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SHAKKEI (借景): COMPRESSION AND EXPANSION

Erwin Viray

I feel compression and expansion as I see the flowing image of space and hear the winding sounds of water. I am gazing at an audio-visual animation, a sample of the Shisen-dō garden. And I realize that Japanese gardens follow the same principle of perspective as Japanese landscape painting, which is based on a close-up, intermediate, and distant plane. The space in between these planes, typically filled with water, moss, or sand, is also important. Traditional garden designers use various optical tricks such as *shakkei* to give the garden the illusion of being larger than it actually is, to create a sense of deep space. In *shakkei*, known as the concept of “borrowed scenery,” views to landscape features far beyond the garden extend the distant plane. Another trick involves placing miniature trees and shrubs in the intermediate plane to create the illusion of their being farther away. It is the art of making small spaces expansive and monumental spaces intimate.

An example of *shakkei* can be found at Entsu-ji Temple in the north of Kyoto. Sitting in the temple’s interior, one has a view of Mount Hiei framed by the garden’s hedges and trees. A strip of flat moss in front creates an empty space which grants a sense of distance to the whole garden composition. The frame is completed by two trees, one standing to the left and the other to the right. The distant view of Mount Hiei transmits an impression of nature’s monumentality while the framing of the view created by the moss, hedge, and tree layers creates a sense of intimacy.

Another place that comes to mind is Konchi-in, one of the temples at Nanzen-ji. The garden there is said to have been designed as a two-dimensional picture, like a *fusuma-e* painting produced on a wooden screen and depicting natural scenery. Indeed, the garden can only be viewed from a single point, namely from the veranda of the main hall of the temple. Beyond the deck, a wide band of light gray gravel separates the rock arrangements from the viewer. Within the delineated frame lies the garden’s main feature: a pair of islands known as Crane and Turtle, each an arrangement of rocks and shrubs.

I remember the cool November wind at Konchi-in and how maple leaves turn a scarlet red against the dark green conifers and the tawny, rust, or yellow foliage of other deciduous trees. The maples

impose themselves in the view due to the lightness of their leaves suspended in thin branches: horizontal leaves, expanding and keeping still in the transparent air.

The Japanese garden is a mastermind construction of nature; it transmits to the mind a sense of rhythm and proportion. The intention behind the garden's layout is to allow things to happen spontaneously precisely because things are calculated: the relationship of colors throughout the seasons, the masses of vegetation and their varying growth, and other harmonious irregularities. It is like a language, both written and free. Consider a garden a poem, or an illustration of one, just as a poem may be composed as a reflection of a garden. But of course a poem is made up of ideas and words while a landscape is composed of other ephemera: leaves, colors, and light.

Materials are shown as they are in a Japanese garden, neither hidden nor modified. Elements in the garden are put together according to the criteria of harmony and meaning. Variation is attained by the plants's changing shape and color over time. These complete or partial changes are considered in the planning of the garden-poem. Plants die and are replaced by similar ones, which are laid out in their exact locations. As centuries go by, the garden is continually remade while somehow always remaining the same.

A garden requires continuous maintenance; perfection is never reached, only suggested. The image of a bare and unadorned space. Material is all that matters. And how a garden and its structures are built and the ease with which one can undo it and perhaps reassemble it in a sense proves that even if the universe falls apart, something will always remain.

Walking through one of these gardens, my eyes search for further meaning. Each composition dictates my physical movements until they are synchronized in a calm, uniform pace. It is all sensation. One grasps things without translating them into words. And as one moves, the scenery changes continuously; the garden one has entered multiples into countless more. Lakes in the garden—one of flowing water, the other a still pool—create two different landscapes, two different states of mind: one is murmuring as it rushes beside pathways and through tiny cracks in the paving while the second one is like a reflecting mirror.

The human mind has a mysterious mechanism which makes one believe that a particular stone is always the same stone, even though its image—in the slightest movement of our gaze—changes shape, dimension, color. These spatial metamorphoses are also subject to further transformations by the passing of time. The garden, and each of the infinite number of gardens contained within it, changes with the hours, the seasons, the clouds in the sky.

Platforms of bamboo are built in order to enjoy the blossoming peach trees in April and the reddening maple leaves in November. Tea houses are constructed so that one can look out into the ideal landscape in every season. And each viewing platform has a time of day or night which presents the ideal moment for viewing. Time has substituted the idea of the infinite for a calendar of exemplary moments that are repeated in cycles; the garden has fixed these in specific places. Maybe what I actually set out to explore was the non-physical *shakkei*—that is, not only the borrowing of a physical view but also of a mental landscape.

The correspondence between my point of view, my movements, and my state of mind, opens up a perspective created by the individual who designed the garden. These infinite viewpoints are then reduced to several, finite views, each with a distinct character. These views cast glimpses into a series of precise point cloud models, each of which correspond to a single need and intention. Each model also serves as a device for multiplying the garden without causing vertigo of the infinite through a regular rhythm of compression and expansion.

A framed view in the garden is an opportunity to describe the process of coming into and out of existence or to distinguish between being and non-being—wherein non-being is simply the absence that precedes and succeeds existence. Within this framework, one can understand a generative process through which all things arise and pass away. Natural processes manifest in seasonal cycles: a pregnant emptiness of non-being in winter and being's burgeoning forth in spring, full and flourishing in summer and dying back into a new non-being in autumn.

Calligraphers, poets, and painters have all aspired to create with the selfless spontaneity of a natural force. As such, the elements out

of which they crafted their artistic visions were primarily naturalistic landscape features such as rivers, mountains, and fields. Sitting on a veranda, guests sip wine and appreciate tea with the intention of clarifying their awareness of things by dissolving the separation between subject and object. If not completely out of doors, these practices take place in architectural spaces which act as “eye-spaces,” wherein open walls create an emptiness capable of containing the world around them. As visual and literary arts depict or describe rivers or mountains to capture nature’s force, these practices open one’s mind to the elements through environmental immersion. From within the garden, the resounding dimension of emptiness and landscape inspire a return to consciousness in the most elemental form. It is a breathtaking poetry which renders all things in a sudden and shimmering clarity, urging one’s own sense of self to be renewed also.

So it is by framing, by limiting the number of things, that one becomes aware of the world as infinitely larger, of the universe as an equilibrium of solids and voids. And the sound of wind and flowing water accompanies the act of contemplation, opening the mind to the space and silence all around. One gains the sense of going on an inner journey, albeit a journey with limits. By borrowing a view—not only physically—interior events are presented to the mind through physical movements, gestures, journeys, and unexpected sensations. It is by withholding and then unexpectedly releasing, by encountering first the frame or limited view, that the boundless view opens up.

Bending down over the pond and seeing my reflection in the still water, I feel my own smallness. As I lift my head to drink from cupped hands, I am dazzled by the immense sky above. In this moment, I feel that I am part of the infinite universe—but everything is ruined if one explains too much.



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