

GARDEN HOUSE

MICHAEL PRAIRIE AND HIROMI SHIMAMURA

Our house and garden, located in the coastal hills of San Diego, would likely be classified as contemporary. Their design has been influenced primarily by the convergence of our respective Asian and European heritages. The garden is Japanese "style," or *wa-fû*, a Western interpretation of a modern Japanese garden. It is notable that our house is not a replica of any structure from any era or country. Our premise for our design is that you cannot build or remodel a house unless you take ownership of the creative process. Wholesale delegation of the process to a design professional will result in a design, which embodies his or her vision or, worse yet, as is the current trend, a replica of a traditional Tuscan villa or a French country home—whose designs are inexplicably lifted from a different century and another world.

We do not suggest that a new home or garden should be designed and constructed without the full participation of the best design professionals and contractors available. We collaborated in the design of our remodeled house with one of San Diego's finest architects, Jim Cover of Crain/Cover Architects. Additionally, the expansion of our garden was directed by an accomplished Japanese garden designer, Hiromi Fujisaki. However, these professionals worked *with* us and were willing to use their expertise to translate our rough concepts and incorporate them into an imaginative but mainstream design.

It is not our contention that our house and garden are necessarily important contributions to architecture or garden design. However, our house and garden are, and in the future will remain,

meaningful to us in a very profound and personal way. The evolutionary process we advocate incorporates the best architectural and design features from our countries of origin and creates something new which looks and feels comfortable among Southern California's eclectic residential designs.

How does one take ownership of the creative process? Simply stated, you must invest a considerable amount of time over an extended period learning about the principles, which will be the foundation of your design. If you draw inspiration from more than one source, you must ferret out the common attributes of your sources so that they can be incorporated into a seamless design. For example, we looked to both Japanese and European architecture and found common or at least compatible features. These included

Minimalism, which is at the root of Japanese and Scandinavian architecture. In addition, Japanese architecture reflects the ideal that a house is inextricably linked to nature. This characteristic was embraced by the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, himself a student of Japanese culture, and, therefore, many of his well-known architectural concepts are also prominently featured in our final design.

Knowing the origin of your architecture is not enough. You also must understand the construction materials and methods that are available to achieve your objectives and design concepts. You will be constantly confronted with "trade-offs." One material may be perfect to bring your design to life but may cost twice as much as a less-desirable material. You may like the appearance of one method or product, but it may turn out to be less durable and more maintenance may be required.

While we do not embrace a formal religion, the design of our home and garden was significantly influenced by principles of Eastern philosophy, which we believe are more often replicated in nature than comparable Western ideals. For example, Japanese tradition, with its origins in Buddhism, is premised on an evolutionary process, contrasted with Western thought, which is premised on the concept of a beginning and an end. In

the East, man is intimately connected to the natural world while in the West, nature is something to be sheltered from or conquered. Our spiritual premise is that any connection with something beyond the profane cannot be realized in an air-conditioned environment isolated from nature.

We also had in mind more practical objectives that we wanted to achieve. We anticipated regularly entertaining both small and large parties, which we prefer to host in our garden. This ability to have garden parties was very important to us. Our second objective was that the family living space should be concentrated on the second floor.

We kept our design on track by distilling our principles and objectives into concrete design concepts. Function prevails over form and simplicity governs, unless our passion could not be constrained. Barriers, both inside and out, were eliminated whenever possible, unless used to frame an important feature of the house or garden. Natural materials at hand were chosen over those, which are manmade. No materials were used which are supposed to look like something they are not. Concepts of design, including art and furnishings, had to express something meaningful to us. Living areas were scaled to fit their purpose and function.

We used the principle of "borrowed

scenery," or *shakkei*, to extend the visual scale of the garden beyond its actual physical boundaries. This is the idea that the eye does not stop at the boundary of the garden but simultaneously takes in everything around, beyond and above it.

The exterior of the house is contemporary, with only minimal Japanese influence. The house features a three-car garage at street level. The natural-material theme is reflected in the garage and fence with natural wood windows and a redwood lattice pattern in a natural stain. The metal roof is simple and contemporary and is more authentic than other available materials, including the various manmade materials, which are intended to replicate wood shingles.

The foundation of our garden is anchored firmly in the past, but our interpretation incorporates many contemporary Western concepts. The yard is divided into four distinct areas, each reflecting different styles of Japanese gardens. The relatively small property contains 40 mature trees and more than 50 varieties of trees and plants. The five bonsai style trees and bamboo groves, which are more than 40 years old, have taken on special characteristics called *sabi*, which roughly translates as the patina or aura that honest materials acquire with age if well maintained.

The front yard is the public expression

of the garden. It features a stone lantern, or *shidoro*, and one of the stylized Japanese black pines. The geometric design of the redwood fence and complementary garage doors embraces the ancient Japanese *shitomi* design. The slate that begins curbside decorates the planting walls and driveway, and continues to the tea garden. Slate was selected because of its compatibility as interior and exterior flooring.

The front yard is intended to blend into a more Western-style landscape. The main ground cover is Korea grass, and highlighted with Indian hawthorne and shaped wheelers dwarf. Seven mature podocarpus, or *inu maki*, trimmed and feathered in Japanese fashion, provide height and density. Azaleas, or *rengetaubaki*, and Japanese camellia, or *tsubaki*, provide accent, together with Indian hawthorn and wheelers dwarf.

A strong combination of Japanese varieties of azaleas, camellias and fortnight lilies in full bloom, which are more often found in European gardens, reflect our desire to use the two traditions. We wanted to enjoy a Western-style profusion of colorful flowers, while retaining the basic traditions of Japanese garden design. Next to the gate is a stone lantern, or *shidoro*, and each side of the front yard features a stand of bamboo.

The walkway through the gate to the

front door is highlighted with several red Japanese maples and wisteria. Adjacent to the front door is a flowering quince, or *boko*, and a bonsai juniper. The courtyard garden is dominated by the largest stylized black pine, which exceeds ten feet. Additionally, a variety of ferns, horsetails and water plants surround the water basin.

The courtyard garden is for guests to wait and prepare to enter the tea garden. The water basin, or *tsukubai*, is intended for guests to rinse their hands and mouth – the purification ritual before entering the tea garden. The water basin is from Indonesia, and is more than 100 years old. The basin is surrounded by stones, and is filled by flowing water from a bamboo pipe. The flat-front stone, or *mae-ishi*, requires guests to stoop to obtain water from the basin, in an act of humility. The other flat stones are for the guests' possessions, or possibly a lantern.

The courtyard garden also contains a waiting bench, or *koshikake machiai*, and a handcrafted stone lantern. The stone lantern combines Japanese and San Diego granite. The granite center stone was carved 50 or so years ago in Japan, and the top and bottom stones were the work of the family.

The middle gates are from the mid-nineteenth century Chinese Qing Dynasty, from the Fujian Province. The seven-foot

gates are constructed of elm wood and iron metalwork. These gates lead to a narrow pathway lined with stylized podocarpus and highlighted with fortnight lilies. The irregular stepping-stones slow the pace of the visitor, heightening the anticipation of the first sight of the tea garden, or *chumon*.

The tea garden, which features five species of bamboo ranging in size from giant bamboo to the more elegant black bamboo, is dominated by a redwood teahouse with three *sojia* doors on each side. The teahouse, with a majestic Monterey pine as a backdrop, is nestled in a grove of giant timber bamboo. The teahouse is the center of the garden, the sanctuary against the worldly and profane. Enclosed with 12 redwood *shoji* doors and covered by a simple metal roof, the teahouse is partially obscured by a fully mature grove of giant bamboo. Some might say the pretense of spirituality ends when sliding the doors reveals a large spa for communal baths. Is this a sacrilege? We think not. Natural hot springs are central to Japanese culture and aesthetics. Humor or satire – any emotion or spiritual feeling – can be represented.

The “stepped falls,” or *dan-ochi*, are yet another striking feature in the tea garden. The water cascades down eight steps on the relatively steep slope and then flows into a short stream before falling onto

several “water-hitting” stones, which creates sound, spray and visual interest, before cascading into the koi pond. Underwater lights are positioned to highlight the waterfall at night.

The arrangement and shaping of the plants and trees are intended to provide greater depth and deemphasize the steepness of the slope. A pathway up the slope leads to a Japanese *jizo* statue from the Edo period, dating from the 1850s.

Another feature of the tea garden is a grand *kasuga* lantern, which is distinguished by a hexagonal light box with upturned corners, a round shaft and detailed decoration on the pedestal and cap. The century-old lantern, likely brought from Japan as a World War II trophy, is inscribed with Japanese writing, or *congi*, which expresses Confucian ideals.

To the left of the patio is a short symbolic bridge with bamboo railings, which leads to the more abstract Zen garden. The Zen-inspired garden is set off with mature wax privet and a stand of bamboo. The challenge was to create a natural atmosphere for contemplation and revitalization of the spirit. The placement of rocks also makes reference to Buddhist symbolism, in which numbers play a significant part. The finely textured gravel is raked in parallel lines, expressing water and boulders that represent islands, ships or the features in the mind of the viewer.

The triad rock arrangement, or *Samson seki*, is three stones in close proximity such that the center stone is larger or stronger than the two flanking stones, and the stones form a triangle, or triad. One stone is always subordinate to the other. In other words, one of the two stones is obviously larger and more “important” than the other.

A small dry, or Zen, garden is set off with fully mature wax leaf privet and a row of silver lace. A stand of bamboo arches over the sand and gravel. Mondo grass shapes the boundary of the garden and the stepping stones pathway.

Returning to the courtyard garden, let us enter the front door of our house. The foyer is dominated by a recessed art enclave with a framed Japanese scroll painting, or *kakejiku*, by Shinsui from nineteenth century Japan. The gold monochrome work features abstract depictions of koi that come to life as the viewer passes through the foyer. We enhanced rooms in our home by extending walls in strategic locations by merely one foot. With the front door open it is possible to see straight through the house to the garden without the perception of a wall.

The design of the formal living area avoids the danger that it can become a rarely used “show place.” A fact of life is that the focus of entertainment is in and

around the kitchen, where the wine is served and the meal is prepared. The living room is opened to the courtyard garden using the *nana* wall system. This moves people through the front room to access the garden and converts the garden into an area to be experienced, rather than merely viewed, while walking from the gate to the front door. A Japanese hand painted screen by contemporary artist Shiozawa Kampo, mounted by Matsuki Jimyousai, depicting white irises on Shantung silk, decorates the room.

The large window in the formal dining room frames a view of the waterfall through stylized Japanese cedar. The dining room is sparsely furnished with a German glass and metal table and Italian leather chairs with “lattice” backs complementing the *Shitomi-do* design of the front fence. Paintings by Philip Chan from his angel and Christ collection adorn the walls.

The powder room is a blending of modern and traditional, a fusion of East and West. The principal feature is the Chinese cabinet that has been adapted for use as a vanity. The single door on the first floor provides privacy in the powder room. The sink and fixtures are contemporary, as is the black toilet. The art includes a plaque given to Michael by the South Vietnamese army. In addition, the art includes erotic woodblock prints,

or *Shunga*, of the early nineteenth which emphasize that the visitor's tour of the house is not necessarily intended to be comfortable.

The restaurant-style kitchen dominated by stainless steel embodies both practicality and simplicity. The office photographs, primarily of children, which decorate the walls of the office, were taken by Michael during his two years in Vietnam during 1967 through 1969. A shadow box contains a first edition of the "Strategy of Peace" (1960) by John F. Kennedy, a presidential seal that was attached to the podium during some official presidential addresses, and photographs at the Kennedy compound in Hyannis port and the home of John and Teresa Kerry on Nantucket Island.

The *tatami* mat is a timeless element of traditional Japanese rooms and the mats on which people sleep and eat. The *tatami* mats in the guest suite are framed by a wood border. Futons are put away. The craftsmanship of the room is of a quality rarely found in construction in the United States. The translucent *shoji* doors covered with paper *washi* create shades of light and perhaps the most pleasant environment in Garden House. The sliding closet doors, or *fusuma*, are made of paper and wood. Unlike *Soghi* doors, the frames are typically decorated with scenes of nature. Our *fusuma* depict an abstract

series of mountain streams and woods.

The rafters in the western guest suite were eliminated to open the space. The resulting structural weakness was remedied with industrial steel rods. The rods are secured into the tech lighting system and create a contemporary studio look. The simple but substantial baseboard with a sharp bevel is contemporary and consistent with angles, which dominate the house. The plain stainless interior and exterior door hardware carries the utilitarian theme. Walls are hung with photographs of Yosemite National Park by Ansel Adams.

The master suite was the only major addition to the structure of the house. An existing bedroom was expanded by 500 square feet and a master bathroom was added. The large Kohler spa is at the entrance of the room. A tub, set in a box of green marble, is located in the bedroom. The bathroom contains no doors other than a glass door to the lavatory. The oversized window with automatic blinds overlooks Kate Sessions Park. A scroll painting, or *kakejiku*, is hung in an alcove at the entrance to the room.

In many respects our house and garden require more maintenance than other similar houses. Adherence to the desire to use natural materials elicited concerns from the design professionals about high maintenance. However, maintenance is

not a burden but an important activity connecting us with the house and garden. We introduce *ki* through our regular care of the garden and, in return, receive *ki* from the garden through its rejuvenating pleasure.