



Japanese gardens

London-based Suzanne Perrin summarises for us a recent lecture series given at the University of Cape Town.

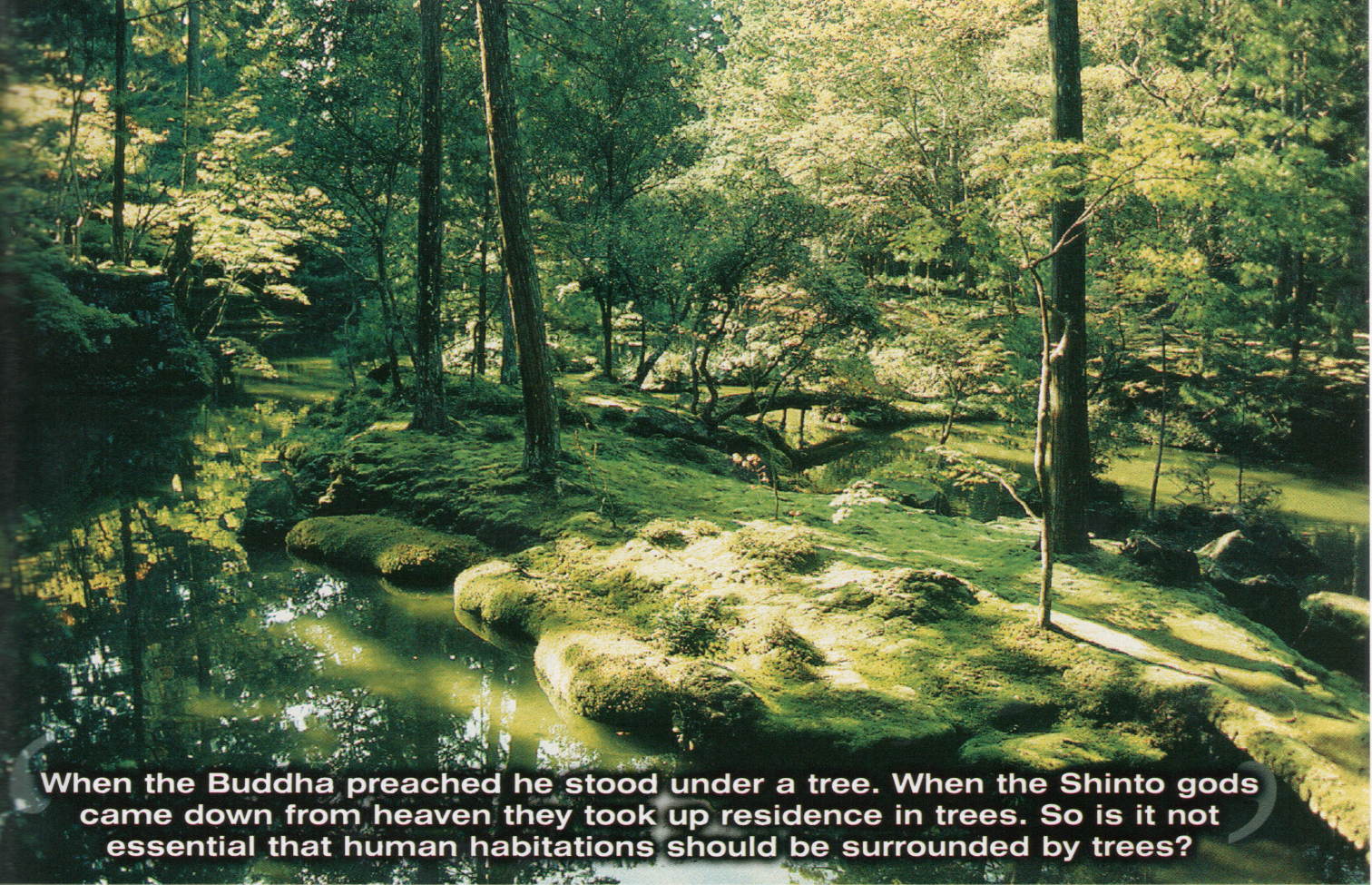
Japan's natural landscape vistas provided much inspiration for the early garden designers of the Nara and Heian periods (8th - 12th centuries). Frequent travel and trade between Japan and mainland China and Korea brought imported culture to the imperial court of Japan, and by the 10th century treatises on garden design were popular with the ruling aristocrats for their country estates. They created a naturalistic environment with lakes, islands, pathways and pavilions which sought to recreate the natural landscapes found in Japan and China, often with visual references to classical poems and folkloric tales. One of the earliest references to garden making in Japan occurs in the *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japanese History) written in 720CE, where it stated that a Korean emissary arrived at the court of empress Suiko in 606CE and built an artificial hill representing Mount Sumeru (the centre of the Buddhist universe), with a bridge seeming to connect the earthly and heavenly realms. From that time on gardens were constructed for the wealthy

aristocrats of the imperial court, often containing a man-made lake with an artificial island at the centre, said to represent Japan as an island nation in the great China sea. During the 10th century in the Heian period (794-1185) a famous manual was compiled called the *Sakutei-ki* (*Notes on Garden Design*) in which the principles of garden design were laid down and thereafter followed for several centuries. In the opening section it states:

'When the Buddha preached he stood under a tree. When the Shinto gods came down from heaven they took up residence in trees. So is it not essential that human habitations should be surrounded by trees?'

The endemic belief system in Japan is Shinto – 'the way of the gods' – which involves a deep regard for natural phenomena, the belief that all living things have a spirit, or kami, and that ancestral spirits share the world in which we live our daily lives. Shinto encourages a close relationship with nature, and many *Kami* (deities)

Above: Heianjingu garden – covered bridge, Kyoto. Garden style: Kaiyushiki / stroll



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are represented in Shinto shrines, for example *Amaterasu* (the sun goddess) at Ise Grand Shrine, and *Inari* (the rice god), in many local shrines. Kami are enshrined for people to visit and pay their respects with offerings of food, *sake* (rice wine), salt and water. Many gardens incorporate a Shinto shrine to symbolise man's connection with nature and to 'house' the kami or spirits when they 'visit' the earthly realm. The Torii gateway marks the entrance to a Shinto shrine or sacred site, and many were placed in areas of significant beauty as an acknowledgement to the kami who lived there. Shrines were often placed within garden settings to reflect this practice, and to give a 'destination' to the walking tour of the garden.

Naturally occurring and imported flora and fauna were introduced to the private estates creating an idealised vision of nature for the landed gentry. A wide variety of trees were used including *hinoki* (a hardwood), cypress, cedar, camphor, prunus, pine, maple (acers), wisteria and ginkgo. Plants imported from China included azaleas, chrysanthemums, camellias, peonies, lilies, lotus flowers and irises, among many other varieties of native plants including the ubiquitous bamboo, pine and plum, frequently associated together as 'the three friends of winter'.

Thus the *Kaiyushiki* or 'strolling' garden was created by the ruling elite, who had the land, labour and means to construct large parkland gardens for strolling and enjoyment. *Kaiyushiki* comes from the word *kaiyu* (*suru*) meaning 'to travel abroad', or 'to take a tour', or simply 'to exercise'. The suffix *shiki* can have a variety of interpretations depending on the reading, including 'way', 'morale', 'spirit', 'ceremony', 'time', or 'the cycle of the four seasons', all of which could be made relevant for the garden stroll.

The gardens of the imperial villas around Kyoto, the ancient

capital of Japan for over one thousand years, offer fine examples of the large, parkland 'strolling' type. These include the Katsura Rikyu garden laid out between 1624-36, The Shugakuin garden, and the more accessible Heianjingu garden in the city centre. The Saiho-ji garden, laid out in 1338, is a naturalistic garden emulating nature more than the landscaped style of the imperial villas. It has over 120 types of moss growing under the cedar trees and bamboo groves, and for this reason is also known as *Kokedera* or 'moss garden temple'.

BUDDHIST PARADISE

Following the introduction of Buddhism to Japan in the mid-6th century, many imported *sutras* (scriptures) from China had become common knowledge among the educated ruling class by the 14th and 15th centuries of the Ashikaga period. One of the most popular sects was Jodo-shu with its focus on the Amida Buddha of the Western Paradise. Palaces and pavilions were constructed in elaborate settings that sought to emulate the Buddhist paradise of the scriptures, and were thought to bring good karma to those who constructed them. Pavilions were often built over lakes and ponds, giving the impression of 'floating' palaces depicted in Buddhist paradise paintings of the era. The *Kinkakuji* or 'Golden Pavilion', built in Kyoto in 1397 by Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, is a typical example of this style of building, and is resplendent with its two upper floors covered in bright gold, shimmering over the water of the 'Seven Treasures Pond'. Many gardens of this era had a small chapel dedicated to an ancestor or founder of a Buddhist sect within the garden complex.

ZEN INFLUENCES

The Shoguns (military rulers) of the Ashikaga dynasty (1336-1573)

Above: Kokoro lake with moss island (*Saiho-ji*). **Garden style:** Stroll (*Kaiyushiki*)



embraced Zen Buddhism as their main religion, but this calming effect did nothing to quell the violent civil war that raged up and down the country between military factions loyal to the emperor and those opposed to the old aristocratic regime. In the battle for new territories residences became smaller and less ostentatious, and their corresponding gardens were downsized to manageable levels of a few acres, instead of large estates over several hectares. This reduction of form was also closely aligned to Zen principles of austerity and simplicity, where superfluous elements are stripped away to reveal the essential core of existence. Garden arrangements began to represent the symbolic reduction of nature into its purest form, using rocks, moss and raked gravel as the focal points for visual references that alluded to man's spiritual journey into the Buddhist cosmos. Groupings of rocks often represented a standing or seated Buddha with attendants, or symbolised the sacred Buddhist peaks of Mount Sumeru or Mount Horai, or the 'land of the immortals' in Taoist teachings. These arrangements also emulated the aesthetics of Chinese landscape paintings in ink, deemed the highest form of art by Song dynasty Chinese scholars.

These gardens were not for walking in, but were created as aids to meditation and contemplation, and took their inspiration from Chinese and Japanese landscape painting, poetry and astronomy, among other subjects. Arrangements of rocks and moss could symbolise mountain peaks above the clouds, islands in the sea, or the forces of nature as in Yin and Yang, represented by *Tsuru-shima* (crane island), and *Kame-shima* (turtle island). The crane flies high into the heavens, and the turtle dives deep into the ocean, thus creating the never-ending cycle of life between heaven and earth.

Many small courtyard gardens of the era were created within temple grounds, being designed and maintained by the monks. The white gravel used to offset the subtle colours of the rocks was raked on a daily basis, in patterns ranging from straight lines, waves and spirals, to zig-zag and checker-board patterns. Many examples are found in the temple gardens of Kyoto, particularly the Ryoan-ji, famous for its 15 rocks in five groupings amid a 'sea' of white gravel. Fifteen is the number of days the moon takes to wax to fullness, then fifteen days to wane – but we, as mortals, can only see 14 rocks as we are 'imperfect' compared to the cosmos.

TAOISM & CONFUCIANISM

Many guiding principles for garden design in Japan were also based upon ancient Chinese Taoist teachings and Confucian concepts as a means of ordering the universe and man's place within it. Taoism sought the harmonious union between natural elements, using rocks, water and plants to symbolise the eternal cycles of growth, fullness, death, constancy and transience in the natural world. Pine trees were synonymous with longevity and strength, rocks for permanence and solid values, bamboo represented flexibility and resilience, peonies for beauty and youth, chrysanthemums for happiness and wealth. Confucian values and corresponding hierarchy would often be applied in designing a specific layout of rocks and pavilions, or even rooms within a summer house when considering the order of importance for visitors. For example rocks could be selected for their size and shape to represent the 'Five Confucian Virtues' by which men lived their lives, those being: Justice, Benevolence, Wisdom, Fidelity and

Above: Kagami Lake with Torii gate, Nara Park



The gardens took their inspiration from Chinese and Japanese landscape painting, poetry and astronomy among other subjects.

Above: Ohbai-in, sub-temple of Daitoku-ji, Kyoto. **Garden style:** Dry garden (*Kare sansui*).

Politeness. A flourishing garden reflected the prosperity of the household, and by extension 'the rise of a garden culture mirrored a thriving empire', as noted by the Song dynasty scholar Li Gefie. Therefore the more propitious elements incorporated into a garden the better it would serve its creator and mirror his fortune. This was amply demonstrated by the many fine gardens built by the military barons (the Daimyo) of Japan during the 16th and 17th centuries as they gained wealth and status after successful battle campaigns.

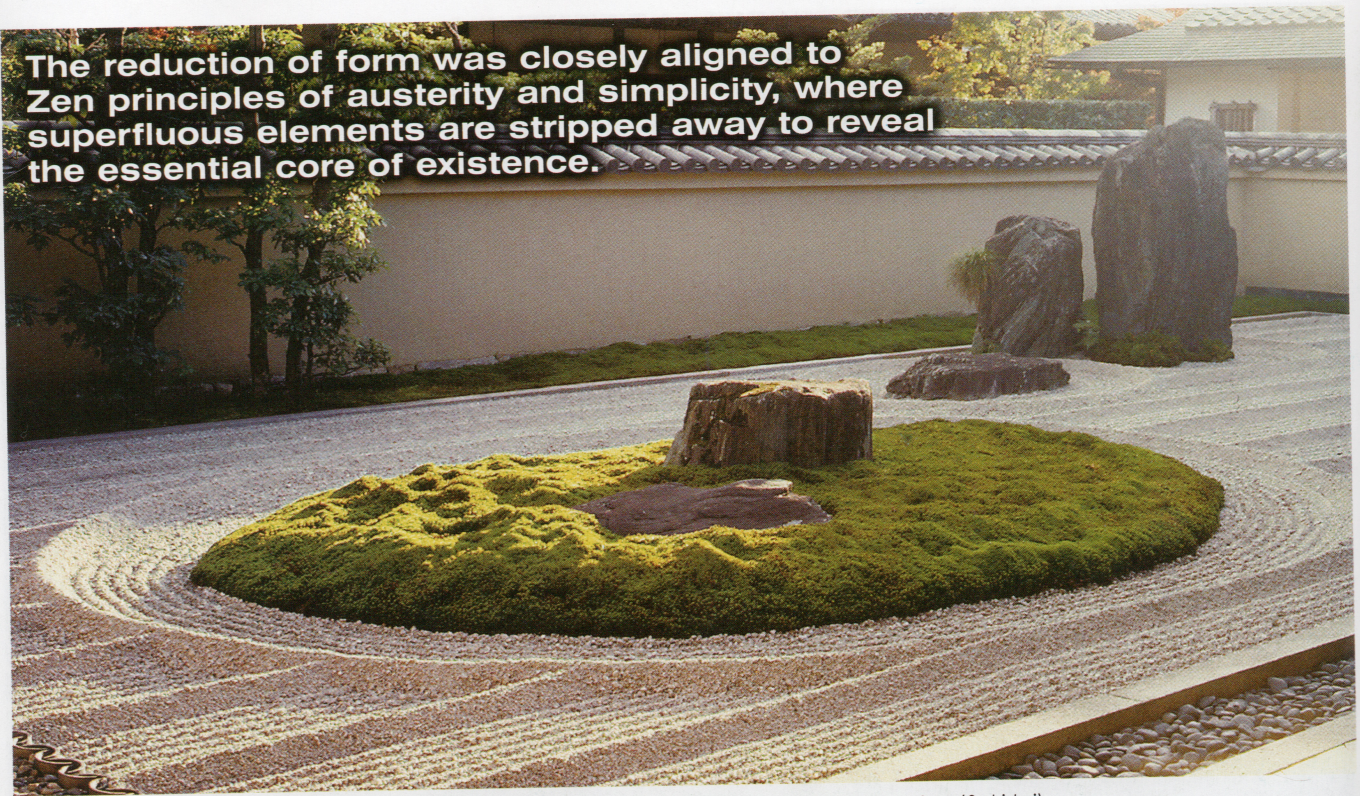
EARTHLY PARADISE

During the Edo period (1603-1867) society became more secularised, and inspiration came from different sources. After the austere nature of Zen gardens during the 15th and 16th centuries, people wanted a more relaxing view of the world. Artists and writers celebrated everyday activities, and many ordinary class people travelled the country on pilgrimages and for business between the growing cities of Edo (Tokyo), Osaka and Kyoto. The Tokaido (eastern seaboard route) was the busiest of five main routes through Japan that linked the main cities and provided goods and services for merchants, military rulers and imperial messengers alike. In the early 18th century Daimyo Hosokawa Tadayoshi constructed the Suizen-ji garden on his estate in Kyushu, replicating the Tokaido highway and some of the famous sights seen along the route, including a large mound in the shape of Mount Fuji seen across a lake. The only thing missing is the snow-covered peak, but the shape is unmistakable and makes a dramatic focus for the whole garden.

CITYSCAPES

In the post-war rebuilding of urban networks, the densely populated areas of Japan's major cities seem to offer little scope for garden space among the jumble of high and low rise concrete blocks, industrial parks and suburban sprawl. In Tokyo a few green spaces do exist; the Imperial palace grounds are the largest open green space but only allows public access around its perimeter; other parks like Yoyogi

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Above: Ryogen-in Isshidan garden, Kyoto. Garden style: Stone garden (*Seki tei*).

Koen and the Hama Rikyu park are open to the public, but can be far away for some people to visit. The new trend is to build a garden on top of a building on a flat roof space, or using terraces over an entrance way or car park. Several department stores, like Matsuzakaya in Ueno, have had a recreational space on their rooftop for several years, with green space incorporating a playground and small zoo for customers and their children.

In 2001 the Tokyo Metropolitan government issued an ordinance stipulating that any structures more than 1000 m² in area should be obliged to use 20% of their roof area for green space, and to have greenery occupying at least 20% of its non-building areas. These measures not only ensure that vegetation and greenery are used to create a pleasant environment, but also to counteract pollution and the effects of overheating from the high density of heat-retaining concrete structures in downtown areas. Gardens, green space and water features are now found on many rooftops in Japan's ultra modern cities, and 'sky gardens' are a popular place to relax for city dwellers.

Some of the top architects in Japan have planned roofspace gardens, and often use traditional elements in new ways to provide links with familiar symbols, folklore and artworks that become part of a new visual language in a modern context.

SUBURBAN HOMES

The huge sprawl of suburban networks around the cities means

that most housing complexes provide only small areas for gardens as most communal space is used for growing vegetables or rice paddies. Many traditional wooden houses are being demolished in favour of prefabricated houses or apartment blocks, with little or no exterior space for individual garden ownership. But even a tiny corner at an entrance way can be used to create the 'effect' of a garden, with a water basin, rocks, pebbles, gravel and a few plants or small pine tree enlivening a space in just a few square meters.

Small domestic gardens can be transformed into a quiet, contemplative space with judicious use of plantings and accessories to give a 'feeling' of a Japanese-style garden. The main requirement is to clear a suitable space that can be recreated as a gravel area for some rocks, or a pathway that meanders through the garden, perhaps leading to a small pond with koi carp, or even a small tea house if one has enough space. Bamboo fences can delineate an area, white or coloured pebbles can act as a border, irregular stones can be placed within flower beds or at junctures between pathways and grass areas. Other additions like a stone lantern or water basin with bamboo ladle (called a *tsukubai*) can be placed near the entrance to the garden or the house, inviting the guest along a particular pathway. The essential idea is to create a harmonious space where the viewer is calmed by a tranquil atmosphere, yet stimulated and engaged by the 'drama' of the interplay between plants, rocks, water and space – a microcosm of the natural world. ○



Suzanne, BA (Hons), MA, is a visiting lecturer at University of Brighton Art & Design School, Huron University USA in London, and at the University of Cape Town. She lectures for the British Museum Asian Arts course, universities, schools and NADFAS (The National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies). Suzanne started Japan Interlink in 1995 in order to promote a cultural and educational exchange between Japan and the UK. She contributed lectures on Japanese History, Culture and Arts to University of Cape Town's summer school programme in 2003 and 2004, and again in 2007. Her next Australian lecture tour in 2008 will include New Zealand. Email japan_interlink@tiscali.co.uk for more.