

Japanese Gardens Today: Authenticity

Authenticity is a word used often in regard to Japanese gardens. But what does authenticity really mean? Webster defines the word authentic as: ‘genuine, trustworthy, reliable’ or ‘true to its type; conforming to an original in style, methods, etc.: authentic Japanese cooking.’

OK. That’s pretty fair and understandable. We might mean that a certain garden is genuine in the sense that it was designed and built by a native-born Japanese garden expert. Or, we might say that it is authentic because it conforms to the style or methods of construction described in the *Sakuteiki*. We might also describe a garden as being inauthentic because it has been modified from the way it was originally built decades or centuries afterwards, either on purpose – by a redesign - or through neglect or inadequate care. I’m not even going to get into the question of whether gardens outside of Japan should be called ‘Japanese gardens’ or only ‘Japanese-style gardens’ or something similar.

My purpose here is to discuss some of the problems we face in maintaining authenticity - no matter how we define it.

Training of Garden Staff

The biggest problem has to do with the people charged with maintaining our gardens. Few would dispute that it takes many years to learn the techniques and to hone the skills needed to properly set rocks, prune pines or even rake gravel. Opportunities to study and train in the field are limited and incentives for interested workers are few. The reality is that there is a serious shortage of properly trained, highly skilled workers to take care of our Japanese gardens. The plant materials keep on growing, stream and pond beds and shorelines erode, rocks even shift positions. Without proper care, in a relatively short time, a garden can cease to look like it used to or as it was intended to look.

The Japanese garden community needs to continue to develop training opportunities and to find ways to encourage consistency and longevity for its skilled professionals. Perhaps even more important, individual gardens need to enable their staff members to continue their training on a lifelong basis and to otherwise provide incentives for them to remain and provide consistent care over many years.



Documentation

A second problem in maintaining authenticity stems from the lack of documentation of the designer/builder's plans and dreams. Once s/he is gone from the project, who really knows exactly what was intended? Did the designer want a certain cluster of trees and shrubs to grow to a height of 10 feet or 30 feet? Was it to be rounded, squared or layered? Was the view from a given spot supposed to be focused on a rock arrangement or a stone lantern by the way overhanging branches were pruned, or was it to have been a wide vista?

It is critically important to document the designer's vision for as many details as possible, whether in additional drawings, photographs, video, or other formats. It is best to do so during the construction process, but it is better to do it later than not at all. You really don't want people 50 or 100 years from now trying to guess. If possible, bring back the designer on a regular basis to share his/her thoughts both on original intent and on the evolution of the garden. And document it.

If the designer is long gone and few or no records exist, document the garden as it is today so that future caretakers will at least have something to go on.

Interpretation

Finally, interpretation is another ongoing problem in terms of authenticity in Japanese gardens. From the most basic questions regarding the terms we use to name and describe our gardens – *karesansui* vs. Zen garden vs. Late Rock garden – to the myths perpetuated about demons and zig-zag bridges, how and what we teach visitors makes a difference.

Most gardens in Japan provide minimal, if any, interpretive information for visitors. And not unlike many artists and curators of art with regard to art exhibitions and installations, many people feel strongly that one should just 'experience' a Japanese garden. One needn't or shouldn't read about it or have someone explain it. Others feel just as strongly that if visitors want to learn about what they are seeing and experiencing, they should be provided with the means to do so.

Because Japanese gardens are outside the experience of most non-Japanese, it is important to help visitors get beyond the strange or exotic initial impressions they may have. This does not imply, however, that our gardens should be covered with signage or that loudspeakers should be blasting – or even whispering – information. People learn in different ways and we should provide individuals with options that fit their preferred mode while avoiding interfering with others' preferred modes. In other words, an auditory learner may desire to use a personal audio tour, whether it is delivered through a wand or her cell phone. A visual learner may prefer a detailed map and guide brochure that he can read while strolling along. Someone else will learn all she wants by feeling the textures of gravel, stone and wood underfoot, smelling the fresh pine scent, and listening to the wind blowing through the bamboo.

Which is the 'authentic' experience? Aren't they all?