

The Japanese Garden and Impressions of Nature

Part Three: Refined References of Nature

By Amasaki Hiromasa

In the long history of the Japanese garden, there are two styles which display an urban perception of nature. One of these, the *roji* (photo 1), can be simply termed a "tea garden"; while the other is the *tsubo-niwa* (photo 2) — a "court garden" squeezed into the plan of a townhouse.

It was during the 16th century that a distinctive style of tea ceremony known as *wabicha* was evolved by the townspeople. As was mentioned in a previous article in this series, these gardens were created as an approach to the room where tea was served. Subsequently, such tea gardens were to have a profound influence on gardens in Japan both in terms of design and in the way that space was handled. It should be remembered, however, that the essential quality of the *roji* was the way that it produced a feeling of the vastness of nature within a small space in the city.

There is no denying the fact that it was this essential quality that subse-

quently became an intrinsic characteristic of city life in Japan in the form of the townhouse court garden or *tsubo-niwa*. On the one hand, therefore, the culture of this new style of tea ceremony known as *wabicha* with its far from ordinary set of aesthetic standards, was a refinement that raised the spiritual qualities of Japanese culture. In a more practical sense, however, various original ways and means were found to forge a union with nature within the sphere of daily life in the city.

By Inference

The ideal environment for *wabicha* was thought to be something known as *shichu no sankyo*. This meant the creation of a space where it was possible to experience the atmosphere of a rural mountain village within the confines of the city. Particular note should be made of the fact that up until this time, the sea was expressed by ponds and lakes in the Japanese garden. In the gardens associated with *wabicha*, however, it was mountain landscapes rather than the sea that was taken as a motif.

Although it was not until the first half of the 16th century that a conscious effort was made to express such rural aspiration in a garden, ever since the Heian period there had been an underlying awareness of such

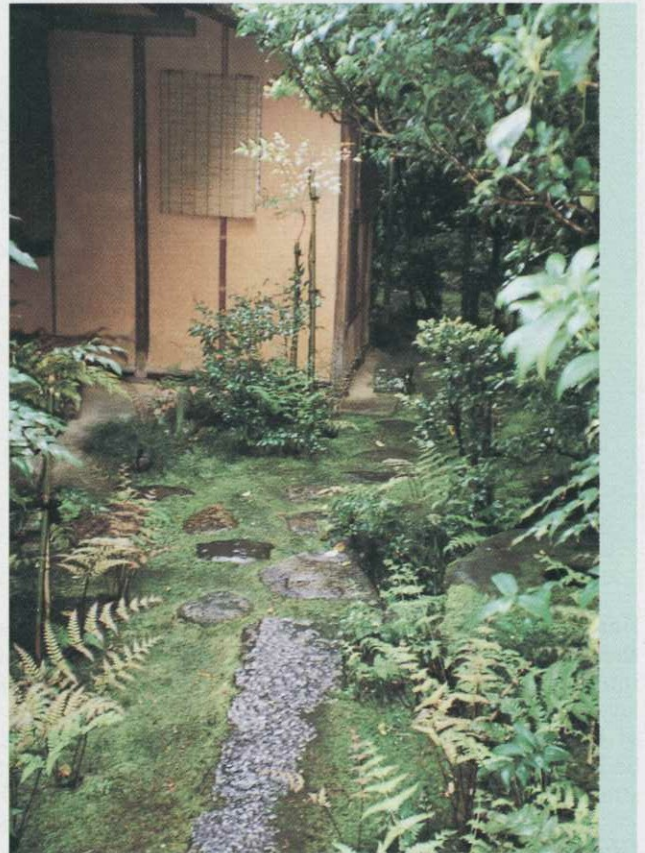


Photo 1: *Roji (urasenke)*



Photo 2: *Tsubo-niwa (kanazawa residence)*

ideals of retreat to the mountains, in order to get away from the worldly affairs of the city. Such things as ancient Chinese Taoist thought and Buddhist concepts of a far off "paradise" were also influential and these traits gradually came together as a single aesthetic awareness. The lifestyle of two prominent literary figures was representative of this desire to forsake the city for a life in closer contact with nature. One of them was the 12th-century poet Saigyō who, at the age of 23, left his wife and children for a life of wandering. Another was the writer Kamo no

Chomei who chose to live in a small thatched hut in the mountains.

Although this longing for a life of seclusion became more intense during the Muromachi period, people were no longer prepared to retreat from the worldliness of the city and live in huts in the mountains. Instead they chose to create small naturally appointed spaces with all the atmosphere of a mountain hamlet, where they might enjoy the delights of tea. The Jesuit missionary Joao Rodriguez wrote that the well-off townspeople of Sakai, a prosperous town near Osaka, created richly planted areas where they might contemplate nature while enjoying a kind of tea ceremony called *suki*, literally meaning "refinement." It is interesting that the townspeople considered these rural references in the city to be superior to the kind of simple mountain huts of the recluse. These spaces were an ideal environment in which to quietly converse with nature while engaged in the pleasures of tea amid the clamor of the city. And as such, they marked the birth of a new aesthetic awareness.

The kind of rural reference created by Murata Juko, the pioneer of *wabicha*, was rather unconventional.



Photo 3: The remains of special pathways leading to the tea room



Photo 4: Fuji-tsubo (Imperial Palace in Kyoto)

It seems that with a mass of pine trees as a backdrop, he planted a large willow tree so that it would be in full view from the tea room. Following in his footsteps, Murata Soshu sought to create the atmosphere of a deep, densely planted mountain ravine of pines and cedars for Goshooan, a tea house in the Shimo-gyo area of Kyoto. It was inevitably known as the "hideaway in the city."

These references to rural landscape were usually found at the back of the sites on which townhouses stood. Guests coming to enjoy tea in the room opening on to these gardens did not come in through the usual entrance of the house but were guided along a narrow dedicated pathway (photo 3). The narrow passageways that can still be found branching off between buildings along some of the old streets of Kyoto are a reminder of the existence of these special pathways. The *roji*, therefore, is a functionally combined series of spaces arranged for the purposes of drinking tea in a ceremonial manner, comprising a pathway to the tea room itself and an envelope of nature that, within the confines of the city, made references to real rural landscape.

Encapsulations of Nature

The *shichu no sankyo* — the gardens with rural references laid out to complete an environment consistent with the aesthetics of the *wabicha* tea ceremony enjoyed by the townspeople — and the small enclosed courts called *tsubo* together were what might be termed the original form taken by the *roji*.

Spaces called *tsubo* had been used in Japanese gardens since ancient times. They were "courts" surrounded either by a fence or by buildings. In the Heian period, noblemen took great pleasure in planting favored plants in the small open courts that were enclosed by a covered corridor or by the individual parts of a *shinden* style building. At this time, the name *tsubo* literally meant "pot." It is a well-known fact that Taira no Kiyomori — a prominent-12th century nobleman — was very much taken with the court that was planted with mugwort. It is still possible to gain some idea of the feeling of openness which these courts offered from the *hagi-tsubo* planted with bushclover and the *fuji-tsubo* (photo 4) with its wisteria in the present day Imperial Palace in Kyoto.



Photo 5: An example of taihishuho: contrasting method (urasenke)

Although open to the sky, the tsubo associated with the townhouse shichu no sankyo style of tea garden were strictly enclosed. In this instance the character used to refer to this space simply means the measurement of an area. Such strict control of space is

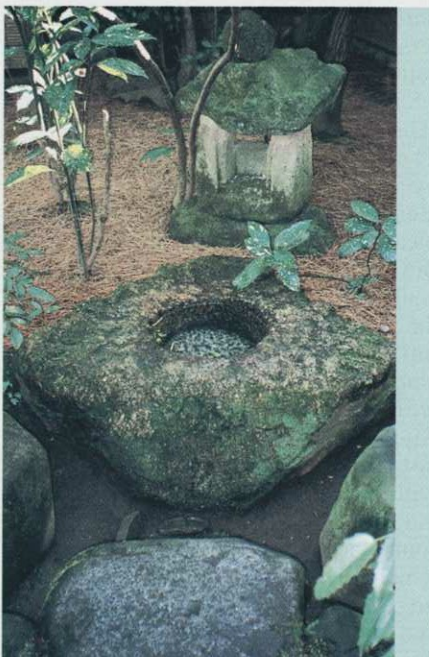


Photo 6: Tsukubai and toro (urasenke)

characteristic of the tea ceremony and consistent with the way that a person is required to adopt a humble position close to the floor when literally crawling through the abnormally small, low entrance to a tea room. Another particular feature of these gardens was *taihishuho* or the way that contrasts were employed. A large tree was placed beside a small building with the intention, for example, of making the room where tea was served appear humble and insignificant (photo 5).

There were two tsubo associated with the four-and-a-half mat, square tea room in the Sakai residence of one, Takeno Jyoo. The one in front of the room was called *Omote no tsubo no uchi* and a pinewood was visible over the fence at its perimeter. This tsubo was, of course, functional, providing both light and ventilation to the tea room. Nevertheless, it must also be recognized that it provided an essential point of contact with nature that for the wabicha style tea ceremony represented part of the ideal setting complete with its rural references.

The other tsubo to one side of the room was called *Waki no tsubo no uchi*. Being an approach to the tea room, it was a long narrow pathway running out to the front of the property; and partway along it was a handbasin. In this case, therefore, the two tsubo worked in unison to form the roji.

Composition

This then was how the roji developed into a very particular style of garden design. This type of garden was created as an environment totally in keeping with the concepts of tea. It was also integrated with the tea room and included such essential elements to the performance of the tea ceremony as a



Photo 7: Koshikake (urasenke)

tsukubai or a handbasin, and a *toro* or a lantern (photo 6). These were functionally located within the whole scheme. Because guests were required to move through this series of spaces on their way toward the tea room, it presented an opportunity to focus a person's mind as they moved through each of the spaces in sequence. According to the tea master, Sen no Rikyu, the roji was "a path out into the ordinary, fleeting world" and a "place in which to rid oneself of all those things that troubled the mind".

But just how do guests move through the roji? Invited guests first gather at the *yoritsuki machiai*, an appointed place to wait. Then, having readied themselves, they put on straw sandals and sit quietly on a *koshikake* or a bench in the garden until they are welcomed by the *teishu* (photo 7) — the host who will make and serve the tea.

The guests sit enjoying the peace and quiet surrounded by the



nizing signs, as not a single word passes between guests and host. The signs are not written but are simple, unpretentious indicators either using particular materials or design elements. One such indicator is the way that the sliding door to the tea house is left slightly open, meaning "do please come in". When the path of stepping stones through the garden divides, there may be a stone tied with black string set upon a stone of one branch of the two paths. It is called a *sekimori-ishi* and is an indicator that people should not pass that way.

The short approach to the tea house is, therefore, designed to focus the mind of the guest and is particularly interesting as the composition of the roji as a whole seeks to bring

greenery of the garden until they hear water being poured into the handbasin. At this, they exchange silent greetings with the host and then move off along stepping stones and more regularly shaped stones let into the earth toward the tea house (photo 8). Walking on the stepping stones requires concentration, as one foot is placed in front of the other. The way that stepping stones are linked and yet do not form a continuous path, inevitably serves to heighten the sense of anticipation.

Having passed through the *chumon*, a gate marking the way into the inner garden, the tea house comes into view, half hidden by a veil of plants. Just before reaching *nijiriguchi* or the low entrance to the tea house (photo 9), there is a lantern and a handbasin. Here, in an act of purification, guests wash their hands and rinse out their mouths before entering the tea house.

It is interesting that guests are led through the garden simply by recog-

people closer in touch with nature by appealing to all their senses.

Townhouse Tsubo-niwa

With the evolution of a new city culture in the guise of tea and its



Photo 8: Stepping stones leading to the tea room



Photo 9: Nijiriguchi (Omotesenke)

attendant roji, it is worth noting that during the 16th and early part of the 17th centuries when culture in Japan had taken on an established air of refinement, people in the cites seized every opportunity to bring nature into their daily lives. They employed various devices and were extremely resourceful in their pursuit of a pleasant environment in which to live; and the townhouse court or *tsubo-niwa* was just one of the things that emerged as part of this process.

The old townhouses in Kyoto stood on long narrow plots extending back from a narrow frontage, and were often hemmed in on either side by similar buildings. Maintaining sufficient levels of lighting and ventilation within these buildings was an absolute necessity. One way of achieving this was to have a garden between the room at the back of the house and the storehouse that was often located right at the back of the plot. Planted with a variety of trees, plants and flowers it was

called a *senzai* (photo 10). The inclusion of a lantern, handbasin and stepping stones in these gardens was the result of a direct influence from the roji. The *tsubo-niwa*, however, was to be found in the gaps between the building that stretched from the road at the front to the most private space at the back of the plot.

Because these *tsubo-niwa* evolved as a result of seeking to satisfy functional requirements, there is nothing wasteful about the way that they are arranged. In addition to this, because they evolved during the same period that fostered the development of the roji, which itself became a parameter of the culture of the townspeople, they are stylishly designed. We must also recognize that they were an encapsulation of nature within the city, providing an element of charm to touch the hearts of the people. They provided an opportunity to experience the expansiveness of nature — just in the same way that a roji does — within the confines of a small space left between individual parts of a building. It is this that is the essence of the *tsubo-niwa*.

These small spaces were therefore created during the process of establishing an environment in which to live and while in pursuit of a functional requirement. The result was something of great charm



Photo 10: *Senzai* (Yoshida residence)

forming part of the living environment in the densely built up city.

Circumstances in Kyoto today are far from satisfactory for the distinctive traditional townhouses and their *tsubo-niwa*. This is also true in the case of Tawaraya (photo 11). This traditional Japanese style inn is well-known to people from all over the world as one of the few places where it is still possible to enjoy the delights of this kind of union of covered and exposed space within the fabric of the old capital.

Although the maintenance of many of these buildings is causing great anxiety, the building itself and the *tsubo-niwa* of Tawaraya are being ardently protected and maintained with skill and sensitivity by the best craftsmen available, and by the mistress of the

inn, Sato Toshi. Recently, however, plans are afoot to build an apartment block to the east of Tawaraya. If it is built, it is doubtful whether the plants in the small open courts will be able to go on growing as they have done for so long. And, if these *tsubo-niwa* disappear, part of the culture of Kyoto will have gone forever.

The problem is not just one that concerns Tawaraya. The general approach to city planning in Kyoto is also in question. Fortunately, however, the city authorities are now pushing ahead with plans aiming to conserve and sensibly reuse the city's townhouses. There is no doubting the infinite value of these spaces created out of human desire to try and live in harmony with nature, and which were directly fostered by circumstances in Kyoto. The traditions of the roji and *tsubo-niwa* are certainly not something which we can allow to disappear, especially as they represent part of the garden culture of Japan, and part of the heritage of future generations. **UJI**

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Photo 11: Tawaraya