Shichu-no-In : The Hermitage in the City

Tea Gardens Ancient and Modern

By Marc Peter Keane

HAVE you ever strolled through a Japanese garden or perused one in pictures? Did you happen to see a stone lantern half hidden by the lightly-pruned branches of a nearby tree? Were there some stepping-stones, meandering gracefully around a corner, dotted like islands in the sea across a velvety carpet of moss? Was there a carved stone basin filled to brimming with crystal clear water? Most likely there were some, if not all, of these things there because they are the most common features in a Japanese garden; those quintessential items that a Japanese garden seems to always have. If you could timeslip to the early 1500s, however, and take a look around then, you would not see any of them. Not one. You wouldn't because all those things – stone lanterns, stepping-stones, mossy ground and water basins – only came into use in gardens in the late 1500s when teamasters created subdued gardens as entries to their teahouses. In fact, almost every garden you see today in Japan (except for the arrangements of stones and raked gravel called *kare-sansui*) has been influenced by tea garden design.

It is a bit strange how tea gardens began. At the very start, back in the early 1500s, there was no tea garden at all, even though people held tea gatherings. All there was for an entry space was a tiny little enclosure next to the teahouse called a *tsubo-no-uchi*. Merchants in cities like Kyoto and Sakai had begun experimenting with a new way of doing tea. Unlike the military lords before them, who held lavish tea parties in bright open rooms with all their worldly possessions on display, the merchants created small rustic teahouses, called *soan* or thatch-roofed hermitages, in the back of their urban properties changing the nature of the tea gathering from a boisterous affair into one that was quiet and inwardly focused. This new way of practicing tea was called *wabicha*, rustic tea, or at times *Shimogyo-no-chanoyu*, the Tea of the Lower Capital, in reference to the district in which the merchants had their homes.

To enter the teahouse, guests would first pass through a gate on the street into a narrow alleyway that led them around to the back of the residence. In the back, they would find a rustic building – like a simple fisherman's hut or that of a mountain hermit. On the side of the building was the tsubo-no-uchi which could be entered through a small door. A small, walled space, unroofed and earthen-floored, the tsubo-

Photos: Marc Peter Keane

The tea garden at Hiden-in Temple in Kyoto

no-uchi was more like a closet than a courtyard. It is hard to know exactly how big they were – the drawings and descriptions from that time are not specific; perhaps only five by ten feet – but suffice it to say that a tsubo-no-uchi was very, very small. Its purpose was to clearly separate the world inside the teahouse from that outside and to create a strong feeling of threshold and passage, so that as guests entered the teahouse, they felt like they had squeezed through a tight cave into a new, hidden world beyond.

At first, there was nothing in the tsubo-no-uchi – later, teamasters began setting a basin full of water in it so that guests could rinse their hands before entering the tearoom as a symbolic act of cleansing. In time, the walls of the tsubo-no-uchi were taken away, the water basin set further out in the entry alleyway itself, forest-like trees and shrubs planted, moss allowed to grow over the ground, stepping-stones set out to elevate the guests above the wet moss, and lanterns placed to light the way during early-morning or evening tea gatherings. And there you have it – the tea garden.

The rustic teahouse itself was simply and lightly constructed, delicately and expertly made, but of materials that were left in their natural state or as close to that as possible. Teamasters eliminated, for instance, the white plaster covering normally used on the walls of elegant residences allowing the rough clay plaster beneath to be exposed. All the posts and beams, which would normally be cut and planed into square dimensions in the houses of military lords, were left round and irregular. The teahouse consisted of one room to hold the gathering in, about ten by ten feet in the classic form (though many variations existed), and a side room where the host could make preparations. That was all.

The rusticity and simplicity of the whole design was purposeful. By having their guests pass through a mossy, forest-like path, teamasters evoked the sense of a journey out of town to a distant hermitage amid wild nature. By having them pass through the tsubo-no-uchi, and in later eras, through a small crawl-through door called a *nijiri-guchi*, they separated the tea gathering from the cares of the outside world. By making the tearoom small, they increased the sense of communion among the participants. By stripping away all extraneous finish details, they created an environment that encouraged the appreciation of subtlety – in the taste of the tea, the simple meal, the utensils used to serve the tea, and the artwork and the flower that were displayed. They created in the heart of the ancient cities they lived in, places that stood apart, and called them *shichu-no-in*, hermitages in the city.

The culture of making "hermitages for tea" still exists to this day and has been important in my own work as a designer. One such project is in the southeast of Kyoto, nestled on the side of a forested hill that borders the city, at a small temple called *Hiden-in*. The temple acts as a *shukubo*, an inn for traveling pilgrims, but is not open to the general public. Several of the temple halls are clustered closely enough together to form a partially enclosed courtyard. One interesting aspect of the tea garden there is the path itself, which leads out from one hall across a rocky field to a waiting bench and then continues on to another hall where the tearoom is. Made of a mixture of natural stones and old granite artifacts – millstones, paving stones, and foundation stones – the path is an example of *mitate*, a technique of reusing old materials perfected by teamasters during the 17th and 18th centuries.

Photo: Matthew Ferrari

The teahouse and garden built by the students participating in the Teahouse Project at Cornell University

Another project that embodies the hermitage concept was an experimental teahouse and entry garden built at Cornell University in New York that distilled the most important aspects of the early teahouses into a new, modern form. The narrow entry path that leads back from the street, the small entry court (tsubo-no-uchi) with its water basin, the crawl-through door into the teahouse, and the natural, rustic materials used to make the teahouse – all these elements harkened back to the design of medieval teahouses and yet, at the same time, created a new form that was not based on traditional patterns. The teahouse stood for a little over a year in front of Cornell's Johnson Museum. During that time, it was used not just for tea gatherings, but also by teachers for their seminars and students for a quiet respite. It was what might be called *shin shichu-no-in* or a *new* hermitage in the city. JS

More about Cornel's Teahouse Project can be seen at www.t-house.info and Marc Peter Keane's other work can be seen at www.mpkeane.com.

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