Zen Gardens Essay, Research Paper

Zen Buddhism began to show up in Japan during the eighth century. It went through various periods of popularity and disregard, but constituted one of the most important influences on Japanese culture. All Buddhist temples include gardens. The first temple gardens evolved from well-groomed landscaping around Shinto shrines. Later, the gates and grounds surrounding Buddhist temples began to use gardens to beautify the temple, similar to the Heian mansion gardens. Jodo Buddhism (Pure Land) used temple gardens as a way to symbolize the “pure land” created by Amida Buddha to aid suffering souls in pursuit of enlightenment. These Zen gardens were meant to encompass the nature of the universe. The garden is the Buddha’s realm. Gardens are tools, vehicles for meditation and reflection. Therefore they tend to be far more metaphorical than other gardens. You can stroll through many Zen gardens, but more often, you are encouraged to simply look at it.

During the 10th to 12th centuries known as the Heian era, Japan was breaking away from the styles of the Chinese T’ang Dynasty. New ideas were developing as the Imperial court converted what it had learned. In the area of garden design, however, Chinese thought was still a powerful force. Most of the aesthetic principles we see as Japanese had not yet developed. The dominant architectural style, called Shinden, was essentially a modification of Chinese design. Buildings were arranged somewhat symmetrically and according to the laws of Chinese geomancy called Feng shui. Within the mansions, a central building, the shinden (sleeping hall) would be linked to other outlying buildings by covered causeways. Beyond the tile roofs and verandas was the garden. A large empty area was set aside for open-air gatherings such as dance performances or games. The rest of the garden was intended for viewing and limited strolling. Fishing on small boats to catch fish in their ponds was one popular activity. Poetry reading and writing was also essential.

According to Feng shui, all structures have to be laid out carefully along compass lines and in certain configurations to allow ki (Chinese “chi”), the mystic energy of life to flow properly. A reduced ki flow in a home was thought to cause sickness and disharmony. For example, the builders, after consulting with a Yin-yang diviner, would usually create special arrangements to prevent bad ki from entering the home from the northwest. In the first Japanese garden design manual, the Sakuteiki, it is explained how water courses should flow from the northwest to the southeast so that any bad ki could be cleansed by the protective deity of the east Kamogawa (blue dragon), then proceed west again passing under a veranda of the house so as to draw away any evil spirits that might have somehow slipped into the house. Heavy stones were thought to serve as gates or landing points for spirits and were thus placed very carefully. Other design rules applied as well. Influenced by esoteric Buddhism, the garden design was expected to include an island in a pond connected to the mainland by a bridge. This represented the world of enlightenment separated from the world of man. The bridges were frequently arched and coated with bright red lacquer (another Chinese influence).

The Heian nobles also filled their gardens with special aesthetic ideas that were unique to its time. Mujo is a sense of melancholy, which arose from a Buddhist awareness of the impermanence and transient nature of all things. Plants were sparse but flowering and deciduous trees were popular for their passing beauty. At the end of the Heian era, chaos ensued. Most of the Imperial court culture withered away as civil war shook Japan. Most of the great shinden mansions of Heiankyo were destroyed. As a result, there are no extant examples of Heian mansion gardens. However, they have been found in archeological sites and are well represented in literature such as The Tale of Genji and paintings of the era. Yet this garden style never really died and was to be reinvented over many centuries.

Abstract representations of natural elements had long been an aspect of Japanese design by this time. But in the late Kamakura to early Muromachi period (late 15th cent.), the true Zen gardens began to evolve. Designers began to create “the garden as a painting” under the influence of Chinese Zen ink painting. A sort of “short-hand” style developed called karesansui (dry-mountain-water). Karesansui, or “dry landscape” style Japanese gardens have been in existence for centuries. They are to be used as an aid to create a deeper understanding of the Zen concepts and to heighten the poetic and metaphoric significance of stones. Not only is there viewing intended to aid in meditation but also the entire creation of the garden is intended to trigger contemplation. A good example of a “dry landscape” garden is at Ryoan-ji Temple in Kyoto, created around 1500. In an area measuring 30 m x 10 m. This small dry garden is composed of 15 rocks of different sizes set in outcroppings of two and three set, with raked gravel in between which represents the sea. Created by Soami, painter and poet. These dry-stone gardens so greatly favored by the Zen temples were an attempt to symbolically express the vastness of nature within a small space. The rocks represent islands and the gravel is raked into geometric patterns resembling waves on water. Islands have a particular importance for the Japanese. Islands represent a symbol of longevity and continuing health. Most Japanese gardens have both single rock islands and built up islands of earth and stone. Often, these islands are built up to resemble the shape of two prominent symbols of longevity the tortoise and the crane. The tortoise is believed to live for 10,000 years and the crane 1,000 years. These rock islands are also said to symbolize a tiger and its cub swimming, or even a deer or rabbit. Yet the mind can also ascribe other symbolism to the scene. There is nothing in a Zen garden except what you bring to it yourself. Sitting in one of these gardens one is bound to enter into meditation and spiritual contemplation.

All stones are fundamental to the dry-stone garden; and after the Heian period the making of a garden was referred to as “standing the stones.” It is little wonder, therefore, why they were so important in the Japanese garden. Other symbolic references were made with stones such as the shumisenseki and the kusenhakkaiseki, both stone-groupings identifiable with Buddhist ideology and teachings. The dry-stone garden was, in other words, an expression of nature taken to an extreme, generated by this kind of strong attachment for stones. These gardens created by the Zen priest are called “kansho-niwa” or (contemplation garden) and termed by many today as “Zen gardens “. The two main elements of a Zen or a “dry style” garden are rocks to form mountains and island and raked sand to form flowing water. The sand used in Japanese gardens is not often even sand but instead crushed granite. These dry-stone gardens symbolically expressing elements of nature in stone appeared during the latter part of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century as stated earlier. Although toward the end of the 16th century, when the splendor of Momoyama culture was at its height, Rikyu, the renowned tea master, perfected the highly understated and yet elegant aesthetics of tea, and a very particular style of garden was developed as an approach to the tea house or room where the ceremonies would take place. It was these two garden styles, the abstracted “dry-style” garden and the restrained “tea garden”, which would greatly influence the Japanese garden in the ensuing years.

This new style of garden which came into being at the end of the 16th century as a result of the townspeople’s interest in tea, was called a “tea garden”. People were actually required to walk through a tea garden and it provided a number of design pointers for the development of the “stroll garden”, which will become so popular during the Edo period. Furthermore, because the culture of tea came to occupy such a prominent position in the hearts and minds of the Japanese people, such essential elements in a tea garden were a Oribe (stone lantern), a Chozubaci (stone basin for cleansing the hands and mouth), and stepping stone paths all became symbolic of the Japanese garden.

During the first half of the 17th century, garden design became far more uninhibited. Prominent in this new development was the work of Kobori Enshu, most distinguished tea master of the era. Enshu was commissioned by his brother in law Shokado Shojo to build a teahouse at Ryoko-in. Shakado was then asked bye Enshu to paint its fusuma (paper walls) because he was one of the pioneers of simplified Zen calligraphy and was also a tea master. Enshu displayed considerable talent as both a garden designer and architect, while also occupying a position of some influence in the Shogunate and being responsible for instructing the Shogun’s family in the “way of tea”. Enshu developed his own design concept of “contrasting natural and man-made elements,” and proceeded to introduce geometric design elements into the Japanese garden with all its passions for the natural. Using such things as straight pieces of dressed stone to edge water and paths composed of rectangular stone elements and naturally formed ones, he opened the doors on a new world of original design. It was Enshu who employed a linear design for the lake at Sentogosho (part of the Imperial residence in Kyoto).

The Edo period spanning the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries was a period during which a number of garden styles were integrated. The dry-stone garden and tea garden that had come into being prior to this went through a number of diverse developments, and were both incorporated into the stroll garden, which also paid homage to traditional lake gardens. Seeing that stroll gardens were a comprehensive compilation of all the various styles of the Japanese gardens, they subsequently became used for grand receptions and entertaining by feudal lords. And, ultimately, they were heir to an individual style of garden that functioned as a banqueting facility. The gardens of Katsura Rikyu that were laid out in the first half of the 17th century on the southwestern outskirts of Kyoto are representative of the early period of this stroll garden style. The gardens of Katsura represent the first completion of a stroll garden around which, as the name suggests, it was possible to walk. It was during this period, that a method of drawing natural scenery into a garden became established as a recognized style of garden design. It was described as a “borrowing of landscape” beyond the limits of a garden and such gardens were termed “shakkei” or (borrowed landscape) gardens.

Many of these gardens fell into decline with the coming of the Meiji restoration at the end of the 19th century. And although the leaders of this new age were bent on absorbing western culture, they also turned to traditional aspects of culture in Japan for inspiration. It is this intellectual climate that allows Japanese gardens to develop along a constantly evolving path with a strong sense of naturalism, which is essential to its over all design.

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