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20 ODD QUESTIONS

John Pawson, Architect of Restraint

The master of light and proportion talks about his romance with Japan, learning from Trappist monks and how to avoid distraction



John Pawson GILBERT MCCARRAGHER

By Jackie Cooperman

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RAISED IN A TREELESS YORKSHIRE LANDSCAPE, John Pawson, 62, worked for his father's textile manufacturing companies, and then as a waiter, an English teacher and a sports photographer before becoming one of his generation's most celebrated designers.

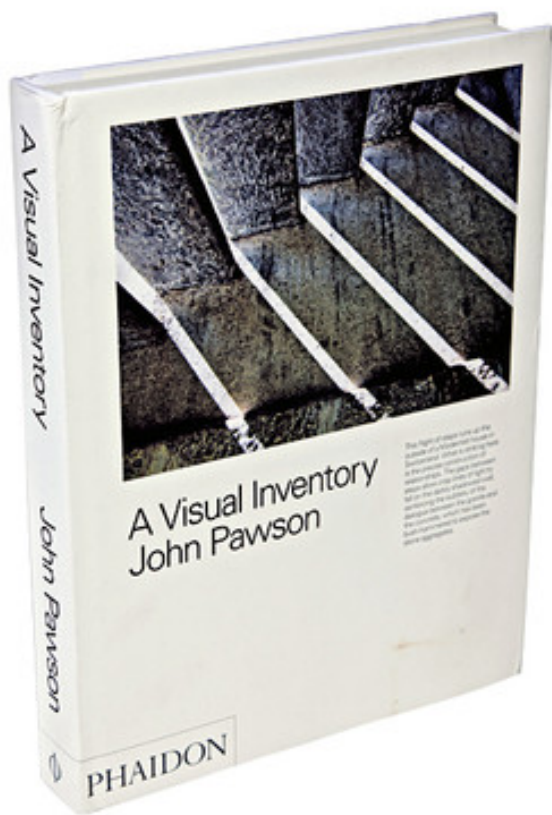
A staunch minimalist who dropped out of architecture school, Mr. Pawson has created homes for Calvin Klein, Ian Schrager and the late novelist Bruce Chatwin, as well as for the monks of the Novy Dvur monastery in the Czech Republic.

He's also designed yachts, door handles and tableware. Married for 23 years to interior designer Catherine Pawson, and the father of three grown children, Mr. Pawson is the author of 14 books, including a cookbook, "Living and Eating," which he co-produced with Annie Bell.

His newest tome, Phaidon's just released "A Visual Inventory," showcases Mr. Pawson's photographs of inspiring objects and destinations. When he's not working or traveling, the designer looks forward to weekend family lunches at his home in London's Notting Hill. Here, he offers us a glimpse into his life as a never-satisfied aesthete.

I grew up in Halifax, an industrial English town that never really modernized. It's all made of the same Yorkstone. All the factories had very simple Victorian facades and lots of narrow alleys. It had everything that I liked: compression, attenuation, repetition.

My camera is a Canon S100. I don't have any emotional attachment to it. If there's an S101 I'll probably get it. I was a sports photographer for a year, but I was always photographing pattern and texture, so I missed the race finishes.



'A Visual Inventory' F. MARTIN RAMIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

I love perfection and I adore it when things are the best, but I'm so imperfect myself in every way. I have no patience to develop film, sketch, to build models.

When I went to Japan on Christmas Eve 1973, I expected beautifully raked gravel, gardens and temples. But the only person I knew in Japan was in Nagoya, and it was all electric cables and concrete. I had this naive idea that Japan was all 16th century, and I was also thinking that I could become a Buddhist monk in a year. I thought I'd become rich in enlightenment. But I became a teacher of English in Nagoya for three years, and spent one year in Tokyo spending the money I'd carefully saved.

I've never studied religion, but I find little to disbelieve. I have access to Cistercian Trappist monks and you have just to see their faces to see what an amazing life and what comfort that belief brings.



WHITE SPACE | John Pawson in his London office GILBERT MCCARRAGHER

The most important architects to me are Mies van der Rohe, for making near-perfect places—perfection, as the monks often remind me, is only for God—and Shiro Kuramata, for the revelation that the ideas I had in my head as a young man could be manifested as built work.

I have a bad habit of eating at my desk. There's a Pret A Manger next door to us. I tend to get vegetarian soup, some toast and a banana. I eat on the go. It's terrible. The continental habit of a relaxed break, I know, is healthier.



Shiro Kuramata VITRA.COM

In my 20s I used to go to an amazing traditional restaurant in Nagoya, and they brought around exquisite sake cups. To my untrained eye, they were almost like the ones used by the 16th-century tea master Sen no Rikyu, really simple. I remember saying to my host, "My dream would be to have a



Pret A Manger soup F. MARTIN RAMIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

cup like this." He said, "Oh, it would be difficult," which in Japanese means impossible. Eventually, he bought me one cup, at some mind-boggling cost. It's fairly solitary, but quite a nice idea, to drink sake alone and watch the snow come down.

My office is the opposite of sterile, unfortunately. When I first started, I had amazing empty long white desks, no books and white walls with nothing on them. It was brilliant. Our office is communal and

there's no hierarchy. I have the same space as everyone else.

I sweat the small stuff. The wrong table in a restaurant makes me irritable. I'm staying in the best room in a hotel, but I keep panicking. Am I on the right floor? The worst thing is choice.

Women do more than men. Catherine juggled the children and the house, which left me free to close the door in the morning and come back at 7 having thought only of work. The women that I work with, if their son has a cold, the school calls them to pick him up. Why don't they call the husband or partner?



Novy Dvur monastery JOHN PAWSON STUDIO

I don't listen to music when I work. I think music is to be listened to undistracted. I like Wagner, cool jazz and some of the artists on my son Caius's record label, the Young Turks. He's got an encyclopedic knowledge of music.

When I built the Novy Dvur monastery, I thought I would hide the cemetery, but that's the thing the monks want to see the most—the plot where they're going to be buried. If you welcome death, it makes things

easier. I've learned a lot from the monks' approach to dying and death.

Of all my clients, I learned the most from Calvin Klein. With Calvin, nothing is impossible. Like his Madison Avenue store, when he took it over it was a neoclassical bank and the windows had mullions. He wanted to get rid of them. I said we should have one piece of glass, as a joke, and he said, "Great, just do it."

To relax, I get on my bike, a Pinarello Dogma, and cycle off into the hills.

It's a treat to stay put in London. We try and make the house attractive for our grown-up children to come round. We gather for Sunday lunch, sometimes interrupted by soccer on television.

At home, we have a very long kitchen work top. It's about 56 feet long, and goes out into the garden so you can barbecue outside. It also has the laundry and boilers underneath it.

I see photography as a daily compulsion. The camera does seem like a third eye—blink and you have captured a moment that will not repeat itself ever. Photography is all a terrible worry about things slipping away.



Custom Pinarello Dogma 60.1

I never intended to publish my photographs, but I was stuck in Milan during the Eyjafjallajökull volcano explosion, and Richard Schlagman, who owns Phaidon, invited us to his amazing 1960s Marcel Breuer house on Lake Maggiore. The light was so beautiful. We just wandered around the house. Catherine was worried that we were overstaying our welcome. I was taking pictures and she said, "Not another shadow on a stone wall." I sent him six photographs out of 6,000, and he said, "You should do a book."



His home CHRISTOPH KICHERER

Cooking is a bit like model making. The key is amazing ingredients and not messing around too much. My ideal meal is vanilla soufflé and I love turbot. I quite like black-ink squid.

I'm happiest, as I was when I was a child, with crayons and a bit of paper. One of my biggest treats when I was a boy was to go to my father's factory's stationery room, with endless supplies of pencils, reams of papers, notebooks.

My greatest accomplishment is a happy marriage and healthy children. Professionally, I am never really satisfied with the work—it can always be better.

I hate it when people say, "Oh, I would never do that." So if I haven't done something, I'll say I haven't done it...yet.

—Edited from an interview by Jackie Cooperman

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