

Japanese gardens are among the most beautiful and distinctive in the world. The design principles of these gardens derive from both Japanese aesthetics and philosophical ideas as well as Japanese practicality. In this short monograph we will explore some of the key design principles that are common to Japanese gardens. All share a common theme: They contribute to making the Japanese garden a tribute to nature and a place for peaceful contemplation. This is informed by Shinto's profound connection with nature and also by Buddhism's respect for impermanence, constant change, mindfulness, meditation, and the 'beginner's mind' of Zen. Thus the syncretism inherent in Japan's culture and spiritual life manifests itself in the aesthetics of its gardens.

Those who have visited the famed Kenroku-en garden (the suffix *-en* means garden in Japanese) in Kanazawa know that *Kenroku* means 'Combined Six', referring to the 6 key elements of Japanese gardens. This world-renowned garden exemplifies the Six Elements of Japanese garden design, all of which have Chinese antecedents - as is true of most everything we think of as Japanese including sushi, sake, geishas, kimonos, Zen Buddhism and more. The Six Elements can be traced back to 11th century Song Dynasty China when a treatise on The Famous Gardens of Luoyang was written by Li Gefei in praise of and analyzing the finest gardens of the Northern Song capital of Luoyang. The Japanese are known for cultural borrowing followed by exquisite refinement of the borrowings. Such is the case with The Six Elements. **The Six Elements** are:

1. Antiquity - A deep respect for nature and the passage of time underlies the incorporation of rocks that have existed for millions of years and trees that are hundreds of years old that show their age through gnarled and weathered trunks. This is also an expression of the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*, an abstruse but 'you-know-it-when-you-see-it' quality of age, imperfections and the uniqueness therein.

2. Artifice - Juxtaposed to Antiquity in a yin-yang dyad is the complementary aesthetic of man-made elements, which balance and enhance the more natural and ancient 'immortal' elements. The artifice is often subtle and integrated with natural elements. A quintessential example is the Flying Geese Bridge (*Ganko-bashi*) at Kenroku-en. Its zig-zag shape makes it appear man-made yet its resemblance to a skein of flying geese connects it to the natural world. Beautiful stone lanterns (such as the graceful kotoji-toro in Kenrokuen) and elegant teahouses are also representation of this 2nd important element. Another key aspect of the artifice element is its use to create idealized scenes of antiquity and natural processes. Thus the placement of moss or even leaves on the ground, or the pruning and training of tree limbs or the meticulous placement of rocks, are done with utmost skill and care to artistically render nature for the human eye and spirit.

3. Spaciousness - This self-explanatory element has two dimensions: (1) the literal concept of expansiveness, and (2) the Zen concept of empty space as a bridge to 'inter-connectedness' and a gateway to potentialities. In the former sense, spaciousness and a capacious reach can inspire awe, and awe enhances mindfulness, connection to nature, and suspension of time. Recent cognitive and psychometric studies on the psychology of awe support these couplings. In the latter sense, the use of 'empty' space helps blur the line between nature and human artifice and provides both relief and a platform for the human imagination. Empty space also serves as the complement to 'filled' space, in a Taoist yin-yang sense which to some degree was transmitted to Zen.

4. Seclusion - Seclusion in its own right contributes to the peacefulness and mindfulness that one needs for a connection with nature. It also serves as a complementary juxtaposition to spaciousness. Seclusion brings security, 'coziness', and a sense of control to the otherwise enormous and uncontrollable forces of

nature. So seclusion and spaciousness, like antiquity and artifice, have a yin-yang dyadic relationship in the aesthetic palette of Japanese garden design.

5. Water or watercourses - Water is as essential to a Japanese garden as it is to life. Its flow in a stream or fountain, or its tranquility in a pond or lake, represent nature and the life experience. Koi in a pond will often add another element of nature to such scenes. Water can also provide a pathway linking one element to another. For example, it is common to follow a stream in a large spacious strolling garden that will ultimately lead you to a secluded spot ensconced in a small enclave of the overall garden. Kasumigaeke Pond in Kenroku-en serves as a central point to explore other attractions in the garden, such as nearby tea houses and the Uchihashi Tei Tea House.

6. Panoramic views - This principle provides the garden with a perspective larger than itself, bringing in scenic vistas and connecting the garden and the garden experience to the larger world. This element is in some ways dyadic with the water element, as watercourses bring you into and interconnect parts of the garden world, whereas panoramic views take you out of and beyond the garden world. Again, a yin-yang aesthetic dyad. Very importantly associated with this 6th element of panoramic views is a practical technique which I think is one of the most important aspects of Japanese gardens, although it is not considered one of the 6 essential elements: **shakkei**. the use of borrowed scenery:

Shakkei, or borrowed scenery, is a distinctive design principle of Japanese gardens which leverages practicality to achieve aesthetic aims. Gardens will often be placed in a setting where distant scenery such as hills, mountains, or a castle are incorporated to provide a backdrop which extends the 'canvas' and adds to the spaciousness and panoramic views of the garden. *Shakkei* is utilized not only in small home and courtyard gardens but also in large strolling gardens, in each case adding to the garden's effect and making it seem larger than it really is. The magnificent Adachi Museum gardens in Yasugi and the famed Ritsurin Garden in Takamatsu are famous examples of the use of *shakkei* - but if you look for it you will find 'borrowed' background elements in most Japanese gardens. The famed Koraku-en garden in Okayama features the 'Black Crow' Okayama Castle as borrowed background scenery in the distance. Like other Japanese garden design principles, *shakkei* came to Japan from China and in fact is mentioned in the 16th century Chinese garden design treatise, the Yuanye. The Zhishan garden on the grounds of the National Palace Museum in Taipei, Taiwan, provides an excellent example of the Chinese use of *shakkei*.

A note on **'dry landscapes', known as karesansui**. **Kare-** means dry and such gardens have no water but often contain extensive patches of gravel as part of the spaciousness element and/or as a replacement for water. White gravel is the most common as it provides relief and accentuates the difference between space and 'filled' areas. The classic raked white gravel *karesansui* gardens were developed and flourished after the advent of Zen Buddhism in 12th-century Japan of the Kamakura Period (Zen was brought from India to China to Korea and thence to Japan - where it was exquisitely refined). Interestingly, raked white gravel had been used in Japan in Shinto shrines pre-dating Zen Buddhism, but the Zen Buddhists 'appropriated' and refined it with great effect. With gravel representing 'empty space' or as a stand-in for water, the *karesansui* retains these important elements. Petrified landscapes are suspended in time, making them among the best at promoting mindfulness and meditation. Perhaps Japan's single most famous garden is a Zen-inspired *karesansui*: Ryoan-ji in Kyoto. For a beautiful exposition on this garden, see Willard Spiegelman's classic essay: [The Singular Simplicity of Ryoan-ji](#). Simplicity is a major tenet of Zen and is certainly a key aspect of the reductionist *karesansui* aesthetic. On a final note: as quintessentially Japanese as Ryoan-ji and other *karesansui* gardens are, they clearly have Chinese antecedents in both paintings (mountains rising from misty seas) and actual rock gardens.