



# An Introduction to the Zen Aesthetics of Apple's Mobile Phone Design

Chengjun Zhou<sup>a</sup>, Chunxing Hao<sup>b\*</sup>

School of Art and Design, Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, China

<sup>a</sup>635532939@qq.com; <sup>b\*</sup>3213444166@qq.com

**Abstract.** Apple mobile phones are unique in the mobile phone industry, and their perfect combination of design and technology products has become a model in the field of mobile phone design. This not only reflects the unity of functional value and aesthetic value, but also reflects consumers' recognition of the aesthetic trend of technology products. In the design process of Apple mobile phones, the principles of "Zen aesthetics" and "less is more" are deeply reflected in the design of both the exterior and the internal iOS system. Zen aesthetics is an important cultural heritage left to the world by ancient monks, and Steve Jobs himself was also a "Zen fan". In this paper, we will discuss the intersection of Zen aesthetics and the aesthetics of technological product design, and analyse how Apple's mobile phone incorporates Zen concepts into its design to show the aesthetic charm of the product.

**Keywords:** Apple phones, design, Zen aesthetics

## 1 Introduction

Apple's branding is second to none, and the contribution of the iPhone is very significant in this, with at least 1.4 billion iPhones sold in the past decade,[1] which has led to Apple's leadership in the smartphone market. The success of Apple's mobile phones is not only due to its advanced innovative technology, excellent branding, but also its unique design aesthetics. Apple mobile phones are committed to pursuing the ultimate in product aesthetics from multiple dimensions such as feel, beauty and texture. Its appearance and system design are minimalist to the extreme, with no redundancy, and every detail is refined to near perfection. This pursuit is in line with the aesthetic wisdom of ancient Zen Buddhism, reflecting the Zen philosophy of "The Way is Simple, Refinement in Mind, Simplicity in Form". Under the guidance of this aesthetic thought, technology products can bring excellent experience to users, which is not only the "technology" of technology product design, but also the "art" of technology product design.

Zen Buddhism had a great influence on Jobs, as early as when he was studying, Jobs already regarded Zen as the support of his own thinking, and he integrated Zen thinking and practice into his life and work, and also applied Zen aesthetics concepts and spirit to the design of Apple mobile phones. When Jobs was a Zen practitioner at

Reed College in 1973, he said of his understanding of Zen: "I was very interested in doctrines that transcended the tangible or the metaphysical, and I began to notice a higher level than perception and consciousness - intuition and epiphany, which were very similar to the basic concepts of Zen. ." [2]

## 2 The spirit of Zen in the design process - Zen mind is like the moon and there is no dust.s

Zen heart like the moon is very dustless means that the heart of Zen practice is as bright white as the moon without distractions, the role of the design is to focus on the ultimate design, the state of mind applied to product design, the heart is dustless, the pursuit of excellence in the performance of the product should also be "dustless", [3] Apple does not hesitate to extend the development cycle and increase R&D costs, even if it has to wait, use scarce and expensive raw materials, or even torture R&D engineers to make sure that the product meets its own high standards.[4]The iPhone 4 has a black seam on the side, which Steve Jobs allegedly expressed dissatisfaction with, believing that it was not perfect enough for his idea of perfection in integrated design, and asked the engineers to redesign it to eliminate the seam. Despite months of effort by the engineers, this was ultimately not to be.

Steve Jobs emphasised that the product should be perfect both inside and outside, even the unseen parts should be made beautiful, and Apple did the same. In the internal structure design of Apple mobile phones, in order to make the internal structure more compact, regular and beautiful, they adopt a modular design to reduce the flying wires and redundant space, as shown in Figure 1; and they will also deploy some new innovations in advance, such as the L-shape batteries, to make room for future functionality to make room.



**Fig. 1.** Comparison of the internal structure of the Apple 15 (left) and the Samsung s23Ultra (right) (image from author's photo)

### **3 Zen aesthetics in the look of Apple's mobile phones - Recover one's original simplicity**

#### **3.1 Zen aesthetics in color and material**

The most immediate perception of the appearance of the iPhone is simplicity, which is an undeniable aesthetic characteristic of Apple phones. From a color perspective, regardless of which model it is, black and white are the most classic color schemes. Different materials are used to present different color effects. Glass materials evoke an ethereal color mood, while alloy and matte materials reflect its unique texture, highlighting the natural color and texture of the back material without adding unnecessary patterns.<sup>[5]</sup> In Zen aesthetics, the highest level of skill is to be "natural" and effortless; excessive cleverness is seen as clumsy. Humans should learn from the "natural" skill of nature rather than boast about their cleverness. Decorating the back with unnecessary patterns or other decorations would distract people from focusing on the essence of color and instead focus on ornate decorative colors, thus ignoring the true meaning of "natural" skill. This also embodies the Zen concept of minimal and pure color.

#### **3.2 Zen aesthetics in the form structure**

From a structural perspective, Apple phones feature a rounded appearance, with the iPhone 4 marking the beginning of iPhone adopting a design with metal frames and sharp edges. The tactile experience is smooth, and consumers can intuitively feel it when touching the metal frame of an iPhone. The exterior design is conservative yet highly recognizable. From the first generation to the eighth generation, they all feature top and bottom bezels with a home button design. The shape of the rear camera module, except for the Plus versions, has remained unchanged, becoming a major characteristic of iPhone<sup>[6]</sup>. Since the release of the iPhone 14 Pro, the camera island has become a unique label for iPhone. On the Android side, unique designs such as waterdrop notches, punch-hole displays, pop-up cameras, sliding screens, and curved screens have attracted attention in the market. However, only the iPhone's camera island truly combines function and form. While the camera island itself may not significantly increase the screen-to-body ratio like Android's waterdrop notches or punch-hole displays, the larger front-facing camera module within the camera island can provide excellent photography performance. Apple does not sacrifice user experience for the sake of chasing a higher screen-to-body ratio. Moreover, the Dynamic island can provide users with more real-time information and wonderful interactive experiences (As shown in Figure 2), becoming a major characteristic of Apple's appearance. Apple also pursues perfection in detail, from material selection to the curvature of device edges, from the feel of the edges to the control of light brightness and color. Every detail undergoes careful design and strict selection to ensure the overall quality and coherence of the product. This pursuit of perfection in detail not only demonstrates Apple's high responsibility for product quality but also showcases its professional leadership in the industry. The elegance and aesthetics of Apple's phone

appearance stem from this precise control and meticulous polishing of details, making it highly competitive and attractive in the market.

All of these aspects align with the Zen principle of simplicity, purity in color and material, and minimalism in design, aiming to directly appeal to consumers' hearts and provide them with a high-quality tactile experience and user experience.

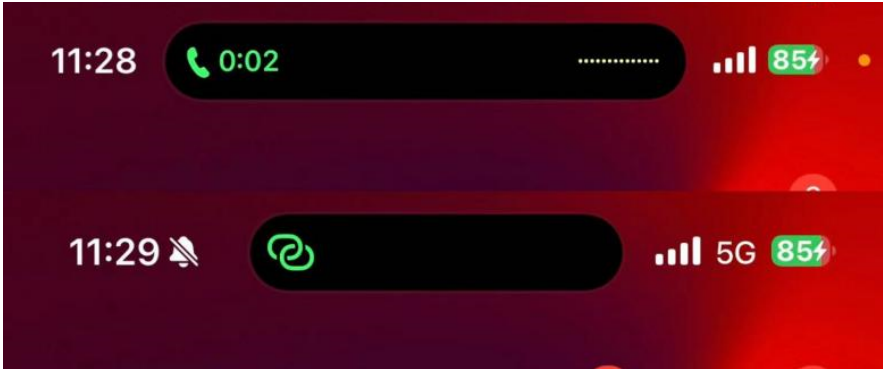


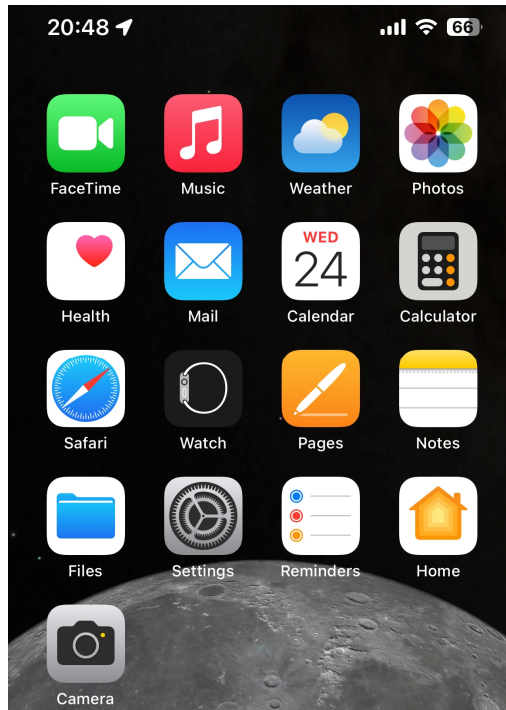
Fig. 2. Dynamic Island and Interaction (Image sourced from the author's screenshot)

## 4 The Zen philosophy in system functionality

### 4.1 System interface design - 'emptiness,' 'silence,' 'harmony'

Apple's iOS interface design is renowned for its simplicity, elegance, and usability, closely linked to the principles of Zen aesthetics. Zen aesthetics emphasize the spirit of "emptiness," "silence," and "harmony," striving for simplicity and returning to the essentials.

Simplicity: Zen aesthetics advocate simplicity, believing that simplicity is the essence of the universe, and excessive decoration only obscures the essence of things. [7]Apple's iOS interface design follows this principle by pursuing a clean, clear, and intuitive interface, avoiding excessive decoration and flashy effects. This allows users to quickly find the information and functions they need. For example, the icons on the iOS home screen are simple geometric shapes without any text explanations, yet users can easily recognize them. As shown in Figure 3.



**Fig. 3.** Apple icons composed of geometric shapes (Image sourced from the author's screenshot)

**Emptiness:** In Zen aesthetics, emptiness is not the absence of anything but rather holds infinite potential. iOS interface design also utilizes whitespace effectively to create a clean and airy interface, providing users with space for interpretation and exploration. This fosters curiosity and creativity, as gestures, icons, menus, etc., are designed with subtlety, allowing users to easily find the desired applications amidst the whitespace between app icons.

**Naturalness:** Zen aesthetics emphasize the harmony between humans and nature, considering the natural world as the highest form of beauty. iOS interface design respects the laws and aesthetics of nature, imitating its forms and dynamics to create a harmonious, fluid, and comfortable user experience. The animations, sounds, haptics, etc., in iOS are inspired by nature, simulating natural light, sound, texture, etc.

In summary, Apple's iOS interface design is a successful application of Zen aesthetics in the modern technological field. It not only embodies the beauty of simplicity, naturalness, and harmony but also provides users with a more comfortable and efficient user experience.

## 4.2 System functionality - Sense of Focus

The essence of Zen lies in striving to effortlessly focus on one thing at a time, achieving utmost concentration. In the "Platform Sutra,"[8] it's recorded: "When the wind moves the flag, some say it's the wind moving, others say it's the flag moving. Huineng said: 'It's neither the wind nor the flag moving, it's the mind of a compassionate person moving.'[9]" When you look at a tree, it exists; when you don't, it doesn't. Zen is about undistracted focus, concentrating on one thing. In order to prevent users from being overly disturbed, Apple introduced the Focus mode in iOS 15. It allows users to customize different Focus modes for various scenarios and needs, such as work, study, sleep, etc. It filters out irrelevant notifications and applications, retaining only important contacts and messages, allowing users to focus more on their current tasks or activities. [10]The Focus mode can also be automatically synchronized across other Apple devices, such as Macs, iPads, etc., enabling users to maintain focus across different devices.

In system functionality design, Apple adheres to the core principles of focus and simplicity: if a feature is optional, it will be removed; if the optimal design solution has not been found, it will be eliminated; if the design is unsatisfactory, it will be discarded without hesitation. In Apple's mobile aesthetics, form and function do not simply follow each other; they strive for a balance and effectiveness. Although this dedication sometimes leads to temporary feature omissions or controversies, Apple consistently pursues excellence. For example, while major Android phone manufacturers began releasing designs such as waterdrop notches and punch-hole displays in 2019 to increase screen-to-body ratio, iPhone introduced the Dynamic Island only in 2022. Comparatively, it doesn't significantly increase the screen-to-body ratio. Unable to compromise due to the area occupied by Face ID sensors and projectors, Apple opted for the unified design approach of the Dynamic Island instead of choosing other facial recognition methods to reduce space (Face ID's 3D structured light biometric recognition technology is relatively more secure and accurate). The earliest iPhone couldn't copy and paste or perform multitasking. Copying and pasting were omitted because a good operational method couldn't be found, so it was simply removed. This simplicity makes it easy for users to get started without worrying about a steep learning curve. Whether it's seniors or children, once they've used an iPhone, they can intuitively use it without obstacles. In their eyes, this high-tech device feels as simple and ordinary as everyday items, devoid of complexity and precision.

## 5 The Zen of introspection in service philosophy

Apple values usability and product experience, setting itself apart with its unique philosophy. They prioritize design aesthetics, technological innovation, user privacy protection, and vertical integration of the supply chain. They are user-centric but not overly focused on pleasing users. These characteristics make Apple stand out in the tech market.

Buddhism emphasizes introspection, seeking enlightenment from within, addressing and solving problems internally. Similarly, Apple approaches market research

with a different attitude, believing that traditional market research cannot match Apple's high business vision. Relying solely on user research to design products may not always be the best choice. Often, users only understand their needs when the product is presented to them. For example, before the birth of the iPhone, if users were asked whether they wanted a phone without physical buttons, operated solely through a touchscreen, most would consider it unnecessary. However, after the successful launch of the iPhone, it quickly became the leader in the smartphone market.

## 6 Conclusion

Overall, the design of the iPhone's exterior, its internal structure, the iOS interface, and Apple's process in crafting the iPhone, are all imbued with Zen aesthetics and spirit. This is not merely a fusion of industrial and Zen aesthetics, but rather a manifestation of Zen philosophy integrated into contemporary design systems. The analysis of Apple's mobile phone design and Zen aesthetics can provide a reference for exploring Apple's brand influence and the design of mobile phones in our country.

## Reference

1. Sina xr. Ten years of Apple: How the iPhone led the mobile phone industry and changed the world. [Z]. Sina VR Think Tank, 2019.12.18
2. Zhong Zhixian, Yi Kai Oracle, Qiu Juan. Zen culture and Steve Jobs [N] - Journal of Jiangxi Radio and TV University, 2018.03
3. Yu Rongbiao. On the aesthetic characteristics in product design [J]. Popular Literature and Art, 2011:4
4. Wang Qiang-An Introduction to the Design Aesthetic Characteristics of Apple Mobile Phone [J]. Hunan Normal University, 2015.04.007
5. Song Xiaofang, Yang Wenzheng. Talking about technical aesthetics in industrial design [J]. Modern Decoration (Theory), 2012.
6. Chen Ping, Leng Yuanhong-Comparative Study on Innovation Problems of High-Tech Enterprises-Taking Apple and Samsung as an Example [J]. Research on Technical Economy and Management, 2012:5
7. Ji Rongxuan, Wu Weihua-Modern Design under the Influence of Zen Aesthetics [J]. Gujin Wenchuang, 2023.02
8. Tian Tao-The influence of Zen aesthetics on modern design [J]. Chinese Religion, 2023.08
9. Wu Lushi - Research on the Thought of Taoism in the Sixth Patriarchal Altar Sutra [D]. Guizhou University, 2022
10. Li Jia - ios15 search probably gold covers delusion album lock screen access [N]. Computer and network, 2021.19

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

