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Garden architecture in contemporary Japanese culture

In contemporary Japanese culture, gardens are a form of art which combines nature and human creation. The Japanese garden presents nature formed with the human hand. This way it is both an element of nature and architecture as well as art.

Contemporary art and architecture are dominated by functionalism and simplicity where excessive decoration and ornamentation are avoided. Similar trends appear in gardens globally. A lot of old rules are questioned and in many cases nature is rejected. Japanese designers also experiment by creating inventive compositions but the basic difference is that they still draw from their native tradition of garden design.

The oldest tradition assumes that the garden represents nature which for centuries has been considered holy in Japan. Such understanding of nature is connected with indigenous *Shinto* religion which provides that each natural phenomenon is interpreted as a manifestation of deities. Japanese *kami* deities dwell in places which display natural beauty such as mountains, trees, waterfalls, rocks. They were the places of contact for man where people could worship deities and pray to them for grace. These natural sacred surroundings, enclosure and pebbles became the origin of the garden.

In the 18th century, *Zen* Buddhism was brought to Japan from China and it exerted great impact on numerous aspects of Japanese culture such tea drinking ceremony, garden design, calligraphy, *suibokuga* painting, ceramics or theater. This unique culture developed under the influence of *Zen* and it deeply penetrated into the aesthetic perception of the Japanese who love simplicity, naturalness and subtlety. The Japanese now also live in connection with traditional culture which is highly significant to life and spirituality of these people.

Zen monks created contemplative *ishidateso* [1, p. 11] gardens which literary means “a priests who raises stones”. These gardens were the answer to the simplicity

and austerity which are the attributes of a *Zen* monk life. The austere atmosphere created by stone compositions seems proper for ascetic places where *Zen* is practiced. Through their simplicity and limited elements which could distract the viewers, the gardens provoked meditation and contemplation. They demonstrated a scarcity of means of expression and at the same time philosophical profundity. This simplicity was coupled with color moderation and the use of natural colors and materials. With the use of rocks and gravel as well as few slow-growth evergreen shrubs, *Zen* monks created dry landscape gardens, *karesansui*. By reducing nature to its most basic level, removing from it everything that could be removed and restoring it to its most fundamental dimension, they displayed its essence. These almost unchanging gardens seem to be frozen in time. *Zen* monks rejected passing phenomena and worthless appearances. Thus the gardens which they created present universe in its most condensed form. Rocks which do not change are such an imperishable element – at least in the scale of human life. Rocks in Japanese gardens play a very important role which is unheard of in the West. The Japanese believe that stones, like plants and animals, have spiritual life. Single rocks can be the main element of the Japanese garden and especially colors, texture and shape of each of them provide the whole landscape with specific qualities.

The influence of *Zen* is visible not only in the selection of materials but also in the composition of *karesansui* gardens. It is very important to compose free space with space occupied by rocks and shrubs. In traditional Japanese painting, an unoccupied space, which in the Western culture has negative connotations and is considered emptiness, constitutes the basic part of the composition and its artistic significance is great. It is an artist's task not to say everything and some room is left for the viewer's imagination to interpret the rest. The most important message should be suggested, delicately signaled and in no case should it be communicated directly. Emptiness expresses perfection, the absolute, true substance of all things and it is the essence of the teachings of *Zen*. Similarly, in *kare-*

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Fig. 1. In this *karesansui* garden, the stones are replaced with clipped azaleas and camellia shrubs. There are three groups with three, five, and seven plants. The *shakkei* technique of a borrowed distant view is of Mt. Hiei



Fig. 2. In the traditional *karesansui* garden, water is represented in a symbolic way by gravel. In this garden, stones standing in the shallow water integrate the garden with the building

sansui gardens there are large spaces of light gravel and trees and rocks contrast with that light space which surrounds them. These gardens were not meant to be used for strolls; they were meant only to be looked at from the building as a landscape (Fig. 1).

Harmony achieved by asymmetry is another characteristic feature of the Japanese garden, originating from

observation of nature. The Japanese aesthetics deliberately and consistently rejects symmetry, building harmony of the whole on asymmetric location of the rocks in the garden. Rocks and trees can be used individually but usually they are arranged asymmetrically in groups of 3, 5 or 7. The principles of breaking symmetry in order to achieve harmony with nature were applied not only in the arrangement of rocks but they also govern the relations between the groups and their relations to the pathway or the building. The natural harmony, as seen in nature, is also achieved by arranging different, often opposite, elements of form and color in the garden. Contrasting arrangement of shrubs, ferns, clumps of grass and moss brings out the beauty of the rocks and constitute an element combining the rocks with the surroundings.

The contemporary gardens, created under the influence of Zen, are also designed to express simplicity and nature in its purest form without plants or water. Like sculptures, *karesansui* gardens can be seen as abstract and three-dimensional monochromatic landscapes. With different modifications, what always applies is the principle of great moderation and simplicity in selecting elements and well as in their arrangement, resulting in very sophisticated garden designs. The rocks which are used very often in the contemporary Japanese gardens have new shapes and they are specially cut; sometimes they are replaced with irregular “blocks” made of glass imitating rocks; sometimes, combined with water, they create space integrating the interior of the house with its surroundings (Fig. 2).

Other well developed garden design techniques include beauty spots and compositions influencing the perception of the garden by the viewer. Such effects can be achieved by directing the viewers’ eyes, revealing parts and not the whole view or by revealing the same view from different places. The partial blocking of the viewing field provides some room for imagination and enables the control of the view. The fragmentary and episodic nature

Fig. 3. The tree trunk and branches in the foreground catch a glimpse of the distant view. Space in the garden thus appears to be bigger than it really is. When garden borders are not visible, focusing on a part enables the viewer to imagine the whole



as well as the lack of unity in art is connected with deliberate rejection of symmetry as well as a predilection for naturalness. These qualities are expressed in gardens by focusing on a single element as well as in their simplicity and limiting the number of the elements of the garden to the necessary ones. This has its origin in Zen philosophy which is deeply rooted in Japan, based primarily on intuitive acquisition of knowledge and perception of the world as well as avoiding logic and minimizing the role of intellect in artistic creation. According to this philosophy universe is not constructed logically, and a fragment is as important as the whole, which is in line with a Buddhist saying “*ichi soku issai soku ichi*” meaning “the one is none other than the many, and the many is none other than the one” [4]. In a traditional Japanese home, the sliding *shōji* doors or straw *sudare* screens or blinds which are used as curtains carve out some outside space – garden or scenery – and compose a graphic view resembling a painting seen from inside of the house. The view of the garden is blocked with the use of groups of plants and bamboo fences. Under no circumstances should the garden space be directly revealed. Adequate vegetation can make the garden look bigger than it really is, which is especially convenient in small gardens. Planting trees by a pond with swooping branches which provide glimpses of the view behind them or a plum tree branch in the foreground behind which there is a whole landscape and the space is just suggested and make it look bigger. Similarly, the details are only delicately signaled instead and the viewers can let their imagination run free and image more (Fig. 3).

Tea ceremony is another element that shaped the Japanese patterns. The aesthetics developed on the basis of tea ceremony exerted great influence on garden art, architecture and interior decoration of tea pavilions, the art of flower arrangement, applied utensils, costumes and the behavior of the participants. Since there is a close connection between the symbolism of tea and Zen philosophy, the metaphor of emptiness plays an important role

in tea ceremony. According to the esoteric Zen mysticism emptiness is the essence of things and that is why in tea ceremony what is not there it is more important than what is in it. The same criteria apply to the pavilion where what is important is empty space is limited by the roof and the walls and not the roof and the walls themselves.

The brewing and drinking tea has become a religious ritual still in China, however, in Japan it extended its dimension to include the totally secular domain in order to ultimately develop the aesthetic patterns which still are visible today in many aesthetic and spatial solutions as well as in applied materials. Tea ceremony fully developed in the 16th century when Sen no Rikyū was the tea master; he is considered precursor of formal rules of tea drinking and strict regulations for each activity, including the kind of tea bowls used and flower arrangement as well as the tea house interior decoration. The rules of tea ceremony developed by him have been applied with slight changes until today. The characteristic features of that style included primarily the following: moderation, rejection of splendor and ostentation as well as elimination of everything that can distract attention and cause unrest of the spirit. Rikyū wanted to create surroundings that would demonstrate the frailty and the fleeting character of the surrounding world. He wanted to wake the world of soul by applying simplicity. The elements of his philosophy, especially those regarding the development of the “framework” for a broader context of the surroundings, still can be seen in the contemporary development of urban space.

The style of tea pavilions was reflected also in the architectural mainstream. Architecture is the expression of the typical Japanese way of perception of space as being continuous, flexible, horizontal and combining the elements of the world of nature and man. For the Japanese space, which is in the West perceived as emptiness limited only by walls and roof, is considered real beauty of the room and a valuable element of composition. The real



Fig. 4. In the traditional Japanese room there may be a *tokonoma* alcove with a flower arrangement and/or hanging scroll painting. In this room, the scroll is imaginatively replaced with an actual view, a cropped fragment of the garden

beauty can be shown in artistic work by simplicity and delicate suggestion of color, form or texture. The characteristic features of traditional homes include almost empty interior, simplicity, harmoniousness and beauty of few details. The mind and ingeniousness of the viewer should complement the image which is visible only for a short moment. The external emptiness is internally rich. Emptiness – which is erroneously identified with nothingness – is a treasure chest full of infinite possibilities. This idea is the “essence” of the Japanese home and garden. The most important thing is the space designed with basis elements – it is the “pure” function. Contemporary buildings and gardens are designed in Japan according to the above assumptions and their value is demonstrated not in their rich ornaments but in the sophisticated details made of traditional materials or in compliance with the traditional spatial form (Fig. 4).

The traditional Japanese home is integrated with its garden which, regardless of its size, is important, integral part of the home. In the Japanese home with simple structure, almost all walls, both external and internal, are sliding and they can be temporarily disassembled, which makes the home look totally integrated with nature. After sliding the walls to the sides the whole view of the garden appears; one of the garden’s sides adjoins the building and the other ones are enclosed by a wall constituting the frame of the design. As a result the home’s interior and the garden, which is outside, are spatially connected with each other to provide integral whole. Looking outside from such a home’s interior, the wooden poles of the light timber structure are the frame, which with the trees, stone lanterns, mossy rocks and the mountains glimmering in the distance, create a great picture that looks as if it was painted by an unparalleled artist.

The contemporary architectural solutions of this type that involve combining space used by the residents with garden are typical primarily of residential buildings or generally accessible public spaces. The problem is high-

density housing and no private space. Nowadays, when the living spaces are very limited, apart from *shōji* doors which help to integrate the home with its garden, vegetation is introduced inside the home. The sense of presence of nature inside the home is achieved e.g. by a growing tree which changes during its growth. In the spring buds appear; in the summer leave provide a lot of shade and when the fall comes they turn red. The tree was planted in such a place so that it could be seen from the places which are used most often at home in a small rectangular area enclosed by the walls. Sliding the walls open provides the view and light and it makes the division between interior and exterior indistinct and provides a sense of freedom and open space.

One of the most effective techniques is *shakkei* – a technique of “borrowed scenery” where a fragment of a distant landscape is incorporated into the garden composition. Frequently, the garden design makes use of the natural surroundings e.g. a forest or hills which provide a sense of additional space and prospects. These solutions are also applied in contemporary designs such as Matsuo Taisha in Kyoto. The central element of the composition in the garden – large hill with clipped azaleas – reproduces the shape of Mt. Matsuo, behind the temple. At the same time the shape of the hill resembles a tortoise which in Japan is the symbol of a long life. Rock arrangements, located all over the garden, strongly contrast with nicely clipped *karikomi* shrubs on the hill. The repetition of the shape of the mountain and the use of *karikomi* as a backdrop for a meandering stream makes this garden unique and special (Fig. 5).

The contemporary Japanese designers create a new kind of scenery. In an inventive way, they design space by combining, in accordance with their taste, elements selected from nature. They face new issues connected with contemporary life and specific conditions of urban life. Even if in their designs they use new materials in a totally new way, they still draw inspiration most often from the



Fig. 5. The shape of Mt. Matsuo behind the shrine is „borrowed” into the garden by a reproduced hill with clipped karikomi shrubs. The banks of the meandering stream are covered with flat, bluish rocks and its shallow bottom is covered with small pebbles

rich Japanese repertoire of traditional techniques. As a result the gardens are still close to their roots.

Experimenting with new materials and a new way of their arrangement provides new perspectives in the design of Japanese gardens. One of them is the use of cut stones – a radical departure from the old tradition of application of stones which can only be found in nature; sharp edges and chisel marks on the stones reveal a different kind of beauty. Another, is the application in the garden of gravel of a different color and a plane raked to produce innovative patterns. The contemporary designers also found an application for glass, iron, stainless steel, tiles and even carbon fiber, stimulating imagination of the viewers so that they could create their own image of the garden.

Inhabitants of the city who suffer from stress connected with work and lack of space can easily lose their identity and strong connection with nature. In its ideal form, the contemporary Japanese garden should be a spiritual place designed in line with the sophisticated aesthetics which evokes and celebrates nature as space that includes nature helps to relieve stress and soothe the mind. In order to achieve this, various techniques are applied, including rock Zen gardens or focus on one element (e.g. a tree) and less restricted forms of arrangement of plants – still they all draw from thousands of years of tradition. This kind of expression, involving a combination of traditional and contemporary solutions, sets new directions in the design of Japanese gardens.

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Architektura ogrodów w kulturze współczesnej Japonii

W kulturze współczesnej Japonii nie można pominąć ogrodów jako formy sztuki, w której natura i dzieło ludzkich rąk łączą się ze sobą. Artystyczna wartość „japońskich ogrodów” jest powszechnie uznawana na całym świecie i miała znaczący wpływ na rozwój współczesnych ogrodów na Zachodzie.

Sztuka tworzenia i idee japońskich ogrodów przekazywane są z pokolenia na pokolenie, chociaż przez pewien czas uważane były za mało nowoczesne i starano się je zastąpić wzorcami zachodniej kultu-

ry masowej. Pomimo to nadal kultywuje się tradycyjne umiejętności tworzenia ogrodów i traktowanie krajobrazu jako wnętrza użytkowego. Wielu czołowych projektantów coraz częściej eksperymentuje z zastosowanymi materiałami, formą i stylem projektowanych przez siebie ogrodów. Zmianie ulega wygląd współczesnej przestrzeni miejskiej. Pojawiają się rozwiązania wykorzystujące tradycyjne elementy kultury i sztuki, wkomponowane w nowoczesne, niekiedy wręcz futurystyczne rozwiązania architektoniczne.

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