Study #1: Seeing the Sacred in the Site

This series of studies is intended to outline a process by which a garden for mindful contemplation can be created. Each study begins with a quotation from a classic author or garden master, followed by a short summary of recommended steps. If you have a question or comment, use the contact box on my website (www.nathan-wilbur.com) to send me a message.

Quotation from Loraine Kuck; The Art of Japanese Gardens (John Day, New York, 1940) Page 13:

Of all the Chinese garden records which I have seen, the most revealing and appealing, the most human and understandable, is that of an official of the later T’ang dynasty named Po-Chü-i. He was an inveterate garden maker and one of the greatest poets China has produced. Down the eleven centuries which separate our time from his, the record of this poet-official’s gardening reaches us and finds deep response in anyone who shares the love of garden making.

The career of Po-Chü-i, like that of most Chinese officials, was a series of ups and downs, of high position in times of favor and of virtual banishment in times of disfavor. But wherever he went, he built gardens. When he was an important official, he caused large works to be carried out; as a private individual, in times of retirement, he built a cottage garden for himself. Often enough, it would seem, he worked with his own hands, for he speaks with the authentic voice of the dirt farmer when he says of himself:

“At youth to old age, the whitewashed cottage of poverty or the vermilion gates of affluence have each lasted but a day or two in turn. But to build up a hillock with dirt spilled from a basket, to pile up a hill with rocks carried in the hands, to make a pool of water borne in a dipper—joy in such things has completely obsessed me always.”

Recommended Steps:

■ On a first visit to a site, a state of mindful awareness calls for:
  o Appreciating the land and the life it sustains
  o Giving thanks for humankind’s capacity to build gardens
  o Recognizing the ‘imperatives’ present in the site—what it is, what it requires and where it is situated locally and in the larger landscape
  o Visualizing the potential for change in all things in the moment, and in each season
  o Acting humbly as co-creator and fellow traveler with stones, trees, shrubs, water and living creatures

■ Orientation:
  o Determine the four compass points
  o Study the path of the sun and moon
  o Observe the patterns of sunlight and shade on the ground during the day

■ Needs and Spaces:
  o Identify the fundamental needs, according to purpose and use
  o According to the desired type of garden, consider optimal siting for enclosed spaces, views of ‘borrowed scenery’ of distant landscapes (shakkei), rocks, plantings, and places for sitting, viewing and meditation

8/23/2016
Study #2: The Significance of Shadows

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Quotation from David Slawson; Secret Teachings in the Art of Japanese Gardens (Kondansha International, 1987; paperback printed in Japan, 1991) Pages 130-131:

The cavelike hollows at the bottom of the Rock of the Spirit Kings in the Ninomaru garden (in Kyoto; photo below is a detail from a view of the garden on photos.gateley.com) may also allude to a later development in the Taoist conception of paradise—the world of light beyond the cave—that supplanted the island as a place of bliss. As Wolfgang Bauer explains,

‘For a long time, the idea of the “island” as a place of happiness seemed the ideal compromise. While situated on earth, it was yet adequately detached from it. But as the world began to shrink still further, an even more ideal place was discovered. It was the “cave,” or better, the world, the “heaven” beyond the cave. For the “cave” was even closer to earth than the island. Like the latter, it could it could also be connected with the idea of the “mountain,” that old place of refuge for the Taoists. Yet it was also otherworldly and, being much more difficult to discover, its magic could not as easily be lost as that of the island.’

...The first to enjoy the mystical power of the Nijō Castle Rock of the Spirit Kings would have been the shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, for whom the garden was created...in April of 1605. The view from (his private living quarters) was a privileged one, for from here the shogun could cast his eyes upon the eternal paradise, be it an island out at sea or a world just beyond the cave.

Recommended Steps:

■ When setting rocks:
  o Position the rocks, each one in turn, so that their shadows (faces turned away from the sun) create an interlocking rhythm of emptiness and movement among them all.
  o In the body of the stone composition, create a dark place or cave whose inner space cannot be fully seen. A view of immeasurable darkness—however small—can convey a feeling of the infinite as well as a sense of lightness in the whole.

■ When building a walk:
  o Use irregularly-shaped stones or bricks that are firmly anchored in a compacted base, but allow narrow gaps for soil brushed between them. When sprinkled with water, these gaps will turn black. At the end of the day when the sun is setting, the black lines become shadows. These shadow lines, and the penetrating, rosy glow reflected from the sky give the walk a feeling of rising from the ground.

■ When building a roofed structure:
  o Raise the height of the supporting posts so that the bottom half—but not all—of the roof’s shadowed underside can be seen when seated at a fixed distance. The interior darkness one feels intuitively within the unseen upper half pulls the entire roof upward. The roof floats in balanced nameless space, while the posts extend weightlessly downward. 10/10/2016
Study #3: Principles Animating a Tea House

This series of studies is intended to outline a process by which a garden for mindful contemplation can be created. Each study begins with a quotation from a classic author or garden master, followed by a short summary of recommended steps. If you have a question or comment, use the contact box on my website (www.nathan-wilbur.com) to send me a message.

Quotation from Daisetz T. Suzuki; *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Bollinger Series paperback, Princeton University Press, Third Printing 1973) Chapter entitled Zen and the Art of Tea/1, Pages 276-77:

If the art of tea purports to establish a Buddha-land in its small group (of people), it has to start with gentleness of spirit. To illustrate this point further, let us quote the Zen Master Takuan (1573-1645).

‘The principle of cha-no-yu is the spirit of harmonious blending of Heaven and Earth and provides the means for establishing universal peace... Let us then construct a small room in a bamboo grove or under trees, arrange streams and rocks and plant trees and bushes, while [inside the room] let us pile up charcoal, set a kettle, arrange flowers, and arrange in order the necessary tea utensils. And let all of this be carried out with the idea that in this room we can enjoy the streams and rocks as we do the rivers and mountains in Nature, and appreciate the various moods and sentiments suggested by the snow, the moon, and the trees and flowers as they go through the transformation of seasons, appearing and disappearing, blooming and withering. Visitors are greeted here with due reverence (i.e. harmonious relationship)... the spirit, in words, (that) is the mysterious Suchness that is beyond all comprehension.

‘For this reason, the principle animating the tearoom, from its first construction down to the choice of the tea utensils, the technique of service, the cooking of food, wearing apparel, etc., is to be sought in the avoidance of complicated ritual and mere ostentation. The implements may be old, but the mind can be invigorated therewith so that it is ever fresh and ready to respond to the changing seasons and the varying views resulting therefrom; it never curries favor, it is never covetous, never inclined to extravagance, but always watchful and considerate for others. The owner of such a mind is naturally gentle-mannered and always sincere—this is cha-no-yu.’


- ‘The tea-room (the Sukiya) does not pretend to be more than a mere cottage—a straw hut, as we call it’... The term Sukiya may signify:
  - An Abode of Fancy inasmuch as it is an ephemeral structure built to house a poetic impulse.
  - An Abode of Vacancy inasmuch as it is devoid of ornamentation except for what may be placed in it to satisfy some aesthetic need of the moment.
  - An Abode of the Unsymmetrical inasmuch as it is consecrated to the worship of the Imperfect, purposely leaving something unfinished for the play of the imagination to complete.
- ‘In the tea-room fugitiveness is suggested in the thatched roof, frailty in the slender pillars, lightness in the bamboo support, apparent carelessness in the use of common-place materials. The eternal is to be found only in the spirit which, embodied in these simple surroundings, beautifies them with the subtle light of its refinement.’
- ‘That the tea-room should be built to suit some individual (person’s) taste is an enforcement of the principle of vitality in art.’
- Okakura says that art should reflect a person’s contemporary life. He adds that ‘slavish comformity’ to tradition blocks ‘the expression of individuality in architecture.’

11/29/2016
Study #4: Using Level Changes to Define Location, Movement, and Moment

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NOTE: For this study, I offer a compilation of my own observations and practices, using my narrow (18 x 70') garden as an example.

Outside the back door of my house is the entry to the garden. The structure built with dark cedar landscape timbers runs across the lot from one side to the other. What principles are at work here?
  - Right from the start, the structure and its levels raise visitors above the plane of ordinary life. In entering the garden, each level change alters the view and clears the mind as they step up, stop, and move through an ever-changing world.
  - Two walks—one of granite stones and the other of cedar boards—serve as oversized steps that take visitors upward to a planting bed with birch trees straight ahead. These walks point them to a platform one step higher to the left. The steps are all about flowing motion—up and down, side to side—while the platform is a stopping point for sitting still and contemplating the rock landscape and the middle gate. Like a cosmic clock, each level change defines a new location, movement and moment in the garden.

Passing along the brick walk—one step down from the platform—visitors come to the middle gate. As they move through the gate, they step down again to another level—the lowest in the garden. The fountain marks the garden’s center point, while the surrounding circular walk turns without end.
  - Level changes can signal arrival at the center of everything, a place of stillness and rest.
  - Aside from platforms and walks, level changes can be built to raise and define such elements as planting beds, a rock landscape, and a small copper-lined pit to boil water for tea. Together these frames form a sequence that moves visitors’ eyes dynamically through the garden space.

3/10/2017