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Echoes of historic Japanese gardens

Ana Oliveira

Fig. 1 The karesansui at Tofuku-ji

As a Kew Diploma student, my travel scholarship enabled me to travel to Kyoto to see some historic Japanese gardens. In addition to my passionate interest in the gardens, this voyage was also related to my dissertation about whether historic Japanese gardens can show us ways to reduce the stress we experience in urban environments.

Japanese gardens aim to capture the essence of nature and refine it into its most essential elements, often in a miniaturised form. They encourage the visitor to slow down, meditate or contemplate. These objectives are mainly achieved through a balanced composition of hard landscaping and plant choices. I wanted to know if these traditional methods could be incorporated into contemporary design.



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Fig. 2 Shugakuin, a shakkei garden



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Fig. 3 Katsura, a stroll garden

Heading to Kyoto was crucial, as it allowed me to see most styles of gardens and to minimise travel at the same time. The main garden styles included the karesansui (gravel and rock gardens [fig. 1]), shakkei (borrowed scenery [fig. 2]), and kaiyu-shiki-teien (stroll gardens [fig. 3]). I saw 23 gardens in total, which enabled me to see patterns and distinguishing features, but also allowed me to contemplate, write, or merely observe how the Japanese experience each place.

With the help of Yuri Ugaya, a specialist in Kyoto gardens, I also learned that, while in the West a garden is mainly an aesthetic exercise, in Japan a garden without an allegorical narrative is pointless. For instance, a group of rocks can become a mountain range, or a fish swimming up a stream will turn into a dragon.

Plants are also full of meanings and can greatly influence spaces and moods. The use of conifers and evergreens is particularly common. They are most often

clipped to impart a sense of permanence and longevity (much like a rock – fig. 4), but can also be allowed to grow freely to soften the hard lines of a building and the hard landscape (fig. 7).

Pines, especially *Pinus thunbergii*, *P. parviflora*, and *P. densiflora* are a staple of most gardens (figs 1, 2, 3), as they are associated with long life (cuttings don't wilt after being taken), a very important concept in Japanese culture. They are also clipped in the style of cloud pruning, which is the manual removal of needles to shape the layered branches and let in light to the lower ones.

Another interesting plant is *Nandina domestica*, whose Japanese common name 'nan ten' means to repel bad spirits. In domestic gardens it is placed in a north-west corner for that specific purpose. The concepts of restraint and frugality are very important in Japanese culture, and these are displayed in their gardens and planting designs. Showy plants such as azaleas, camellias or cherries are common, but are used merely as a gentle reminder of the changing seasons (fig. 5). Bedding plants or perennials are not used at all.

Perhaps the best-known flower of them all is the cherry blossom. Unfortunately, I arrived one week too late and I missed the spectacular flower displays (it was the earliest flowering season in 80 years!).

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Fig. 4 The topiary seen at Sanzen-in

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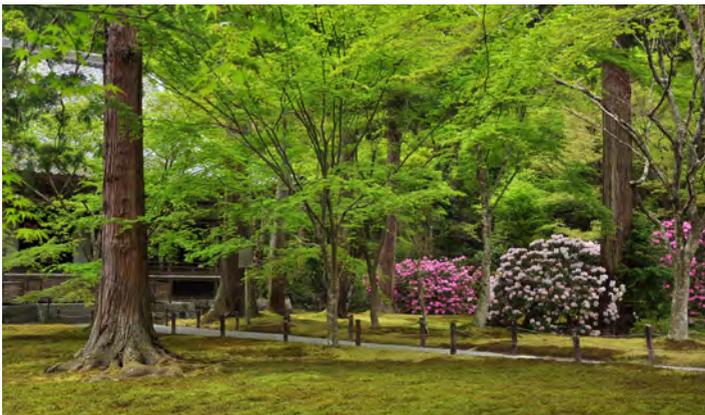


Fig. 5 Rhododendrons used as a focal point in Sanzen-in

Cherries have a profound meaning associated with them, as their short-lived blossoms remind us how fleeting life is. They are not just used in gardens, but also in streets and public parks, and their flowering season is a major social event (fig. 6). This is a very interesting example of how important plants can be in human culture, and how they remind us to retain our sense of wonder for life, regardless of how many times we may see events repeated.

Apart from plants, what also interested me was how landscaping features in a garden can make us relax and slow down. For instance, narrow paths or stepping stones force us to walk more slowly. In the garden at Katsura (fig. 3) the stepping stones are used to draw our attention to our steps and away from the surrounding landscape. As we arrive at wider stone we are prompted to look around, and a wonderful view presents itself.

Zen gardens are also soothing. They are often viewed from one side only, which produces a theatrical effect. Visiting them is like stepping into a live painting with a designated seating area (figs 7, 10, 11). They are viewed from a temple, ensuring shelter and comfort. One is persuaded to sit, contemplate, and slow down.

Other commonly used features are waterfalls (fig. 8). They recall a mountain stream or cascade; they add sound; and they



Fig. 6 A late flowering cherry in Ohara, near Kyoto

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Fig. 7 The view from the temple at Enko-ji

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mask surrounding noise such as vehicle traffic.

A garden with views doesn't need to be very large either. Murin-an is a small stroll/borrowed-scenery garden that provides views and surprises through careful landscaping and planting design (fig. 9).

I found that the Japanese people still enjoy the old gardens as havens of tranquility. At Shisen-dō I saw garden visitors relaxing in the peaceful atmosphere at the end of their working day.



Fig. 8 The waterfall at Shugakuin

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Fig. 9 Murin-an



Fig. 10 Zuihō-in



Fig.11 Ryoan-ji

Some contemporary Japanese gardens are very similar to historic ones. Zuihō-in created in 1961, looked remarkably like much older gardens such as the 15th century Ryoan-ji showing how the designs and references of ancient times are still relevant for the contemporary Japanese (figs 10 and 11).

On this trip I learned that there are parallels between some core Japanese design principles and western

garden styles. Although cloud pruning and extensive use of topiary may not always fit into a western garden, the spectacular displays of cherry blossom, and the careful use of flowering plants in a garden setting (sparingly, so as to enhance their impact) are definitely elements we can learn from.

I found that using running water, manipulating views, or laying paths to slow us down, are strategies which

can indeed soothe the human mind. I saw that a garden of contemplation doesn't have to require a large space, as many Japanese gardens are often a small enclosed outdoor room.

These strategies can be applied in densely populated urban environments such as pocket gardens, hospitals and mental-health facilities. My trip proved historic Japanese gardens can inspire current and future designs after all. 🌸

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