

The Japanese Garden for the Mind: The 'Bliss' of Paradise Transcended

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The question is, why were the gardens first created, and do we still create them for the same reasons? No animal makes a garden, although animals' nests and shelters are a form of primitive architecture. The garden could be said to stand at the crossroads of nature and culture, of matter and consciousness. It is neither purely the one nor the other; it discloses both in the form of human art.

- Gunter Nitschke¹

It is dualistic to detest the world and to rejoice in liberation . . . Liberation can be found where there is bondage, but where there is ultimately no bondage, where is there need for liberation?

- Vimalakirti Sutra

Introduction

Literature

For many centuries, Japanese gardens have been both a source of fascination and an object of mystification for Japanese and non-Japanese alike. In spite of the many different forms of gardens that have been created throughout Japanese history, and the very

different meanings those forms had for the people who created and enjoyed them, in the vast literature (especially in the non-Japanese sources) Japanese gardens are often treated as one unitary whole amassing all characteristics that have been gathered over history into one big, amorphous notion.² This historical construct seems to have long taken on a life of its own, at home and abroad.

As is usually the case with Japanese traditional arts, information concerning garden techniques and principles has long been inaccessible to the general public. Instead, such knowledge has only been available to the initiated, transmitted mainly through "secret teachings," literally, and "oral transmission" or *kuden*. The famous *Sakuteiki*, kept secret until modern times, is one example.³ Beyond this mystification of the subject from within, there are additional hurdles to surpass for the outsider. Indeed, one is often given the sensation of listening in on a discourse that is meant only for insiders. Some otherwise very interesting sources, even books published after World War II, would sound outdated in literal translation, because they are scattered with words like

¹ Gunter Nitschke, *Japanese Gardens: Right Angle and Natural Form* (Koln, Germany: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1999), 238.

² Even though I acknowledge the need to sometimes point out general characteristics that apply to all types of Japanese gardens, there is a striking imbalance in the literature between the treatment of specific types and historical periods, and the aggregating style mentioned above. The past decades have seen successful attempts to correct this imbalance. See, for example, Mitchell Bring and Josse Wayembergh, *Japanese Gardens: Design and Meaning* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981) and Nitschke, *Japanese Gardens*.

³ The *Sakuteiki*, or *Records on Garden Making*, is a manual on gardening techniques surviving in manuscript form. Often dubbed "the first gardening manual," it is roughly dated between the mid to late eleventh century, and its authorship is controversial. Initially attributed to Fujiwara Yoshitsune, it is now believed to be the work of Tachibana no Toshitsuna (1028-1094), the son of Fujiwara no Yorimichi. See Takei Jiro and Marc P. Keane, *Sakuteiki, Visions of the Japanese gardens: A Modern Translation of Japan's Gardening Classic* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2001), 3-8.

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Japan *waga kuni* (our country) or even *waga teien* (our gardens). On the other hand, books on Japanese gardens in English range from the highly popular to the scholarly, with the bulk concentrated at the popular end. Large sections of these books contain explicative material, not only with respect to the specialized terminology, but also to the more general terms referring to specifically Japanese aesthetic or cultural values. Those may be helpful for someone who is searching for an introduction to the general issues concerning Japanese gardens and the cultural context to which they belong, but for more in-depth approaches, one has to look at a limited number of sources written by foreign scholars. Or, one must overcome the feeling of listening in on somebody else's conversation when reading primary sources. In other words, there still seems to be a schismatic gap between sources from and for the "inside" and "outside" of Japan.

The plethora of books in English on Japanese gardens, which give readable accounts of their history and principles, contribute, in degrees, to the establishment of a "modern myth of Japanese gardens." They obviously reflect the interest the world displays in them, but, at the same time, may act as a deterrent in their understanding and scholarly analysis. Even though they may be correct in what they say, by scratching the surface, they give the impression that all the issues have been elucidated, when in fact many have not.

The biggest source of frustration in

reading these works is, however, the fact that they do not support information by providing citations.⁴ In fact, many fairly interesting books do not even have bibliographies. The same concepts are recycled, the same "facts" are mentioned over and over again, until it is impossible to find out where exactly they originated. From this respect alone, differentiating fact from construct is a task akin to archeological work.

Terminology and Concepts

We cannot begin to understand anything about Japanese gardens without first looking at how garden vocabulary and concepts developed. There is no definitive exegesis of the evolution of the terms for gardens, although partial attempts fill the literature. A close look at the terminology can shed some light on how the notion of "garden" was perceived at the time of the first creation of garden-like spaces in Japanese history and what changes occurred in subsequent historical periods.

In contemporary Japanese, the word *niwa* chiefly designates the space adjacent to residences, occupied by a garden. The notion of "yard" in modern Japanese has been almost entirely obscured by the notion of "garden," to the extent that the overlap is almost complete. The first mentions of the word *niwa* in the *Nihon shoki*, *Kojiki*,⁵ and *Manyoshu*⁶ have, however, a different meaning from the modern one. Here the word designates a ground, a flat open space used for human activity, whether it is a

⁴ To give just one example, Erik Borja, a respected architect and skilled designer of gardens, says: "There are some rules about the use of stones, the most important of which is that they must not be used in a different way from their natural position. A stone that is found lying on its side, for example, must not be placed vertically, and vice versa. The original placement must be respected, and each stone must be re-positioned in the garden as it was originally found. This is crucial if their original 'nature' is to be preserved." He has obviously internalized the ancient precepts of the *Sakuteiki* of which he quotes liberally without giving a citation. Even though he mentions the *Sakuteiki* in many instances, specific passages like the one quoted above lack due acknowledgement. Eric Borja, *Zen Gardens* (London: Ward Lock, 1999), 58.

⁵ The *Chronicles of Japan (Nihongi or Nihon shoki)* and *Records of Ancient Matters (Kojiki)* are the oldest extant annals in Japanese, dating from the eighth century.

⁶ This is an eighth century anthology of poetry.

fishing ground, a hunting ground, or a ceremonial ground.⁷ In that sense, the original meaning of the word *niwa* seems to be closer to what in English is called a courtyard, and its extensive use in the above mentioned documents can be considered an indication of the importance attached to such open spaces.

The first term used to refer to a garden-like space as such is *shima*. This seems to be of particular importance both because the word contained the meaning “island” and because of the subsequent obsession with the island theme in garden making. Semantically, the use of the word *shima* is a way of using the focal point, the island. In other words, it is an instance of pointing at the whole by referring to the part. The use of the term *shima* to designate garden-like spaces adjacent to architecture is indicative of a yet inexistent concept of “garden,” which would be separated from the natural landscape as an established genus. On a conscious level, people were possibly “making an island” in a way very similar to a child playing house. Creating a landscape with an island was probably perceived as a sort of playful mimesis, unstructured by conscious meta-conceptualization, but possibly characterized by a profound mythical determinism. An island was eminently an island, a genus in its own in a way somewhat similar to what Claude Lévi-Strauss describes as “the science of the concrete,” as a mode of functioning of the “savage mind,” but possessing the quality of abstractness at the same time.⁸ As Rudolf Arnheim points out, “any phenomenon

experienced by the mind can acquire abstractness if it is seen as a distillate of something more complex [in our case, landscape].”⁹

The *Nihon shoki* makes numerous references to watery spaces where emperors and empresses enjoy themselves. One, widely cited in garden literature, is the fact that Soga no Umako, the important figure from the Soga clan, earned himself the nickname “Shima no Ototo,” or “the minister with the garden/island.”¹⁰ This fact is seen by Kawase Kazuma as an indication of the still exotic perception of having such a watery paradise on one’s own premises. The term *shima* is used extensively in the *Manyōshū* as well, and can still be found in the Heian period poetic tale, the *Ise Monogatari*.

On the surface level, the use of the word island could be interpreted as a reflection that these acts of garden-making were perceived to be acts of replicating the topography of the land, in a ludic mimesis, as mentioned above. They may have been, at the same time, perceived to be acts of sacralization. As Mircea Eliade explains, in traditional societies, “houses are held to be at the Center of the World and, on a microscopic scale, to reproduce the universe.”¹¹ Moreover, the symbolism of islands, in Eliade’s view, is universally perceived to be related to creation: “One of the paradigmatic images of creation is the island that suddenly manifests itself in the midst of the waves.”¹² Eliade also says that “every construction or fabrication has the cosmogony as paradigmatic model. The creation of the world becomes the

⁷ For an interpretation of ancient use of space and the need for open space, see Kawase Kazuma, *Muso Kokushi – zen to teien* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1968), 106-108. For further discussions of ancient use of space, also see Amino Yoshihiko, *Nihon ron no shiza* (Tokyo: Shogakkan, 1991), 269-280.

⁸ See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 1-33.

⁹ Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 156.

¹⁰ W. G. Aston, C.M.G. trans., *Nihongi, Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to AD 697* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1972), 154 and 188.

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane; the Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), 43.

¹² *Ibid.*, 130.

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Japan archetype of every creative human gesture, whatever its plan of reference may be.”¹³

In Japan, where the paradigm is obviously constituted by the *kuni-umi* (literally “birth of the land”) myths,¹⁴ the use of the word *shima* to designate garden-like fabrications of the human microcosm is particularly meaningful. We seem to be confronted with an extremely rich concentration of symbolic substrata in the use of this word: creation as such, sacralization, and repetition of the archetypal model all at once. It is no wonder that the island should become an all-pervasive theme and we can see what a significant foundation gardens developed upon. We shall see later how this can further be related to the valences of stones, which are closely knit to those contained in islands.

The next decisive phase in the development of terms designating gardens and their extensions is the introduction of the concept *sansui* from the Chinese *shanshui*, (literally “mountain-water”), taken to mean “nature” or “landscape.”¹⁵ The idea of landscape being a composite of mountains and water belongs to the Chinese pictorial tradition. A whole range of iconographic elements (for example, *horai*, “the isles of the blessed”) is also imported along with the concept, and these connotations will constitute a steady presence in the constellation of garden images created thereafter. The word *senzui* also appears in the *Sakuteiki*, designating garden-like spaces, so we can clearly construe its use as an indication of the “landscape” quality

associated with gardens.

The presence of the *yin-yang* dichotomy is quite obvious: mountains as an expression of masculinity, stability, permanence, power, and assertion; water as feminine, unstable, formless, and nullifying. Its cultural connotations, the association of the concept with the classical culture of China that constituted a model and a standard for Japan’s own cultural creation, are larger topics that are deeply connected to the *sansui* concept, but are beyond the focus of this article.

Focus: The Establishment of the Contemplative Mode and the Karesansui Lithic Space

From the initial island-like spaces mentioned previously, some of which can be located archeologically,¹⁶ to the sophisticated tea gardens and stroll gardens of the Momoyama (1547-1600) and Edo (1600-1867) periods, many garden styles and types have developed. There is not only a rich variety of styles and sub-styles, but also an insatiable willingness to name them. Perhaps no other gardens in the world have been given as many names as Japanese gardens. This is partly due to the elusiveness of many of their perceived characteristics, and the attempt to describe them as faithfully as possible. The more elusive a characteristic is, however, the fascination it yields on the one hand, and willingness to demystify it on the other. Curiously enough, as a result, sometimes quite obvious qualities are contested.

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¹³ Ibid., 45.

¹⁴ The legend concerning the creation of the islands of Japan, as recorded in the *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki*, states that: “Thereupon they thrust down the jewel-spear of Heaven, and groping about therewith found the ocean. The brine which dripped from the point of the spear coagulated and became an island which received the name of Ono-goro-jima.” From W. G. Aston and C.M.G. trans., 12.

¹⁵ The word was apparently pronounced *senzui* in earlier periods, as shown by *furigana* present in the *Sakuteiki* manuscripts of earlier date. Kawase, 108.

¹⁶ Ibid., 106.

One fairly elusive, yet dynamically central characteristic of Japanese gardens is their perceived contemplativeness. The closest a Japanese garden gets to the Western park is the stroll garden, a garden designed around a central pond.¹⁷ But even there, it is like an immense terrarium of fictional worlds, a collection of vistas and of literary allusions; each point on the stroll path is a “peeping” spot, a premeditated angle for contemplation.

Contemplativeness is therefore as much a quality of the garden itself as it is an attitude dictated by that quality. It is, therefore, a complex cultural construct. It is precisely this attitude that architect Ueda Atsushi refers to in *The Inner Harmony of the Japanese House*:

The [Japanese] garden is a “work of art” which is to be appreciated while sitting in the drawing room. Thus, the garden is something to be seen, and not a place to exercise or relax in. Most older Japanese, those who were raised before the war, are likely to have memories of being scolded by their mothers on the score: “Get out of there. The garden is not a place for playing!”¹⁸

In this article, “contemplation” and “contemplative” refer to a frame of mind that stresses a thoughtful, detached mode of attending to a landscape; it implies physical or metaphorical distancing, and often a sense of reverence. This also implies considering the landscape itself as an object for contemplation and a vessel for meaning, as opposed to a mere location, a vessel for human presence. Naturally, any landscape has

the potential to be both. At the same time, relative weight is usually attached to only one of these extremes.

The question then is to understand the origins and conditions that generated such values in the first place and the reasons for their endurance. I will try to show how socially determined architectural changes, along with stones and stone material, have participated in the establishment of a contemplative frame of mind. This is a process that reaches momentum in the highly instable phase of transition from aristocratic rule to military rule, spanning through the Kamakura period (1191-1333) and into the Muromachi (1333-1547) period.

The first full-fledged gardens that we have a relatively clear picture of are the watery paradises of the Heian period (794-1191) that belonged to aristocratic residences.¹⁹ Here we see a combination of strictly functional space, the flat, sand-covered area at the south of the main hall, *shinden*, and the pond garden proper. The pond was used both as a stage for festivities, when boats carrying musicians were part of the paraphernalia deployed to enhance the atmosphere, but also simply for pleasure boating. On the other hand, Pure Land Buddhist temples used the same prototype as a base for developing a highly mandalistic form of garden, assigning each element a specific, systematized signification referencing accession to the Pure Land. This type of garden is, in the most explicit and structured sense, a picture of paradise.²⁰ Irrespective of the type, all gardens are replete with religious iconography, islands and stones playing an important part in its expression.

¹⁷ One such garden is the famous Edo period Katsura Rikkyu in the imperial summer palace near Kyoto.

¹⁸ Ueda Atsushi, *Nihonjin to Sumai: The Inner Harmony of the Japanese House* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1990), 161.

¹⁹ See Takei and Keane, 12-13.

²⁰ See Hasegawa Masami, *Nihon teien zakko: niwa to shiso* (Kyoto: Toyo Bunkasha, 1983), 285-289.

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As we approach the Muromachi period there is a fundamental shift in the use of space, in the meaning contained in the gardens, and the means of expression used. More specifically, there is a fundamental change in the way gardens were meant to be enjoyed, in the attitude with which gardens were approached, and the positioning of the viewer in relationship to the gardens. The growing, powerful presence of Zen Buddhism acted as a catalytic force in the mixing of preexisting possibilities and newly emerging ones. The resulting set of values constituted an enduring legacy that marked all later developments and produced what has been perceived to be the “contemplativeness” of Japanese gardens. Changes in the architectural framework were accompanied by the use of a newly matured form of expression, the *karesansui* style, which further places stones in a central position. An entirely new form of space was created on the grounds of Zen temples, the combined result of architectural delineations and a new lithic rhetoric.²¹

Transcending Paradise: The Redefinition of Space in Japanese Architecture and Gardens

Heian Period Shinden-zukuri Prototype and its Pond Garden Form: Use and Implications

Except for archeological sites, what we

can actually see today of Heian period gardens are fragmentary remains in a very few locations. The best preserved of these is the pond garden of Byodo-in temple in Uji, Kyoto.²² There are, however, numerous pictorial representations in hand scrolls like *Nenju Gyoji Emaki* (twelfth century), depicting annual festivities at the estates of aristocrats, or *Koma Kurabe Gyoko Emaki* (fourteenth century) depicting events of 1024 at Kaiano-in, the estate of Fujiwara no Yorimichi (992-1074), to mention only a couple. The above, combined with descriptions in literary works like *Genji Monogatari* on the one hand, and in the previously mentioned gardening manual *Sakuteiki* on the other, provide us with a fairly clear picture of what Heian gardens were like, how they were enjoyed, and what cultural values they embodied.²³

Heian period gardens, also called “pond gardens” or *chitei*, were built as part of the architectural construct called *shinden-zukuri*, or

shinden style architecture of the aristocratic residences and Pure Land Buddhist temples. Modeled on a Chinese prototype, the building itself is basically symmetric, but the garden facing it to the south and extending into the southeast and southwest around the open corridors is not. Between the building and the garden there is a sand covered courtyard, *nantei*, contiguous with the pond garden area.²⁴ This corresponds to the “open space

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²¹ Stones and gravel are often regarded as separate, even distinct entities. But gravel and even sand belong to the same material in different manifestations. I define lithic space as any space that is determined by the presence of stone material, irrespective of size or use.

²² Byodo-in temple, originally built by Fujiwara no Yorimichi (992-1074) as a palace, which he then turned into a temple in 1052, has managed to maintain intact its main Phoenix Hall and pond garden. This is particularly important because, even if only partially preserved, it clearly presents us with an example of the prototypical, symmetrical layout of the *shinden-zukuri*.

²³ The *Sakuteiki*, a work produced in the eleventh century, is considered to be not only an apt descriptor of Heian period gardens, but also an invaluable source for understanding aesthetic, religious, and social considerations pertaining to them.

²⁴ This area was the stage for both official and a variety of recreational events and games.

for human activity” designated by the word *niwa*, as discussed above. The pond features one or more islands, the central one being connected to the southern and northern shores by arched vermilion bridges. The yard and the garden taken together occupy roughly half the size of a typical estate.

Heian-kyo, present day Kyoto, was built in the eighth century at the order of Emperor Kammu. Using the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) capital of Changan (present-day Xian) as a model, a city was first built at Heijō-kyo (near present day Nara) and then reconstructed at Heian-kyo (794). To begin with, this city layout was a compressed version of the Changan prototype. Such compression characterized Japanese architectural history and became a factor of paramount importance in subsequent changes. Also, as Inaji Toshiro demonstrates, even though “the formula for *shinden-zukuri* emerged from an existing symmetrical pattern,”²⁵ this prototype was, upon adoption, subjected to complex interpretation and abbreviation:

Shinden-zukuri residential architecture used abbreviation as its means of adapting the Chinese prototype to a different set of circumstances. This style honored the symmetrical formula as ideal, while also giving high priority to the need to conform to site conditions and the building’s intended function. Architectural interpretations of the prototype shifted to the diagonally-stepped “geese-in-flight” pattern and a myriad of other asymmetrical forms of *shinden-zukuri*.²⁶

Even though the buildings themselves

were originally meant to follow a symmetrical pattern, the garden itself was never constructed symmetrically. On the contrary, asymmetry is practiced consciously and is overtly emphasized as a design principle. Again, the *Sakuteiki* is rich in examples in this respect. For example:

The bridge [connecting the islands in the pond] should not align with the center of the central stair roof but rather should be placed off-center in the garden so that the eastern post of the bridge aligns with the western post of the central stair roof.²⁷

Considering this, it could be said that it is precisely the gardens that acted as triggers in the adoption of asymmetry in Japanese architecture.

The perception of built landscape as intrinsically asymmetric has, in my opinion, a further vital implication. By establishing a creative field that is free from the externally superimposed mathematical grid of geometric/symmetric design, the door is left open for a form of unhampered fictional discourse using the elements of natural landscape in a way akin to literature. Asymmetry not only allows for the expression of beauty in natural form, but also for the expression of meaning in creative ways that symmetry would not permit. Freedom of expression on a formal level allows for freedom of expression on the level of content, more specifically, for the presence of the “story,” the fiction that is attached to the created landscape. But it is precisely the sacredness with which the landscape is invested, its mythological quality, which makes it more than nature. Japanese gardens have been portrayed as cute imitations of

²⁵ Inaji Toshiro, Pamela Virgilio, trans., *The Garden as Architecture: Form and Spirit in the Gardens of Japan, China and Korea* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1998), 5-16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁷ Takei and Keane, 155.

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nature, and love of nature has long been considered the sole dynamic factor in their creation and for their perceived mimetism. But what I see in these man-made landscapes is first and foremost a world saturated with meaning, not just a world of form. They are landscapes with a story, and the story lives precisely in the seemingly unpredictable nooks of asymmetric form.

From their inception, the artificial landscapes attached to dwellings were probably perceived as miniature worlds imbued with religious significance, as shown by the early incorporation of the mountain Shumisen as part of the island.²⁸ Heian period gardens further enlarge this pantheon to incorporate Daoist iconography: Mt. Horai,²⁹ where the Daoist immortals were believed to reside, represented the main pond island accompanied by other representations including the turtle island, *kamejima*, and the crane island, *tsurujima*.

These representations were part of a miraculous world of make-believe, complete with boats carrying musicians, all meant as a set of devices to entice the immortals. The sophisticated ceremonies depicted in handscrolls and in literary works were forms of enacting paradise, where human actors placed themselves in a fictional world created with painstaking meticulousness.³⁰

Pure Land temples also used the same *shinden-zukuri* architecture and pond garden, but attached to them a different interpretation. The center island was no longer the Isle of the Immortals, but the Pure Land itself and the vermilion bridge connecting it to the shore

signified the path to salvation. Such a flexibility of interpretation is a fundamental characteristic of the gardens in these early periods, and it always complicates interpretation, but at the same time, it is obviously a propitious condition for the act of creation.

Moreover, a fact that needs to be taken into consideration is that the boundaries between the “religious” and the “secular” are also often quite fluid. For instance, Byodo-in was transformed by Yorimichi himself from his residence into a Pure Land temple. We tend to think in terms of “secularization” of artistic or architectural forms, but here we have instances of the opposite. Another example would be the common practice of members of the emerging *samurai* class to build themselves a temple and become priests after retiring. This has an important consequence: specific architectural or artistic features are freely exchanged across blurred religious-secular demarcations.

Of course, the gardens of aristocratic residences are different from the mandalistic, temple versions. However, they share the belief in a world beyond. All in all, religious iconography is not only all pervasive in Heian period gardens, but it is also characterized by an extreme syncretism. To begin with, the *shinden-zukuri* building itself was a copy of the Pure Land representations of paradise. The Buddhist Trinity was also a commonly used image by setting stones as *sanzon seki*.³¹ The whole layout was also thoroughly based on *feng-shui* principles, or more or less free

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²⁸ The singular, upright stone is often used as an expression of Mt. Shumisen (in Sanskrit: Sumeru).

²⁹ In Chinese: Peng-lai.

³⁰ Some words should be said here about the “famous places of scenic beauty” that were, apart from religious iconography, another very important thematic prototype, also mentioned in the *Sakuteiki*. According to Inaji, “At this point in Japanese garden history, the recreation of famous sights had been established as an appropriate metaphor for the ‘natural landscape;’ it has maintained this same status through the present day.” Inaji, 16.

³¹ *Sanzon seki* are stones symbolizing the Buddhist trinity.

interpretations of those, combined with a system of indigenous taboos. We are presented with a multilayered fictional world, vibrant with meaning. To further enhance participation in the landscape, the *shinden-zukuri* structure was enclosed by shutters or *shitomido*, which, once raised, allowed for an unobstructed view of the artificial landscape. This probably made the building feel very much part of the surrounding garden.

A fact of great importance is that all of the above mentioned images of the sacred were somehow connected with or expressed in the built landscape using stones. Within the flamboyant, colorful drama depicted in literature and pictorial representations, stones themselves don't stand out; but when we read the *Sakuteiki* their significance looms large.

In sum, Heian period gardens, while already displaying many of the qualities that characterize Zen temple gardens—like asymmetry, for instance—were highly imbued with a sense of idyllic admiration at one end and of mystic fascination at the other. This mindset had a tinge of the miraculous, of the make-believe. Human actors willingly wove themselves into the canvas, taking part in the fiction they created as landscape.

In Japan, landscape architecture initially developed, therefore, as a creative ground, situated at the crossroads of syncretic religious belief and the human need to fantasize and play. It is equally a reflection of religious belief and the means for the creation of beauty, a beauty which was not consciously separated from religious feeling. The world of meaning thus generated was very much in the realm of the fantastic, and represented not one paradise, but a multitude of paradises. Above all, it expressed a seemingly infinite yearning to inhabit paradise and to be inhabited by it.

The Transition to the Muromachi Period Gardens

In the subsequent historical periods of Kamakura and Muromachi, architecture and gardens underwent revolutionary changes as part of what constituted one of the most fertile creative waves in Japanese cultural history. It would be impossible to understand these changes if we do not consider the historical developments and the socio-political background that generated them.

The decline of the aristocracy and the gradual process that led to the creation of the *bakufu* and the emergence of the *samurai* as a leading class determined the society of the Kamakura and Muromachi periods in every respect. The naive idealism of the Heian period gave way to an age of profound meditation and a quest for meaning that paralleled the quest for power of the newly emerging class. Two other factors further took part in the creation of the age: the second great wave of Chinese influence and the growing influence of Zen Buddhism, especially of the Rinzai sect. Both were the result of a mixture of conditions and a felicitous coincidence of interests. The Song Dynasty was crumbling under the Mongol invasion, and the many Chinese Chan priests who fled their homeland found refuge in Japan. Many of them were high-ranking reputed masters,³² which meant that the cultural input they were able to provide was of a high intellectual level. They were met with open arms by the emerging military regime, which was looking for a powerful, yet controllable educational apparatus. Even though it had been introduced much earlier, as a sect, Zen Buddhism was only beginning to gain momentum, which meant that it was free of the political entanglements of the other Buddhist sects, making it appealing to

³² For example, Lanchi Daolong (1213-78), who immigrated to Japan in 1246.

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the *bakufu*. Zen temples were kept under relatively tight control, did not develop large land holdings, and relied on the government for sponsorship. This economic aspect was decisive in the intimate relationship that grew between the warrior class and Zen temples.

The *bakufu* realized very early that power also meant knowledge and, under the *bunbu ryodo* slogan,³³ they were determined to create a warrior class that was superior in terms of education in addition to the martial arts. As a result, Zen monasteries became vibrant citadels of learning for the warrior class, as well as centers of culture and commerce. There are many other further reasons why the *bakufu* favored Zen Buddhism. One of them is that Zen Buddhism emphasized personal effort or strength, *jiriki*, as opposed to other sects that stressed external salvation. Also, Zen Buddhism emphasized oral transmission from master to disciple, as opposed to the study of the texts of the scriptures, which were written in highly inaccessible Chinese. The philosophy of Zen Buddhism magnificently coincided with the needs of the warrior. It was a twofold source of empowerment: culturally, it created the superiority needed to compete with the high standards that the nobility had set; mentally, the “no mindedness” taught by Zen provided the strength needed in battle.

Finally, the transfer of the new Ashikaga military government’s capital from Kamakura to the Muromachi district of Kyoto (1338), the subsequent socioeconomic development, and the so-called “renaissance” that it engendered, further favored the development of the arts and gardens. It is of

no little significance that the great monastery of Tenryuji, whose garden constitutes an important transitional moment between the Heian period *shinden-zukuri* gardens and the Muromachi *karesansui* gardens, was built at the order of the founder of the Muromachi *bakufu*, Ashikaga Takauji (1305-58). And it is of no little significance that he appointed as the first abbot none other than Muso Kokushi (1275-1351), the most important figure of Zen Buddhism during the first half of the fourteenth century, who was also well known and even criticized by his opponents for his involvement with worldly matters like gardening.

All these developments are presented here in simplified form. I only hint at the scope of human action that constituted the underlying motivation for the cultural production of the age, of which gardens are only one part. What is important is that the instability of the age itself had the side effect of stimulating creative energy. There was a huge propensity for experimentation, and architectural space became one of the most richly experimented in mediums.

The Shift in Perspective, Positioning of the Beholder: The Birth of the Contemplative Mode

Changes in social forms trigger changes in material forms; architecture, being the vessel of human activity, becomes extremely malleable. As a result of the changes discussed above, the process that triggered the shift from the *shinden* to the *shoin* architectural style gained full momentum.³⁴

“ CHANGES IN SOCIAL FORMS TRIGGER CHANGES IN MATERIAL FORMS; ARCHITECTURE, BEING THE VESSEL OF HUMAN ACTIVITY, BECOMES EXTREMELY MALLEABLE. ”

³³ This slogan is translated as “the pen and the sword.”

³⁴ *Shoin-zukuri* is “a style of residential architecture that developed during the Kamakura and Muromachi periods. It was mainly used in warrior residences and Zen temple abbots’ quarters. It is divided into rooms with fixed walls and sliding doors, has *tatami*-mat flooring and square posts. In its most elaborate form this style includes a *tokonoma* alcove, *chigaidana* staggered shelves, a *tsukeshoin* built-in desk, coved and coffered ceilings, and a *jodan* raised floor area.” Inaji, 193.

This transition, which paralleled the advent of the *samurai* class and the establishment of Zen as the dominant religion of the period, was gradual, as it clearly reflected the re-tailoring of architecture to people's needs and the crystallization of new cultural values. In *The Garden as Architecture*, Inaji Toshiro describes some significant stages in the process:

During the medieval period, in order to adapt to further reductions in size, the main hall was reduced in scale and the symmetrical pairs of *tainoya* annexes, *tsuridono* fishing pavilions, *chumon* inner gates, and *sukiro* open corridors were all omitted on one side. Asymmetrical in ground plan, a smaller *shinden* and a single *tainoya* connected by a reduced-scale *sukiro* and *chumon* became the new standard. This is the compositional form typically seen today in Zen sub-temples, except that the *shinden* is now replaced by a *kyakuden* (guest hall) or *hojo* (abbot's quarters).³⁵

A clearer distinction between the private (*ke*) and public (*hare*) areas was being made through the more extensive use of walls and sliding screens to divide them. This partitioning of the interior space, which began in the twelfth century and was accompanied by the replacement of *shitomido* shutters with *mairado* shutters,³⁶ triggered important changes in the angle of vision, from the panoramic view of the *shinden* to a more acute angled view.³⁷ Also, a

multitude of viewing angles and ways to manipulate them became possible. This had significant consequences on the way gardens were perceived.

The single most important change was, as Inaji points out,³⁸ the loss of functionality of the southern court, which both in residences and temples, initially served as a venue for all important events. Furthermore, buildings used to be entered through the southern hall. The creation of an entryway, which later became the *genkan*, rendered the southern court useless. As a result, "that space was now made available for designers to use in a more artistic way."³⁹ This space, now without an entryway, became a secluded enclosure attached to the main hall.

The earlier *shinden* prototype combined a functional-ritual space, represented by the sand covered *niwa*, and the pond garden in its background. What happened when the southern court lost its functionality was first a reduction in size. This, according to Inaji, was dealt with in two different ways: *samurai* residences, or *buke yashiki*, deleted the *niwa* in favor of a highly compacted version of the pond garden; Zen temples retained the graveled *niwa* instead.⁴⁰ Inaji sees these as "ostensibly antithetical interpretations of the same prototype,"⁴¹ one abstract, one representational. But the act of compacting, of miniaturization, can be considered an act of abstraction, too; since reduction in scale implies a reversal in the process of understanding, where "knowledge of the whole precedes knowledge of the parts."⁴² This is precisely what occurred, as what we

³⁵ Ibid., 34.

³⁶ These shutters are "a sliding wooden door faced with thin, closely spaced wooden strips. This was installed in early *shoin-zukuri* architecture as a set of two wooden doors and one paper screen (*akarishoji*) per bay that slid horizontally in a three-track gutter." Ibid., 192.

³⁷ Ibid., 37.

³⁸ Ibid., 40.

³⁹ Marc P. Keane, *Japanese Garden Design* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 1996), 54.

⁴⁰ Inaji., 43.

⁴¹ Ibid., 49.

⁴² Strauss, 23-24.

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are presented with are gardens that can be seen in their entirety. Heian panoramic gardens, like handscrolls, implied a permanent sweeping of the visual field to grasp it.

A completely new form of architecture and a completely new way of seeing had emerged. The garden had become a very different world. From the paradise-like landscape that could be populated with musicians in ornate boats, where the range of vision expanded out and wide, the garden was now an off-limits, outdoor terrarium. At the same time, it was a precipitous, breathtaking close-up, invading the beholder's consciousness with its proximity, readily transporting him to a meta-experiential realm. Even though this space was created as a result of scale reduction, through the architectural exacerbation of the viewing angle, the opposite effect was attained: a sensation of reality looming large.

The height of this effect was achieved on the grounds of Zen monasteries, of which Ryoanji is the epitome and the pinnacle. There, in the Zen monks' hands, the enclosure with its off-limits space reaches even farther. The lens to look through is *karesansui*, another brilliant product of the age.

Karesansui: The Term and its Meaning

The term *karesansui* or *karesenzui* is translated into English as "dry landscape garden" and first appears in the *Sakuteiki*:

There is also a way to create gardens without ponds or streams. This is called Dry Garden Style and should be created by setting stones along the base of a hill or with Meadows in the garden.⁴³

The most conspicuous and unequivocal characteristic of the garden style it designates is the complete absence of water from the composition, combined with its artful portrayal using stones, and often, but not always, gravel, and an overall abstractness or symbolism of expression. A secondary but not absolutely necessary feature is the liberal use of blank spaces, mostly a characteristic of the *sekitei*, using stones and gravel only, variety. The absence of extensive plantings, while a characteristic of the style, is applied quite flexibly. It does not seem to be an absolute requirement, like the absence of water. The reasons plantings are less favored in *karesansui* may be varied. One could be that, even though they can be trimmed, they

are relatively difficult to control, especially over a long span of time. The stylized aspect of the *karesansui* is probably seen as incompatible with vegetal freedom. On the other hand, when they are heavily trimmed, a difficult

to deal with element of contrived-ness becomes part of the composition. This can easily hamper the prized naturalness that is an essential feature of materials used in the *karesansui* style. Apart from the seasonal connotations that are also not part of the style, there are the practical considerations of keeping the sand free from vegetal material. The permanent task of raking the sand is already sufficient, not to mention that the overall abstractness would suffer from the presence of too much vegetation.

Another aspect worthy of mentioning is the actual semantic structure of the word. The word *sansui*, meaning landscape, is determined by *kare*, which taken alone

“ A COMPLETELY NEW FORM OF ARCHITECTURE AND A COMPLETELY NEW WAY OF SEEING HAD EMERGED. THE GARDEN HAD BECOME A VERY DIFFERENT WORLD. ”

⁴³ Keane points out that this must have been different from the *karesansui* of the Middle Ages, but I would argue that the fact that the idea of *not* using water was already "there" is of great importance as a premise for development. Jiro and Keane trans., 160.

originally meant “withered,” “shrunken,” or “dead,” in reference to plants. Judging from that, what one would normally envision is a desolate landscape, perhaps containing withered trees, which, even though it suggests the absence of water, is not what the actual term means, since, in effect, *karesansui* is a metaphorical affirmation of water.

The term *karesansui* is omnipresent in Japanese garden literature, but it is often used ambiguously, existing in competition and overlapping with other terms like “flat garden,” “rock garden” or *sekitei*, “contemplative garden” or *kansho niwa*, and finally, “Zen garden” or *zen niwa*. Since some *karesansui* gardens like the Daisen-in North-Eastern garden are not flat at all—some are not just stones and shrubbery, they contain trees as well—the terms are sometimes used in combination to better describe specific gardens.

There is one problem that needs to be pointed out. One of the most salient characteristics of Japanese architecture is the fact that the garden and its physical surroundings are an inseparable entity. This is further enhanced and expressed through the flexible, fluid nature of demarcations, which are denied as soon as they are laid out and which simultaneously separate and connect.⁴⁴ All of this considered, one can never look at a *karesansui* section in a garden as totally independent of the rest. Moreover, most temples have a cluster of gardens – a complex composite – the components of which, even if not entirely present in the same visual framework, silently participate in the effect, either through memory, through the overlaying, or through the partial simultaneous exposure that the multi-angled

structure of Japanese architecture so aptly and so pervasively utilizes. As Arnheim says, “To see an object in space means to see it in context.”⁴⁵ This may sound like an axiomatic truth, but we are often too willing to disregard the consequences of the context on the object and concentrate our interpretive attention on the object. When we perceive it, we perceive it as a whole, but when we attempt to understand it, or explain our understanding of it, we lose the context from the view. Even the Ryoanji *sekitei*, the ultimate stone garden, is enhanced both by the patina of the background wall and the greenery in the further background, which immediately counteracts its austerity, and, at the same time, by the memory of the lush vegetation in the northern section of the garden, or even a possible oblique, simultaneous glimpse of the vegetal western corner. This is one of the most quintessential attributes of the original Zen gardens: the elaborate equilibrium of contraries, and the apprehension of the world as a dialectical continuum. *Karesansui* should be used in the strict sense of a style, sometimes dominant, indeed, but always perceived in the context of the whole. As a generic term for the gardens of the Zen temples and *samurai* residences of the Muromachi, however, perhaps the most logically sound taxonomy is to call them Zen gardens, implying the whole garden construct as mentioned above.

The Poetics of *Karesansui*: ‘A Flower Does Not Talk’ but a Rock Has the Voice of Water

Origins and Intent

Conflicting interpretations are given as to why *karesansui* was created, both based on

⁴⁴ An example of this is *shakkei*, or “borrowed scenery.” First, a hedge or a wall is constructed, which looks like a fairly rigid enclosure. In fact, it is only an intermediary background, a demarcation which both separates and connects the primary, foreground landscape with the background landscape, which is thus “drawn-in” the picture. This is an example of the duality of demarcations intentionally used in Japanese architecture to achieve this kind of paradoxical effect.

⁴⁵ Arnheim, 54.

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the physical presence or absence of water. Kawase Kazuma considers it originally a response by Zen priests to the lack of water in their Chinese mountain cloisters, which was subsequently imported to Japan. This view is not, however, supported by any evidence or sources. At the other end, Ito Teiji considers the style to be a luxury possible only in a natural environment in which water is abundant, like the islands of Japan.

Whether it is practically motivated by any of the above or not, *karesansui* is surely an extremely creative, revolutionary form of expression, primarily conditioned by artistic intent—a powerful, intuitive, disciplined intent, concerned with expressing the osseous essence of things beyond things themselves.⁴⁶ So much has been debated over the Zen-ness or Zen-lessness of this art form that one feels reluctant to join the ranks of discussers. But whoever were the physical creators of one garden or the other, whether they were painters, priests, or the *kawaramono* outcasts, what they expressed clearly reflects values recognized as Zen. To begin with, how can one express nothingness, *mu*, more dramatically than by taking water out of a garden?

On the other hand, the use of stone material to express water is an almost perverse rendering of the *yin* and *yang* principles, since it expresses water, a *yin* element, by a *yang* material, stone. Thus, one can consider a stone garden to be an obliteration of the *yin* principle from the form, but one which still maintains it in content by substitution with the *yang* material. Such a choice could be construed as symptomatic of the “masculine” age of Muromachi.

Compositionally speaking, if we think in terms of the evolution from the *shinden* prototype discussed earlier, what we are presented with is a shuffling of planes: the pond is metaphorically dragged over to the sanded *niwa* area, which, in turn, by superimposition acquires the meaning of “water.” Thus, neither the *niwa* nor the pond are lost or *semantically* omitted. They are instead combined into one single symbolic rendering of the pond. The pond itself, in the *shinden* garden, had been a metaphor for the sea,⁴⁷ and that significance is maintained in the sand garden. The change in expression is also characteristic of the shift from mimesis to symbolism.

*The ‘Stone is Water / Gravel is Water’
Metaphor*

The main element in the logic of *karesansui* is that the sand (gravel), as has been shown, is a signifier of water. This is an example of a complete overlap of meaning, which is therefore a full-fledged metaphor. Water is not denied; on the contrary, it is *asserted*. The exclusion of water, instead of being its denial, is an even more potent affirmation because it is done metaphorically. Sand is created through the erosive power of water. Hence, water is contained in it, almost like a hereditary trait. We deal with a highly significant transference of meaning in which sand/gravel behaves like a material metaphor.

Again, as was the case with the gardens of the Heian period, here we have a similar phenomenon, but with a symbolic, rather than fictional content. Water is flat, the sand-covered surface also flat and, like water, also light reflecting. But, unlike water, sand is pliable, malleable, and controllable. As a

⁴⁶ Two possibly important sources of inspiration for *karesansui* that are not treated in this article are the art of *bonseki*, miniature stone gardens probably brought from China, and Chinese landscape painting, especially from the Song Dynasty.

⁴⁷ The *sansui* concept itself is already a metaphorical reduction of landscape into symbolic elements: mountains equal heaven and water equals earth.

liquid, water can only be intentionally shaped by placement within a vessel; then it is the personality of the vessel that takes preponderance, obscuring water itself. What the *sekitei* accomplishes is the ability to shape water itself, to immortalize the ripples, to freeze the flow. This control over the formless, too, coincides with a Zen ideal. And even though lithic material is used to achieve that, water is not petrified, but instead given a structured eloquence, an infinitely mysterious new voice.

Water is originally also sound. A “dry waterfall” composition, akin to creating a blank space, silences the water by commanding it to stone. Then again, the intention is to create sound, to exhort sound from the apparently silent boulders. Yet again, this is done using a different medium; a visual effect is achieved by manipulating the shapes, lines, surfaces and mass of boulders and gravel. The visual sensation of movement, and the rhythm created this way is also, as a result, suggestive of sound. But the sound is created only the moment the viewer looks and sees properly. It is a highly interactive form of art, where the beholder is permanently summoned up to participate in the creation of meaning. Herein we can very clearly see the dialogue type of pedagogy practiced by Zen Buddhism. Only here the interlocutor is not the *roshi*, but nature itself, the ultimate teacher, a nature that has not only been distilled to its osseous core, but also rendered in such a way that it is infinitely open to dialogue, and to idiosyncratic interpretation by any number of thirsty beholders. Using silence to effectuate sound, amassing silent boulders to create the fearful roar of a waterfall: what *koan*, expressed in the feeble form of words that Zen so much fought to expose and to overcome, could be

more eloquent than this?⁴⁸

The Sekitei and its Beholder

When contemplating a rock garden, the distinction between subject and object and between the viewer and the viewed is easily blurred. In looking, one is “raking” the sand in a symbolic way by following the repetitive, rhythmical patterns of the ripples. One is thus drawn into a dialogue with the composition, and at the same time with oneself. On the one hand, the viewer is prohibited access to the neatly raked, delineated perimeter of the sand garden. On the other, he is drawn in, almost against his will.

Raked gravel is far from being the sole means of expression in stone gardens. One extremely important concept that originates in the technique of ink-wash painting is what is called *yohaku no bi*, “the beauty of the space left empty,” or the beauty of the remaining space. It is associated with silence or the lack of motion in other arts like *Noh* drama, and it implies tremendous discipline: to be able to abstain from crowding the place with forms, from crowding the air with sounds, or the stage with movement. It is, recognizably, a vivid, specific application of Zen concepts and Zen discipline. On the other hand, even though the source of inspiration may have been ink-wash paintings, to take the two-dimensional black and white mode of a painting and transpose it into the volumetric form of the garden – literally transforming the graveled yard of previous ages and various orientations into a lithic canvas – is a creative act of magnificent proportions that is too often taken for granted. We are also dealing with an exacerbation of the visual, and at the same time with a flexibility that allows for an unusual exchange of mediums, like the expression of sound through visual

⁴⁸ Even though, as the *Sakuteiki* clearly shows, waterfalls were used extensively in the Heian period, too, in its new dry form, and conveying the additional symbolism of enlightenment, the waterfall becomes one of the central themes of Zen gardens.

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suggestion.

Standing on the flat surface of the “ocean,” like the wind, or even like a demiurge, the Zen priest raking the sand is making waves, is actually exercising *being the wind that creates waves on the surface of the ocean*. At the same time, by perpetuating an archetypal act in raking the gravel, he is unified with the cohorts of priests who have performed the raking through history. The gravel is their shared lithic blood, flowing like sap through the rake and the hands that hold it. And all this time, the concrete feel of the gravel under the special sandals the monk is wearing reminds him of the here and now and of the limitations of the physical body he inhabits. The monk enters the garden, not as a user, and not just as a janitor, but as a creator, equally of the garden and of himself. In a way, the raking of the sand itself, while a chore, is at the same time like a performed *koan*, belonging to an oral tradition, handed down from generation to generation of priests. This highly interactive aspect of life with a sand garden is largely overlooked, mentioned only in passing, as “maintenance,” when in fact it may be the single most vibrant aspect of the famous sand gardens.

Implications of the Transition for the Establishment of Contemplation as a Mode of Viewing

All of the qualities of the evolving *shoin-zukuri* architecture of the Muromachi period discussed so far reinforce the tendency already existent in the Heian period of contemplating landscape. What happens is an

accentuation of the scenic quality. The transition is from an idyllic landscape to the austere landscape of the *karesansui* style, from a mimetic to a symbolic portrayal of nature.

There is also an almost cinematic effect of zooming-in. The landscapes are smaller, but they are also close-ups. So, they gain in immediacy in that way, too, but they are no longer landscapes evoking memories of places seen, however remote in time and space. Under the influence of Zen philosophy, contemplation becomes synonymous with introspection, and observing the outside world means looking into one’s own nature. The landscapes take the viewer inside on a mental journey to a metaphysical realm, at once intimately close and remote. They are remote through their abstractness and at the same time architecturally close, resulting in an enhanced effect.

In this newly created stone and gravel canvas, in its abstract eloquence and off-limits austerity, one can see the fostering of an attitude and the creation of a paradigm of contemplation, far more powerful than the idyllic-miraculous contemplative gaze of the Heian period. Contemplation shifts from an outward to an inward realm.

The use of space in every way sustains that shift. The *shoin-zukuri* architectural elements discussed before, the transformation from a functional to a non-functional area and further innovations in the framing of the view and angle of viewing also contribute to the creation of the contemplative mode. This new contemplative mode contains the shift in

“ UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF ZEN PHILOSOPHY, CONTEMPLATION BECOMES SYNONYMOUS WITH INTROSPECTION, AND OBSERVING THE OUTSIDE WORLD MEANS LOOKING INTO ONE’S OWN NATURE. ”

⁴⁹ We could speculate that the Zen temple gardens were not even “understood” by their contemporaries. However close to Zen, even elite warriors did not normally use the *karesansui* style in their gardens, as we saw earlier. They chose to use a compacted, representational version of the pond garden.

perspective concerning nature, landscape itself, a decantation of preexisting lithic symbolism and the creation of a new lithic rhetoric.

In an off-limits zone in the form of an abstract sanctuary, a visual *koan* is created. That also represents a change from a public space to an intimate space. If Heian gardens were extrovert sanctuaries, imbued with the significance of the mythical, the gardens of Muromachi Zen monasteries are secluded, introvert sanctuaries, labyrinths for a mental, solitary journey. We are witnessing the creation of a distinct culture of the private, through the discovery of the ultimate solitude of existence. On a creative level, it may be precisely the realization that the human being is alone in the face of his or her existence (a realization that much of the rest of the world only achieved later, and is usually associated with the concept of modernity) that constitutes the source of the abstractness of the Muromachi rock compositions.⁴⁹

The realization of the potential for expression contained in stone material may have aided the creators of the dry garden style in the tremendous leap they made in expression, allowing them to distill meaning to such an extent that they were able to arrive at the potent “gravel is water” metaphor which constitutes the most fascinating characteristic of the dry gardens. The importance of this creative landmark cannot be overstated. It represents a revolution in aesthetic expression, generated through a process of “compacting,” potentially aggregating a multitude of significant elements into a minimum amount of material form to contain it, hence its potency and appeal. The unconventional approach to modes of expression practiced by Zen may well have been a factor in the bold decision of

replacing ink with sand and stones. The resulting lithic statement is an unmistakable landmark of Japanese gardens thereafter.

Stones and the Paradigm of Contemplation

We have seen how changes in social conditions engendered changes in the architectural environment and in the values that governed it, bringing forth new ways of seeing, and, more specifically, a radical new way of dealing with architecturally adjacent space in the form of the gradually emerging *niwa*. We have seen how successive architectural modifications gradually created an enclosed southern yard that could be used for experimentation. And we have seen the huge metamorphosis such experiments produced within the atmosphere of the Muromachi era.

Finally, we have seen how this transformation coincided with the birth of a new, metaphysical contemplative mode, which functions in an environment that fundamentally bases its logic in a very idiosyncratic lithic rhetoric. The question still lingers of the significance of stones in a greater, diachronical context. We also need to return to the initial question of what is ultimately perceived as “sacred space,” and what are its salient features, in other words, how do people identify it to be imbued with qualities of the sacred.

If one looks at representative uses of stones in Japanese early history, one finds a very evident, pervasive cult of stones, as manifest in the *iwakura* and the *iwasaka*, large rock formations very often found in pairs, married together by sometimes enormous *shimenawa*,⁵⁰ or enclosed by the same *shimenawa* in what is known under the name of *shiki*. Here, we see the river pebble variety of ground covering, of which

⁵⁰ This form of binding constitutes the object of study in Gunter Nitschke, *From Shinto to Ando: Studies in Architectural Anthropology in Japan* (London: Academy Editions, 1993).

Nitschke says:

Both the mysterious *shiki*, an empty space strewn with river pebbles and fenced in by a sacred straw rope and the *himorogi*, an evergreen tree placed at the center of such a space, are classic forms of a *yorishiro*, a deity's temporary visiting place. The *shiki* seems to derive from the original purification place near some water course; that would explain why it is spread with river pebbles, even when miles away from any water.⁵¹

It is very important to notice the association of sacred space with water, and at the same time, the fact that the stones covering such a space—river pebbles in this case—are associated with the water from which they obviously originate. Gravel, also stone material, is subsequently used as cover for the ceremonial grounds of the *shinden-zukuri* place, as we have seen, in the form of the southern court. On the other hand, a variety of taboos of animist origins applied to the handling of rocks, as the Heian period work *Sakuteiki* clearly declares: “If so much as one of these taboos is violated, the master of the household will fall ill and eventually die, and his land will fall into desolation and become the abode of devils.”⁵²

Considering all these characteristics, we can say that there is a sense of reverence, of awe, associated with lithic material that comes from the animist heritage. This may be translated into a contemplative feeling and attitude, originating before what is called *kansho-niwa*, “contemplative garden”

(Ryoanji and the like), and extending beyond it as an overall awe-like reverence, overlapping with aesthetic enjoyment.⁵³

“Revered/sacred” also implies non-tangibility. In Japanese culture especially, we can distinguish between the sacred to the degree that it cannot even be “touched” visually, like the *goshintai* of shrines, and the sacred that is available for visual tangibility, as exemplified by the *shimenawa* demarcated off-limits zones of the *shiki*. Contemplation can be thought of as a function of the relationship between the reverent viewer and such a mystically determined zone. The gardens of Zen temples may be thought of as new Muromachi renditions of such a function, and even though the values involved are very different, the off-limits zone created thereof, when accepted as a wider cultural value, may be perceived to be related to the same mechanism of reverence.

Stones themselves have a fundamental relationship to Japanese gardens from their incipience. Western analysts of Japanese gardens were impressed with this. In 1893, Josiah Conder remarked: “A striking characteristic of Japanese gardening is the importance attached to the use of natural stones, rocks, and boulders.”⁵⁴ The very nature of stones in a more universal sense may hold the key to some of their perceived importance in the specific context of Japanese gardens:

The hierophany of a stone is pre-eminently an ontophany; above all, the stone is, it always remains itself, it does not change – and it strikes man by what it

⁵¹ Nitschke, *From Shinto to Ando*, 97.

⁵² Takei and Keane, 188.

⁵³ Actually, some authors argue that even the concept of aesthetic enjoyment did not originally exist as such in Japan until modern times, this awe-like reverence being the closest equivalent to aesthetic enjoyment. For example, Kitagawa talks about “the easy fusion and homology of the aesthetic and religious experiences that have given a distinctive character to the Japanese religious tradition.” See Joseph M. Kitagawa, *On Understanding Japanese Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 49.

⁵⁴ Josiah Conder, *Landscape Gardening in Japan* (Tokyo: Kelly and Walsh, 1893), 41.

possesses in irreducibility and absoluteness, and, in so doing, reveals to him by analogy the irreducibility and absoluteness of being. Perceived by virtue of a religious experience, the specific mode of existence of the stone reveals to man the nature of an absolute existence, beyond time, invulnerable to becoming.⁵⁵

Moreover, as we have already seen in the discussion of terms pertaining to gardens, this may be part of the concept of *shanshui*. Mountains came to be associated with and symbolized by stones; islands, in their turn, are often seen as associated with mountains; we have also seen how the island can be associated with the cosmogonic myths.

With respect to the possible perceptions of islands, dealt with earlier, there is one further intriguing fact that can be considered. In his book *The Gardens of Japan*, Ito Teiji mentions the presence of “stone fountains and standing male and female figures in postures of embrace”⁵⁶ in fifth and sixth century palace gardens. He considers them “too decidedly alien [e.g., having non-Japanese physiognomy] to have been Japanese in inspiration.” But these sculptures seem similar to the many *dosojin* images that constitute the object of Michael Czaja’s study in *Gods of Myths and Stone – Phallicism in Japanese Folk Religion*.⁵⁷ There is one *dosojin* in Tottori prefecture in which Izanagi is depicted holding the spear used in the creation of the islands. Even though this *dosojin* is dated 1883, it shows that the connection with the cosmogonic paradigm is a possibility in the Japanese psyche.

We need to further consider the

phallic/fertility valences of stones and menhirs discussed by Mircea Eliade, and what that could mean in relation to the *risshaku* (“standing of stones”). There is an intriguing comment in the *Sakuteiki* in respect to this: “It is rare that all stones within a garden will be set upright; most will be set horizontally. Even so, one says *standing* stones, not *laying* stones.”⁵⁸

The image of the mountain, visually represented using stones, is like a vessel containing multilayered versions of sacredness: from Buddhist Sumeru/Shumisen/Sumi, to Daoist Horai/Peng-lai, or the more ornate crane and turtle, also from the Daoist paraphernalia. All of these symbolic versions of mountains are maintained in the contemplative gardens of the Muromachi period, contributing to the rhetoric of the off-limits space, the original southern court with its previous functional connotations of ritual. All of this considered, stones play a very complex role in the multilayered mental construct of the sacred. Consciously or not, previous symbolism is retained in the Muromachi gardens of contemplation, adding to the introspective definition of contemplation itself that they so aptly establish.

Conclusion

This article began with the basic assumption that if we look carefully at how terms are used in historical texts and correlate those findings with historical gardens and the socio-political milieu that generated them, we can reconstitute the cultural dimensions of gardens and the values that determined them. A much more difficult task is to understand the dialectical movement of those dimensions and values, which happens simultaneously on

⁵⁵ Eliade, 155.

⁵⁶ Ito Teiji, *The Gardens of Japan* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1984), 25.

⁵⁷ *Dosojin* are roadside religious stone figures. Many *dosojin* are of a sexual nature, often depicting couples in more or less obvious degrees of intimacy.

⁵⁸ Takei and Keane, 162.

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the specific level of periods, genres and types, and on the macro-linguistic, macro-cultural level, that takes meaning from one particular materiality and endows it with increased generality. That generality is informed by the deeper cultural and political drives of the social aggregate. Furthermore, in historical perspective, cultural values are subject to an infinite process of stratification and transformation, where nothing is ever completely obliterated, but where anything that is part of the heritage can always be revived, thus reinterpreted, and sometimes manipulated. Attempting to trace the origins of a concept formed as a result of such a process is always daunting. Finding the layers and the points at which certain decisive changes seem to have taken place, is, however, *sine-qua-non* for a real understanding and for placing of the issues in perspective.

My attention was drawn to the perceived contemplative character of Japanese gardens, the off-limits quality of their space, and at the same time a certain feeling of reverence associated with garden space that does not seem to be readily available to explanation in terms of modern perceptions alone. The above qualities seem to have filtered their way into modern attitudes concerning gardens from paradigmatic sources.

A look at the evolution of the terms designating architecturally adjacent garden-like spaces and the actual uses of those spaces reveals connections that can be made with ancestral layers of meaning, related to the use of stones and stone material, and to the perception of garden space as imbued with

qualities of the sacred. The *Sakuteiki*, with its eclectic approach to the handling and understanding of stones, clearly displays a mixture of pantheist, Buddhist, and geomantic values. In that respect, the *Sakuteiki* itself is almost like a geological sediment, where one can see all the layers, very clearly presented in cross-section.

After the Heian phase, idyllic on the one hand and mandalistic on the other, we come to a revolutionary point, represented by what has been preserved as the gardens of the Zen monasteries of Muromachi period built in the dry landscape style called *karesansui*. These seem to have been created as part of a relatively fast process of transformation spanning from the late Heian period, through Kamakura, and flourishing in the Muromachi period. Here, the mode has shifted to a highly mental one. The graveled surfaces that used to cover the *niwa* and the *shiki* of indigenous animist spaces are used now in the stone gardens of Zen temples as an aesthetic means of expression and as a metaphorical device. They can also be seen as a fusion of the pictorial landscape and the functional *niwa* in one single metaphorical stage-set, in which stones are immortalized enacting a never-ending ceremony.

Drawing on feelings of reverence on the one hand—for nature in general and for stones and stone material in particular—the creators of Muromachi era gardens established a mode of expression and a set of values that dictate the particular attitude of contemplation that has become a fundamental way of viewing gardens today.