

Urban silence

Autor(en): **Yamamoto, Asako / Takeguchi, Kentaro**

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URBAN SILENCE

Asako Yamamoto and Kentaro Takeguchi

When Buddhist clergyman relocated the imperial capital of Japan in the eighth century, they sought for their new city—to be called Heian-kyo (“tranquility and peace capital”)—a place sheltered from natural disasters, including earthquakes, typhoons, and tsunamis. The city we know as Kyoto was founded at the center of Japan’s largest island, where it would be surrounded by mountains in three directions and only open to the sea on the southern edge. As it was designed to be a grid city modeled after the capital of China, the inhabitants of Kyoto have been enjoying a vast mountain view from nearly every street citywide for more than 1,200 years. However, having also been densely inhabited for centuries with no large open spaces to speak of, Kyoto invented the *tsubo-niwa*, a tiny “spot garden” where one *tsubo* designates a space no larger than 3.3 square meters. Suitable for both temple and house, these *tsubo-niwa* serve as a miniaturized landscape which corresponds to the distant mountains.

Each season we visit the gardens of Koto-in, a sub-temple of Kyoto’s Daitoku-ji. There, the main garden consists of only three elements: a moss-covered field, randomly aligned Japanese maples, and a bamboo grove. As this garden is located at the center of the crowded city and the area is strictly limited, each element is abstracted into a layer with a minimized material thickness. Nevertheless, carefully calculated and laid out in a space with a depth of only twenty meters, these mere three elements succeed in suspending the notion of restricted space. At first glance, it looks like a simple picture to be viewed from the terrace. Then, gradually, one becomes aware of how deep the space is. First one begins to notice the thin and overlapping leaves of the maples glittering softly in the sunshine. Next, one notices that the dark background created by the bamboo grove achieves a surprising depth through a graduation of shadows cast by the straight and slim, cylindrical bamboo stalks accumulating in layers. Then perhaps one’s attention is drawn to the narrow, light green moss-covered field which is not very deep but deep enough to maintain a cleared, open space between the terrace and the maple trees to ensure that they stand at an appropriate distance for displaying their elegant figures. The moss also serves to illuminate foliage from below by reflecting the sunlight effectively, thus adding greater contrast to the scenery. Upon observing these subtle shifts, the static

picture—and even its layers—comes apart, and more differentiated features are animated by the soft wind, flickering sunlight, or slight movement of the garden's visitors. Listening to the little birds singing, one is reminded of the mountains that cradle the city which holds this garden. And even if their expansive silhouettes cannot be seen against the sky beyond the bamboo grove, a subtle feeling takes over: the sense that one is sitting in the midst of a space which appears to stretch into infinity. Somehow an impression of deep space in a small garden brings one into a meditative state.

Suddenly one hears the ambulance siren or the bells at the elementary school and so notices, or remembers, that between garden and mountain lies an expansive urban context. Nevertheless, these urban sounds mixed with natural sounds don't sound like noisy noise but rather like silent noise, which awakens one's mind from deep concentration to make one realize that this beauty is, in fact, defined by the contemporary city which is carefully enveloped by the mountains.

As we rise to leave our position on the terrace and return to the daily bustle outside this garden, we remember to hold onto the quietude we have found here. Each time we visit this garden we discover anew that all the layers, including birdsong, are not only gathered here to shelter us from the world outside but also arranged three-dimensionally to draw our attention back out into that greater surround, to share the same air, to breathe this urban silence—a silence accentuated by vivid noises.



THE NATURE OF INTERVALS

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