

Washington Park Arboretum

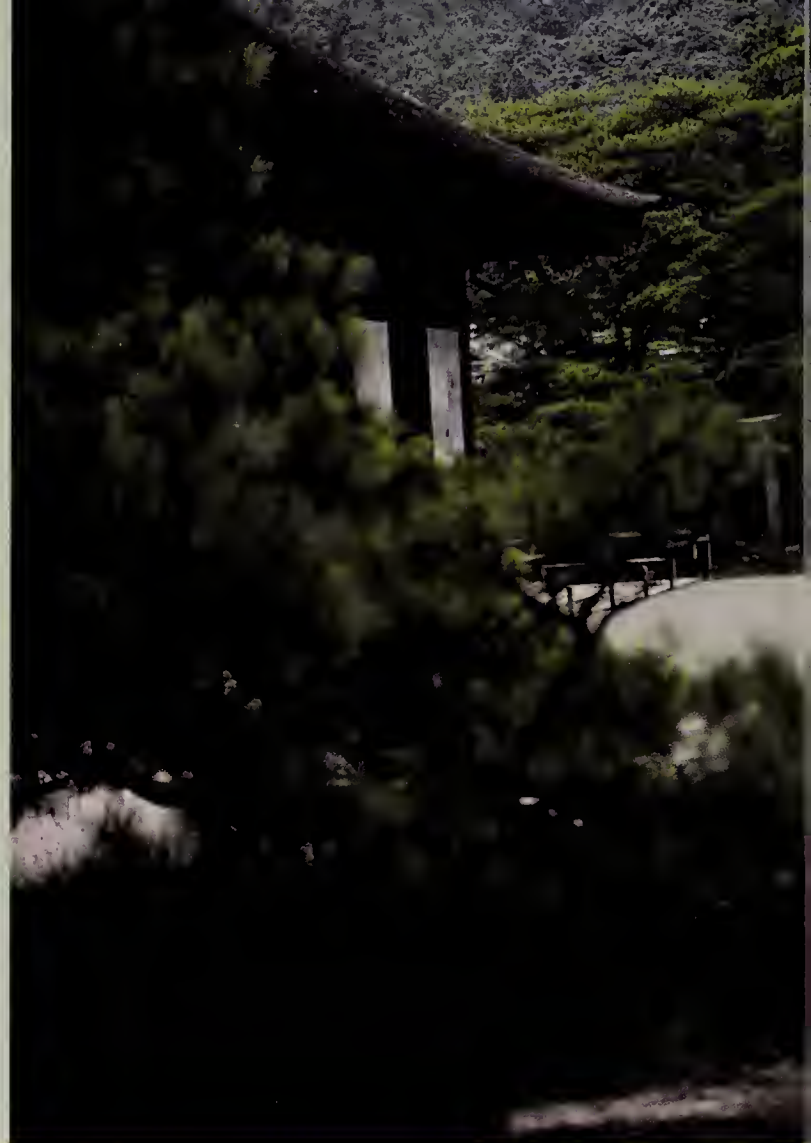
BULLETIN



Published by the Arboretum Foundation

Spring 2006

\$5



A Designer's Introduction

AROUND THE GARDEN IN ONE THOUSAND AND ONE QUESTIONS:

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY
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Surely, Washington Park Arboretum's Japanese Garden is Seattle's most overlooked treasure. Although my original goal in writing this piece was to suggest questions that garden guides might pose to visitors, to enrich their experience of this sublime garden, these questions may also prove helpful to individuals strolling the garden without a guide. To avoid any suggestion that these observations are a prescription for the "right" way to experience or understand the garden, Japanese illustrations, rather than photographs, have been chosen to accompany





FAR LEFT: Every entrance should re-entrance.
(Garden of Ryoan-ji, Kyoto, Japan)

LEFT: Curving paths conceal and reveal destinations, playing off the open space against the building.

BELOW: The Pond Revealed: One step at a time, the sequence unfolds. The picture emerges.
(Katsura garden, Kyoto, Japan.)

Seattle's Japanese Garden



A Designer's Introduction to Seattle's Japanese Garden

the questions. So try to imagine yourself strolling counterclockwise around the garden while looking at these images and pondering these questions.

Preparing to Stroll the Garden

Seattle's Japanese Garden was designed as a stroll garden by Mr. Jukio Iida, and a stroll, with its accompanying sequence of events, translates easily into a narrative, prompting questions: What stories unfold as one strolls Seattle's Japanese Garden? How does the design orchestrate or compose sequential narratives? Do stories change if we follow different routes or visit the garden at different seasons?

Japanese gardens are replete with symbolic meanings, and the perceptual rule, "the more one knows, the more one sees," applies par excellence to them. Posing questions about narrative interpretations before crossing the threshold may encourage visitors to see not only what's there—the garden's plants, stones, lanterns, water, structures, etc.—but also what's NOT there—allusions to mountains, forests, rivers and villages. Although a guide's job is not to instruct visitors about what and how to see and think at every step of the way, it is desirable to open visitors' eyes to physical, perceptual and symbolic experiences. Artfully timed questions may enhance the experience of the garden's literal narrative lines and facilitate reading between these lines, too.

Preparatory questions may also throttle back the turbocharged American mentality to a pace suitable for our journey. Think of the garden's entry as wrapping paper. What's inside? How are the contents presented and implied? The gate's modest scale, rustic materials and fine craftsmanship hint at the garden's character and values. The gate frames a view of a path that slides tantalizingly around

shrub masses, discreetly inviting us into the garden, while simultaneously saying slow down! Pay attention! Like a face glancingly hidden by a fan, this partial view suggests a game of allure—revealing and concealing—that is repeated throughout the garden.

The Curving Path

Rounding the first bend, we are immersed in the garden and fall under the path's influence. How are the shrub masses, tree canopies and open spaces shaped to interact with the path? How do they encourage our eye—and attention—to look from side to side, rather than retain a straight-ahead, goal-fixed gaze? What happens to the experience when the eye is enticed off the beaten path? We begin to suspect that the journey IS the purpose! (If visitors ask, "When will we get there?" we are tempted to reply, "You can't get there with that attitude!") In this portion of the tour, before we have our first glimpse of the pond, we might consider how our speed of travel is influenced by the path's bending, widening and narrowing, and by the location, character and variety of objects along the way.

The first major intersection occurs at the bridge and presents us with a choice of routes. Suddenly, the garden is more than a singular narrative. How do we choose which path to follow? Does the design subtly or overtly favor one direction over the other? Is our choice influenced by what we can and cannot see? Again, images of fans and veils come to mind. Suggesting one route, the foreground stream draws our eye through plant masses to a view of a corner of the teahouse roof. A tantalizing hint of open space suggests another way. Choosing between alternatives slows us down and encourages closer observation of our surroundings. Part of the richness of the garden derives from observations at the larger landscape



Complexity slows us down, to observe, to become engaged.
(The dry landscape garden of Taizo-in, Kyoto, Japan.)

scale, and part from observations at the intimate scale, where detail, intricacy, variety and change reward attentive viewers and remind us to enjoy every step of the journey. Selecting the right-hand path, we postpone visiting the teahouse. How is the garden experience affected by deferring this reward?

The Pond Revealed

The garden's main feature, the pond, is gradually revealed, one-glimpse-at-a-time, until we come alongside it and feel its expansiveness in contrast to the constricted spaces we have traversed. How does the experience of the pond differ when we look along its length, rather than across its narrower breadth? Is the experience enriched by the sequence of framed views, rather than a continuous open view? How might our responses to these questions influence how we choose to experience Seattle's panoramic mountain, water, landscape or cityscape views?

The shrubs and pine trees along the pond's length create a sequence of views that change the focus of our attention—the teahouse,

the peninsula and lantern, the orchard and viewing platform, and the bridge. In this way, the small pond is made to seem larger. Elements that might compete, if arrayed cheek-by-jowl, instead form a complementary, contrasting sequence. Masses and views are part of our narrative's spatial grammar. The number of different views of the pond we experience during our garden walk is surprisingly large, but they are artfully knit together into a coherent, unified whole. Some of the plants surrounding the pond are pruned into dense masses, while others, such as the pines, have open, sculptural forms. What is the difference between looking at a view

framed by solid masses and looking through lacy branches and twigs at the water beyond? Our responses to this question make us aware of the richness of human perception and the eye's ability to change focus from the close to the distant—to focus on the screen itself or to see through and beyond to the view.

The "push and pull" of plant masses and space continues around the pond. Some shrub masses tend to nudge our bodies—and attention—away from the perimeter fence into the garden's center. Contrast this treatment of the garden's boundaries with sentinel rows of *Thuja pyramidalis* along other property lines, insistently drawing our attention to those boundaries rather than concealing their presence. Using the well-known technique of "borrowed scenery," the fence is intermittently screened, so the garden can connect visually to the further hillside. Reaching the Emperor Gate, we face another delightful decision: to continue around the pond or to cross the bridge. Why is the path wider at this decision point? How does this widening encourage us to slow down and ponder our choices? A quick detour to the bridge proves irresistible.

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Increasing Complexity

The path to the bridge is far more complex than the main path: it narrows significantly, and shrubs press in upon it insistently; stepping stones appear, followed by steps up to the bridge; materials change; sharp angles are introduced; and boundaries between land and

water diminish. In myriad ways our perceptions and movements are being manipulated. "What is going on here?" We are being slowed down. Our attention is directed first in one direction, then another—any direction except straight across the bridge. Where the bridge widens, we are encouraged to stop and observe. It should come as no surprise that the garden's richest detailing is located here, in its heart: pines and perimeter stones, low railings, turtles and koi. Here, too, are some of the garden's

most delightful expansive views, for this low viewpoint and central location minimize the fence's obtrusiveness and include the surrounding wooded hillsides in an undivided scene. This is not the result of chance.

Returning to the perimeter path beyond the Emperor Gate, we confront some of the garden's most difficult design problems. After bending past an elegantly sparse weeping willow, we cross the pond where it flows out of the garden. How is this done? Is the transition elegant and natural, or awkwardly contrived? Here, traffic noise is most intrusive. Does the sound of water compensate? Stepping-stones and the wisteria arbor viewpoint counter undesirable distractions and draw our attention back into the garden. Is the design successful? Could it be modified to work better?



TOP: Complexity, not perplexity—diversity contained within a larger unity. (Shoren-in garden pond, Kyoto, Japan.) **BOTTOM:** Children *in* the garden, not *at* the garden—active participants, not passive observers. (Taizo-in, Kyoto, Japan.)



This corner is one of the most complex places in the garden. We may choose the steep path to a viewpoint down the length of the valley or follow the rectangular steppingstones across the terrace between the pond and retaining wall. The contrast between the rectilinear terrace and other parts of the garden provokes questions. Crossing the terrace, why do we step on the stones and not on the grass? How does this choice influence our experience? How does the massive retaining wall affect sensibilities refined by intimate and delicate features? Does the geometry evoke the intended feeling of human habitation? Foremost among these questions is the conundrum of the garden's missing building—a pavilion located on top of the wall and intended to be

the garden's main feature and focal point. Here, we may imagine the garden completed. How different would it look seen from a pavilion? Might we feel like a feudal Japanese lord surveying his stroll garden? Do we now see the garden differently—as an unfinished symphony? Will the last page of Seattle's Japanese Garden narrative remain unwritten?

At this prospect, we stand above the garden's boundaries and survey its context. Does it successfully nestle into the Arboretum valley, blurring its boundaries as it "borrows" views of enclosing hillsides? This thought leads to other contextual thoughts: To what extent is Seattle's garden rooted in Japanese cultural history, and to what extent does it derive its form and character from the Northwest soil in

Intricacy and intimacy in the larger composition and detail.
"Bigness" contains. "Smallness" creates intimacy.
(A shady garden at Ryoan-ji, Kyoto, Japan.)

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which it is rooted? What feels Japanese? What feels Northwest? Have we traveled, in imagination, across the Pacific to Japan and back in time to the Muromachi period?

Coherence & Complexity

But the return journey—in particular, the teahouse—beckons. Do we have time to sit in the Azumaya and ponder universal design questions? How does this tapestry of land, water, plants and buildings comprise a unified composition, while composed of separate, distinct parts? What gives the garden its harmony and coherence, and how does this order aid our comprehension? How do the garden's variety, interest and surprise continually engage our attention without destroying the coherence of the unfolding narrative? Easy answers elude us, but departing visitors may ponder the success of the delicate balance between conceptual coherence—necessary to avoid the perception of chaos—and the variety and richness that prevent boredom. From the Azumaya, the path meanders through the orchard's punctuated space, where low-canopied trees contrast markedly with looser, naturalistic spaces.

The Garden's Heart

The orchard leads to the wooden viewing deck that extends into the pond, where we engage it intimately. Bounded by water, the deck provides a new experience, different from that offered by the perimeter paths or bridge. Its geometric shape prompts questions about the shapes of land and water. How are we affected by the form of the pond's edge? The promontory beach jutting into the water? The growth of plants into or over the water, veiling the land and water boundary? Deck views are among the most varied in the garden,

prompting questions about ways in which its design connects us to or separates us from the garden. The deck is also a good place to ask: Where is the heart of the garden?—a question likely to provoke a lively conversation. Perhaps the deck is the heart. Perhaps the teahouse, or possibly the pond itself. What qualities should a garden's "heart" possess? Since the question is metaphorical, should we even be concerned about locating the garden's heart? This question reminds us that much of the garden experience, like the location of the heart, is symbolic.

Enfolding Intricacy

Time presses, and we move on past lovely iris and water lilies to the path's last major intersection, where we must choose between a narrow path skirting the water's edge and the teahouse hedge, or a wider route between the teahouse garden and perimeter fence. The former path traverses the loveliest and most intimate parts of the garden, and our mind, eyes and feet concur—this is the route to follow. Intricacies and intimacies abound along this enchanted section—enough beauty to still even a designer's chattering, questioning mind. Who could not be delighted by the enclosed, still pool where the stream enters the pond? Japanese maples hang low over the water, the waterfall sounds distantly, and our feet are lured into greater intimacies by steppingstones. Here shrubs and the "mountain" press in, enfolding us within the garden. Here the canopy contains us delicately, perhaps reminding us how open and expansive the pond is in contrast to this still containment. Here is intricacy, complexity and richness. Here one might voice, *soto voce*, the unanswerable question: Why is it so beautiful?

We have bypassed the teahouse in its enclosed garden. This delicate and mysterious



Farewells offer thoughts of returning as well as the beginning of memories. (Ryoan-ji, Kyoto, Japan.)

building may be observed from all sides but remains at arm's length—inaccessible and unapproachable. If we enter its sanctum sanctorum, we find ourselves matching, with infinite care, each footstep to each stepping-stone. The teahouse is replete with questions—a privileged space within a privileged garden, and the subject for another visit, another narrative.

Parting Gifts

Crossing the huge, rounded steppingstones by the waterfall brings us closer to the end of our journey. The waterfall's splash prompts us to consider the contribution of sound to the garden experience. Boulevard traffic notwithstanding, much of the garden is shrouded in silence. Our attentiveness has been heightened, and we hear the water with greater appreciation and clarity. What are the sounds and silences of the garden? Do we carry them home with us?

Leaving the stream, do our questions finally run dry? No, for the mossy forest floor evokes questions about texture, pattern and contrast.

The texture of fine moss, carpeting the garden's "forest," contrasts dramatically with robust sword ferns, candelabra *Primula* and large-leaved rhododendrons. Here, among these lovely flowers, we notice that our garden experience has, for the most part, ignored flowers—the features that define most gardens. Have we missed them? Does the varied experience of the Japanese garden's study in green delight us? How green, but never tiresome, our world can be!

But return at other seasons, and the garden's emphasis shifts as the color palette changes! Where spring and early summer bask in the splendors of rhododendrons, iris and water lilies,

Japanese maples throw restraint to the wind in the fall. Color variations put us in mind of seasonal changes, which translate into thoughts about time itself. As our visit concludes, we realize that, ultimately, the garden story is about taking time—to look, to feel, to think. Rounding the bend, passing the infinitely delicate, pendulous, cut-leaf maple, we walk through the gate, our minds full of questions and answers—and, I hope, a desire to return to the garden to look deeper, to feel more, and perhaps to ask yet more questions. ∞

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