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ON THE RESTORATIVE POWER OF NATURE, OR WHY EVERY NEIGHBORHOOD NEEDS A PUBLIC JAPANESE GARDEN

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ABSTRACT

In celebration of Professor Arthur C. “Chris” Nelson’s illustrious career and our shared ambles in academia and in gardens in Japan, we offer this essay on public health and public gardens, namely gardens in the traditional Japanese style and how they could play an important role in addressing pressing public health issues in urban areas in the U.S. (and elsewhere).

THE RESTORATIVE POWER OF NATURE

Too frequently, the power of nature is understood as requiring a grand scale. For Thoreau, salvation is at the level of wilderness. For Muir, the feeling of going home is associated with mountain ranges. While we concur that these broad terrains proffer inspiration and awe in their magnificence, we understand wonder in nature in the minute as well as the grand. As Gary Paul Nabhan notes, children can help the rest of us rejigger our focus. When out camping with his young children, Nabhan kept working to draw their attention to the grandiose views of the Coconino Mountains; but his children were focused more on the workings of the bugs and plants at their feet.

I realized how much time adults spend scanning the land for picturesque panoramas and scenic overlooks. While the kids were on their hands and knees, engaged with what was immediately before them, we adults traveled by abstraction. Whenever we arrived at a promontory, [my kids] would approach it with me, then abruptly release their hands from mine, to scour the ground for bones, pinecones, sparkly sandstone, feathers, or wildflowers.¹

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¹ Nabhan, Gary Paul, and Stephen Trimble. *The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places*. Beacon Press, 1994, p. 6.

To help us focus in and wonder at nature at a minute scale, children first must have access to nature and be encouraged to engage with the natural realm. In our world of pocket-sized computers masquerading as telephones with 15-second TikToks and 160-character texts, our children—and we—are drawn ever further into the quick gratification and the deep rabbit holes of the digital realm and away from the natural world. Richard Louv laments the loss of connection to nature and the resulting diminished human experience that many children face, a phenomenon he names “nature-deficit disorder.”

At the very moment that the bond is breaking between the young and the natural world, a body of research links our mental, physical, and spiritual health directly to our association with nature—in positive ways. Several of these studies suggest that thoughtful exposure of youngsters to nature can even be a powerful form of therapy for attention-deficit disorders and other maladies. As one scientist puts it, we can now assume that just as children need good nutrition and adequate sleep, they may very well need contact with nature.²

Of course, the benefits of contact with nature extend to adults as much as to children; and long before the scientific studies of the past 20 years, Rachel Carson wrote *The Sense of Wonder*, an essay encouraging a lifelong child-like appreciation and awareness of the richness of nature at all scales.

Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds, the ebb and flow of the tides, the folded bud ready for the spring. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.³

As we approach the one-year mark for the COVID-19 pandemic, the human need for restorative interaction with nature is especially significant. While we cannot gather in groups to share our joys and fears, we are able (for the most part) to move freely outside on our own or with others from our households. For many people, getting outside into nature has become a way to find solace during this time of uncertainty—and for many of us, this was not a routine act. “At precisely the moment in history when we seem to be doing the most to destroy and speed [nature’s] unraveling, we are rediscovering nature as a steady and basic element in

² Louv, Richard. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Algonquin Books, 2006, p. 3.

³ Carson, Rachel. *The Sense of Wonder*. Harper & Row Publishers, 1965, pp. 100-101.

our lives unlike anything else.”⁴ A study from the University of Vermont noted “26% of people visiting parks during early months of the COVID-19 pandemic had rarely—or never—visited nature in the previous year.”⁵ The primary reasons for those visits to parks and other natural places included “getting outside, exercise, connecting to nature, finding peace and quiet, birding, dog walking, and time with children.” The research revealed that “66% of people used these natural areas to find peace and quiet, and 32% reported these places as spaces for contemplation, activities that have been shown to reduce stress.”⁶

With such a great percentage of study participants turning to natural places for quiet and contemplative stress-reducing activities, we wonder about urban dwellers and others who do not have ready access to such spaces. Using its ParkScore® Index, the Trust for Public Land estimates the number of Americans without a park within a ten-minute walk at more than 100 million—nearly a third of the nation’s population.⁷ We need to ensure that easy and free access to natural spaces is treated as a human right and not as a privilege of those who can afford to live nearby. Article 25.1 of the United Nation’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care.”⁸ Yet just like the need for shelter, food, and medicine, humans also have the need to commune with nature. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement have illuminated the inequities in healthcare, food access, and housing that many BIPOC populations have long endured in the U.S., and access to nature also has deep ties to systematic racism. The Central Park “Birding While Black” incident serves as just one clear example of this racist legacy—and highlights that access is about more than just proximity.

⁴ Beatley, Tim. “The Natureful City: Rediscovering Nature in a Pandemic Era.” *Biophilic Cities*, vol. 3, no. 2, June 2020; p. 7. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5bbd32d6e66669016a6af7e2/t/5eff41f647a3f57348019257/1593786878101/Natureful+City.pdf>. Accessed February 13, 2021.

⁵ University of Vermont. “New nature lover? It’s a COVID-19 side effect: Pandemic drove many people into nature for the first time in years.” *ScienceDaily*. December 17, 2020. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/12/20201217145219.htm. Accessed February 13, 2021.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *The Trust for Public Land ParkScore Index*. The Trust for Public Land, 2018, <https://www.tpl.org/parkscore>. Accessed February 13, 2021.

⁸ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>. Accessed February 13, 2021.



Korin-in garden at Daitokuji temple in Kyoto, photo by Mira Locher

Current conditions also draw us to acknowledge that free access to natural places is imperative to public health, as humans have an innate tendency to connect with nature. This tendency has become known as “biophilia,” a term which psychoanalyst Eric Fromm popularized in the 1960s and geographer Yi-Fu Tuan and Harvard naturalist Edward O. Wilson broadened in the 1970s and 1980s. Currently there is much discussion about biophilic design for cities and buildings, whether it is the “natureful city,”⁹ vertical gardens on skyscrapers, or living walls in indoor spaces. Biophilic city design tends to focus on street trees, views to nature, urban food gardens, and open public spaces for interaction (however limited in the current situation); and biophilic architecture leans toward access to and views of nature, indoor air quality and ventilation, natural lighting, and natural materials. While these certainly are positive trends, the urban design solutions mainly address a vision of shared nature, and the architectural solutions tend to rely on technological advancements and focus on bringing nature to the workplace or urban apartment.

The COVID pandemic that continues to run its course in communities around the world has retaught us not only the importance of connecting with nature, but also the role that mindfulness and meditative practices have as strategies for stress management and improved mental health.¹⁰ These practices, while emphasized as part of the current crises, will continue in importance even after the exigencies of the moment have abated. We thus seek here to highlight the healing dimensions of contemplative quiet time in nature. Of course, this space in nature can be found in many different ways, many different places, and many different scales. Countless cultures have long-standing important rituals wherein the individual communes with nature, such as the Indigenous American vision quest and the sacred-land pilgrimage like the Camino de Santiago in Spain. And many cultures have a tradition of garden design to bring nature into daily life—usually the daily life of the aristocrats, such as the imperial Mughal gardens in India, Louis XIV’s garden at Versailles, and the classical Chinese Humble Administrator’s Garden for a not-so-humble imperial envoy in Suzhou.

In the U.S. the first urban parks were grand spaces typically constructed at the edges of cities and provided landscaped leisure spaces for those who could afford the cost of transportation to get to them. A short-lived movement to bring smaller pastoral parks closer to working class neighborhoods dovetailed with

⁹ Beatley, pp. 6-11.

¹⁰ Behan, Caragh. “The Benefits of Meditation and Mindfulness Practices during Times of Crisis such as COVID-19.” *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine*, Vol. 37, Issue 4: Themed Issue: COVID-19 and Mental Health, December 2020, pp. 256-258. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipm.2020.38>. Accessed February 13, 2021.

efforts to provide playgrounds for children, and from that point in the early 20th century, the focus turned toward supplying facilities for recreation rather than for connection to natural landscapes. These “parks” became a service with both “very little social vision” and “very little artistic vision.”¹¹ As we now recognize the dire need for children and adults to connect to nature, we understand the value of having easy access to natural landscapes in urban areas. To benefit public health for all city dwellers, we must work to provide nature spaces within each and every neighborhood. These places needn’t be constructed at a grand scale—as Gary Paul Nabhan noted, children can find wonder in a small natural space, and adults can find tranquility in a meditative moment in nature. But they must be designed for each particular place with the goal of serving the neighborhood. We must learn from our history of urban park design and strive to be both inclusive and reflective of the plurality of our cultural traditions.

That said, for the sake of this essay, and since it is an area in which we have expertise, we will focus on one tradition, that of the Japanese garden, and what it can offer holistically to the contemporary urban dweller. Japanese gardens today are greatly flexible in form and arrangement and can be designed for spaces both grand and minute. This makes the Japanese garden a fitting choice for an urban infill garden. Even so, we would like to assert clearly and strongly that there are and should be other garden types available to the general public; however, we will leave it to others with more expertise to elucidate on those, and we will address what we know.

¹¹ Cranz, Galen. *Urban Parks of the Past and Future*. Project for Public Spaces, <https://www.pps.org/article/futureparks>. Accessed February 25, 2021.



Yusuien garden in Berlin from 2003 by Shunmyo Masuno, photo by Mira Locher

WHAT ARE JAPANESE GARDENS, AND HOW COULD THEY PROVIDE NATURE IN OUR NEIGHBORHOODS?

Like much of the art and culture connected to Buddhism, the early gardens in Japan reflected the style and taste of contemporary gardens in China, where Buddhism flourished for centuries before the religious philosophy officially was transmitted to Japan in the 6th century CE. These early gardens in Japan emulated natural scenery and included ponds and hills, together with forests and streams.¹² Many of these gardens recreated places in China that were famous in Buddhist and Taoist texts and were constructed for wealthy aristocrats who had access to education and were familiar with the images and symbolism within the gardens.

Over time, as Buddhism transformed in Japan, so too did the gardens. Many of the original elements remained but were used in changing configurations that also began to represent Japanese landscapes and images from literature. The gardens were lush and opulent, showy with large rocks of interesting shapes and markings and exotic plants brought in from around the land. Most were commissioned and used by aristocrats for leisure enjoyment and entertaining guests. By the 14th and 15th centuries CE, Japanese gardens had come into their own, with a new garden type emerging as Zen Buddhism became popular. This was a period in Japan that was full of unrest and warring factions, and Zen offered a necessary austerity and a focus on training of both the mind and body. Part of this training included lengthy periods of silent meditation, and the stark new garden type was designed just for that purpose.

Meditation gardens were built within Zen temple complexes, often adjacent to the abbot's quarters. In comparison to the lush extensive earlier gardens, these small gardens, typically contained within a courtyard, must have seemed simple and barren. Often, they consisted of just a few groupings of rocks with a bit of moss set into a bed of fine gravel—no exotic plants or flowering trees. At first glance they appear almost empty, especially compared to the large aristocratic gardens designed for strolling through and admiring the ever-changing views. Yet with careful observation—meditation—the details of the gardens emerge. The meticulously raked pea gravel swirls around the rock groupings, like ocean waves lapping at the edge of rocky-cliffed islands. The gardens are full of movement and change—the figurations of the rocks are altered by the changing light during the course of the day and over the seasons. Rain brings out the subtle colors and markings. Sun casts shadows revealing deep crevices and shallow cracks.

¹² Locher, Mira. *Traditional Japanese Architecture: An Exploration of Elements and Forms*. Tuttle Publishing, 2010, p. 151.

These stark Zen meditation gardens developed alongside more lush and green counterparts—gardens that were designed for strolling, rather than for quiet sitting and contemplation. While very different in style and use, both types of gardens represent nature—one more naturalistically, almost as a perfected nature, and the other more symbolically, as the essence of nature. Both completely are designed to create an atmosphere and experience of being connected to nature. In Buddhism, of course, humankind is seen as part and parcel of nature, one of many living things in the cycle of life. And the goal of Buddhism is to end one’s suffering and attachment to worldly things. Connecting to the greater natural world by moving through, or silently observing, a Japanese garden leads to a greater contemplation of one’s place in the world.

Historically in Japan, gardens often were designed by Zen priests, for whom the design of gardens, as with other arts like calligraphic painting, was part of their Zen training. Today in Japan there remains one Zen priest garden designer, Shunmyo Masuno, the head priest of Kenkohji temple in Yokohama. Although Masuno has a much more contemporary approach to garden design, having studied the natural environment at Tamagawa University as well as apprenticing under a master garden designer, he still considers garden design part of his daily Zen training. For Masuno, gardens in the Japanese style are at least as important today as they were in the past. He says, “Gardens are a special spiritual place where the minds dwells.”¹³

By considering Masuno’s ideas on Japanese gardens as they relate both to the Buddhist search to end human suffering and to the exigencies of contemporary daily life, we hope to show the relevance of the Japanese garden to the public mental health crises we face today. Masuno believes our daily lives are over-filled with information and extreme sensory experiences, and as we spend more time inside accumulating things, we become less connected to ourselves and the “joy of being alive.”¹⁴

Particularly in the confined space of everyday life, I believe there is meaning in making gardens. And within contemporary urban areas, I endeavor to make spaces that restore each person’s humanity. To regain stillness in one’s *kokoro* [literally “spirit, heart, and mind”], to calmly return to oneself, only gardens—nature—can offer the space to feel such grace. Especially for working people of today, who spend 24 hours a day inside buildings with a regulated room

¹³ Locher, Mira. *Zen Gardens: The Complete Works of Shunmyo Masuno, Japan’s Leading Garden Designer*. Tuttle Publishing, 2012, p. 10.

¹⁴ Masuno Shunmyo. “Tomoike no Design no Gaiyō” [Summary of *Coexistent Design*]. Unpublished essay, trans. M. Locher. 2012.

temperature, where it's difficult to sense the changes in time and season, such a space is essential.¹⁵

Masuno designs gardens as places where the viewer can experience the garden fully with all senses, to “hear birds singing, see the play of sunlight and shadows on the rocks, smell the scent of the trees, and feel the damp of the moss.”¹⁶ The gardens are places for contemplation and reflection. “I aim to produce gardens that people continuously want to observe intently. The act of gazing fixedly is the act of creating the opportunity to think—that is, to wonder introspectively.”¹⁷

IN CONCLUSION

While the majority of Masuno's gardens are designed for Buddhist temples or private residences, there is still much that we can learn from them and other Japanese gardens. No matter their size or scale—and some Japanese gardens are quite small, they are designed to express the cyclical rhythms of nature, the lapping of the waves at the ocean's edge and the changing of the seasons. They allow the viewer to have an intimate connection to nature, a moment of respite from the daily grind and a chance for self-reflection. This is different from the experience of the typical public park in the U.S., which commonly is designed for a collection of experiences, mostly communal rather than individual. We do not deny that these spaces play an important role in urban life, nor do we suggest that they should be replaced with gardens. We believe that gardens, such as Japanese gardens, which are designed to reconnect humans to nature, can offer a different function—that of restoration of the human spirit.

These gardens can be created in the leftover spaces within neighborhoods, with local community organizations partnering in the design and construction and ultimately the ongoing maintenance. They can be made from rocks and plants that are durable and found locally. Children can learn about the tradition of Japanese gardens and the joy of quiet observation, experiencing firsthand the “sense of wonder” about which Rachel Carson wrote. The elders of the community can sit peacefully and enjoy the beauty of nature without having to travel a long distance. The busy consumers and purveyors of goods and services can stop for a moment of calm contemplation, as a visit to the garden would not require them to go far out of their way. Neighbors can rediscover the power of spending time in tranquil observation of nature—and of themselves as individuals. How might our resilience

¹⁵ Masuno Shunmyo. “Making Use of Japanese Gardens in Present-day Cities.” Trans. M. Locher. *Tomoike no Design [Coexistent Design]*. Filmart-Sha, 2011, p. 34.

¹⁶ Locher, Mira. *Zen Garden Design: Mindful Spaces by Shunmyo Masuno, Japan's Leading Garden Designer*. Tuttle Publishing, 2020, p. 65.

¹⁷ Locher, Mira. *Zen Gardens*, p. 168.

as communities of children and adults improve, if we acknowledge our biophilic predisposition and easily could access the restorative power of nature? Let's come together to construct neighborhood Japanese gardens and find out!



Sankeien Gardens, Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan, photo by Arthur C. Nelson