



the modern japanese garden

introduction by shunmyo masuno



photography by michael freeman text by michiko rico nosé

MITCHELL BEAZLEY

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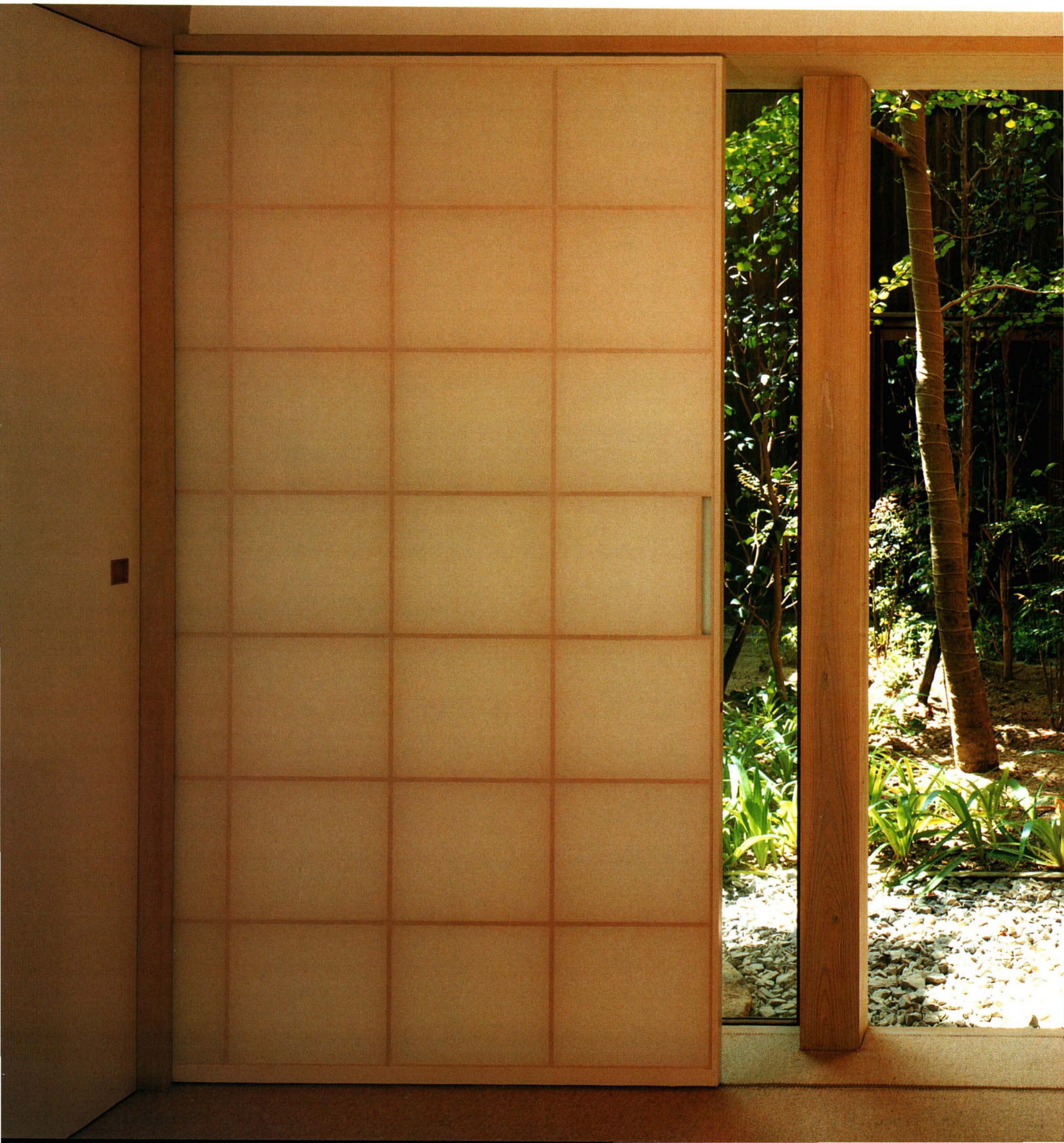
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i n t r o d u c t i o n



introduction

shunmyo masuno

What is a modern garden? Clearly, it is not sufficient to say that it is just what is being designed now. We have to put it in context, and, as these are Japanese gardens, context is everything. In Western art (and gardens are for us an art, as we shall see), modern has become identified with Modernism, and more recently with Post-Modernism. Modernism was an innovation and a challenge to the existing order, and carried with it, particularly in architecture, the rejection of decoration and ornament. Post-Modernism arose as a challenge to all of this, particularly to functional design. In recent years there has been a similar wave of experimentation in gardening throughout the world. Old principles are being challenged, and in many cases nature itself is rejected. Here too, in Japan, we are experimenting, but one of the essential differences, I think, is that we still refer carefully to our traditions of garden design.

The oldest tradition of all is that the garden represents nature, and that nature, since prehistoric times, has been regarded as sacred. This is true for both Shinto and Buddhism, although the two religions differ in their views. The earliest beliefs, which evolved into Shinto, were in the *kami* – sacred powers – who set foot at particular natural sites, often a stone called an *iwakura*. So the point of contact for man was the sacred natural enclosure, and this was the beginning of the garden. To this day Shinto shrines incorporate nature, by keeping a natural habitat in which there are sacred plants, such as the *sakaki* (*Cleyera japonica*), and cordoned precincts of pebble beds.

Buddhism, too, attaches a special importance to gardens, as in the re-creation of the paradise of Amida, the Buddha of the West. When Zen Buddhism arrived in Japan from China in the thirteenth century, a special concept of the garden came with it, which profoundly affected the Japanese. As a Zen priest I find it strange, and unsatisfactory, that



The sacred rock of Waroza-ishi, inscribed with Sanskrit characters, lies in Kumano, an area of Japan with many natural features sacred in Shinto. In this name "za" indicates that the rock is regarded as a seat for gods – a place where they touch the Earth.



In Shinto tradition, the sacred precinct surrounding the plain wooden architecture of the shrine is laid with white stones, as here at the Auxiliary Sanctuary of Tsuchinomiya at Isé. This simple, austere design has exerted a profound and continuing influence on Japanese gardens.





At the Imperial Shrine at Isé, Shinto priests add a branch of the evergreen shrub *sakaki* (*Cleyera japonica*) to the *karahitsu* box containing food for the gods. This plant, similar to a camellia and from the same family, is sacred in Shinto.

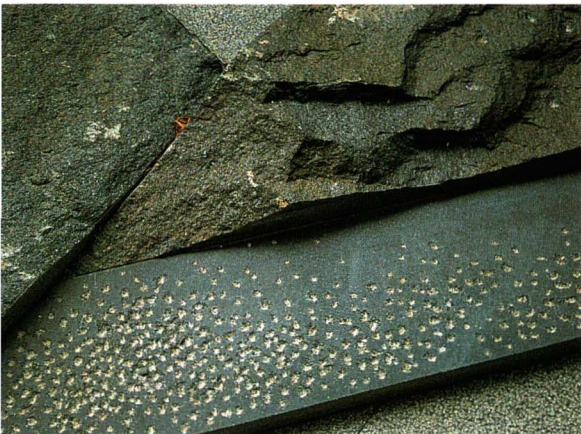




The Zen garden of Ryumontei, or Dragon Gate, at Gion-ji temple in Mito, was designed by Shunmyo Masuno. The prominent upright stone on the left represents the priest Shinetsu telling the Chinese parable of the carp to an audience that includes the Vice-Shogun Mitomitsukuni, who is symbolized by the pyramidal stone near the far wall.



Open to the sky, in the centre of Japan's famous traditional Tawaraya Inn, is a typical small courtyard garden, or *tsubo-niwa*. A corridor opens fully onto both sides of this area, where the key elements are a surface of pebbles, a flat stone for the traditional clogs, or *geta*, and a stone water basin with its ladle.



Stone has always been of great importance in Japanese garden design, and a major innovation of recent years is the use of hewn stone such as this.

With a long history to draw on, modern Japanese garden design usually makes reference to earlier principles. To create this sunken garden in the Osaka suburb of Sakuragaoka, architect Osamu Ishii excavated the plot to a depth of 4m (13ft) below the ground. The square pond is non-traditional, but its shape, with crossed corners, is known as *igeta*, a design element found in several contexts, from textiles to the floats carried in religious processions.

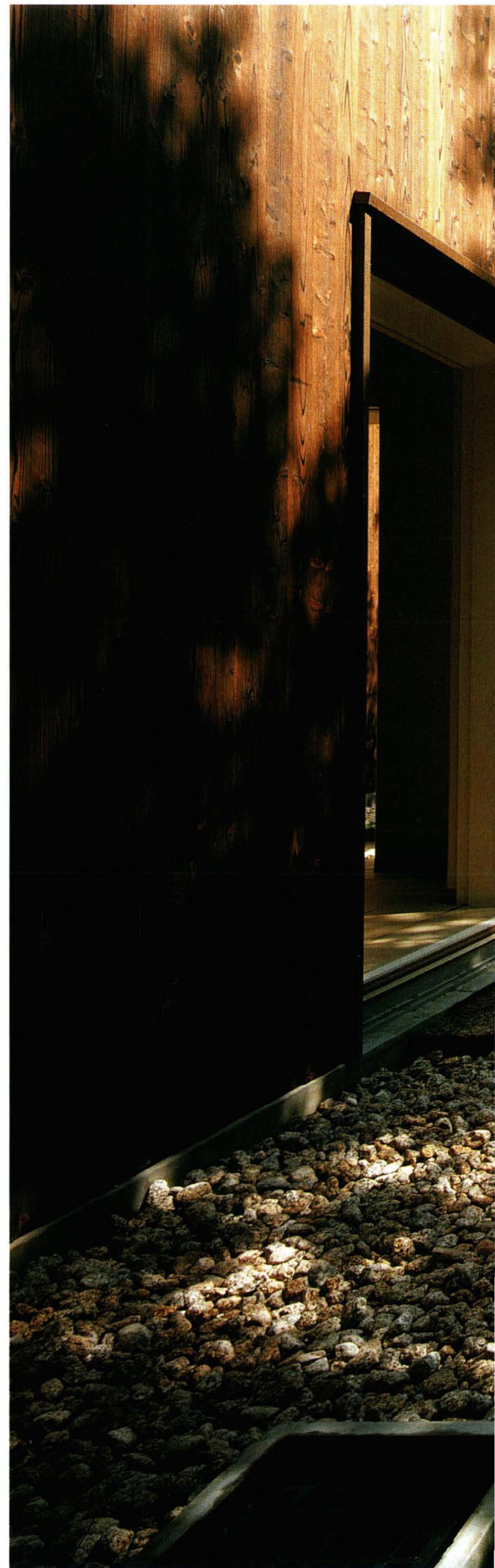
tradition of using stones only as they are found in nature. Split edges and rows of wedging grooves reveal a different kind of beauty in stone. Other designers have found uses for glass, iron, stainless steel, tiles, and even carbon fibre, as a number of the gardens shown in this book illustrate.

Then there is the choice of elements – principally the plants and stones. In the 1950s Kiyoshi Seike was one of the first garden designers to introduce a freer style of planting, and today we can see even more of this freedom: the use of the semi-wild – for example, imported plants – and the re-creation of specific habitats, such as the broadleaf evergreen plants of a Shinto shrine.

I hope that from these examples you may draw some inspiration for your own garden space. The environment, the people who will use the garden, and the relationship of the garden with the building – these are the first priorities to consider, and only after this can the designer begin. This principle applies to anyone who would like to create their own garden.

If the scenery surrounding your home is beautiful, why not create a garden that continues towards this view, as in the Sekkasanbo house (see pages 72–5)? That will help make the garden feel much bigger than its actual size, and make it comfortable. On the other hand, if you don't like the noise and the view where your home is situated, why not make a wall to exclude them, and create a nice, quiet *tsubo* garden, as in the "Residence the Colour of Ink" (see pages 26–9)? If your work is hard, you might consider creating a space in front of the entrance, where you can "tune up" – a tiny *genkan* garden, perhaps with a tree and stepping stones (see pages 86–7). When size is the problem, as it so often is, then again the wisdom of the Japanese garden can help, in applying "ambiguity of space." As a small example, see how the placing of plants near a window can be made to suggest a continuous scene with bushes and trees in a garden, and so create an open atmosphere (see pages 56–9).

It is very easy for people who lead urban lives, with the accompanying strain of work, to lose sight of their own identity. The importance of the garden is the way in which it can help to remedy this. A space that embodies nature can act as a kind of balm – a restorative for the mind. In its ideal form, the modern Japanese garden is just that spiritual space, designed according to a sophisticated aesthetic that evokes and celebrates nature. The means used differ, as we can see throughout this book, from Zen dry stone to the focus on a single tree, to freer, wilder forms of planting, but all draw on a thousand years of what we call *tokikata* – in this context, the reading of the cosmos through the garden. Ultimately, this is how I see the modern garden in Japan – a space that provides the means for the mind to become acutely sensitive to the simple, small matters that are often blanketed by daily life.







a d v a n c i n g t r a d i t i o n







This unusual wooden structure, part free-standing wall, part arch, has the function of restricting the view of the stone garden from the entrance to the house. The idea is to reveal just enough to intrigue the visitor. The inspiration for the opening is the low "wriggling-in entrance" to a tea-ceremony room.



Traditional dry-stone gardens have one formally framed view – usually from inside a temple. Here the view is from the ground floor, but the floor is on the same level as the garden instead of being raised.



contemporary dry stone

design: yoshiji takehara

The dry-stone garden, or *karesansui*, as exemplified by Shunmyo Masuno's contemporary but traditionally correct design at Gion-ji temple in Mito (see page 10), is inextricable from Zen Buddhism. Yet, as Masuno writes, its appreciation has spread into secular culture, and it has a great appeal for many Japanese in the setting of the home. In this garden on the slopes of Hieizan, a sacred mountain close to Kyoto, architect Yoshiji Takehara made a modern dry-stone garden a central feature of the house. Both house and garden were completed in 2001 for the client, who is a textile artist.

The inspiration for this *karesansui* was the fact that the owner's father had collected attractive stones for many years. Each one was significant, and had a name and a history. When the time came to rebuild the site, Takehara realized that the arrangement and the relationship of the principal stones should be preserved. However, he removed the trees and most of the other plantings, and looked for a way to enhance the siting of the stones and give the garden coherence. He recommended relying on the purity of stone, which would mean turning a fairly standard garden into a *karesansui*. Normally the base surface in a dry-stone garden is white sand, representing water, but Takehara modernized this element by using *warikuri-ishi*, broken stone. This would have an even drier appearance than sand, and permitted the use of different sizes for a more dynamic representation of flowing water, as in Masuno's courtyard garden in Kojimachi (see pages 76–81).

House and garden work together to give interesting views, and exploit the concept of *tachidomaru*. This word is a combination of "stand" and "stop" and means "to pause, stop, and look back." One feature found in temples – and Takehara draws attention in particular to the Daitoku temple in Kyoto – is that the route that has to be taken to reach one part or another is always circuitous, with twists and turns, so that progress towards

the destination always contains the unexpected. The experience of walking from point A to point B gives the visitor different views. "What you first saw and expected as the scene that would greet you is changed through views that reveal themselves as you progress along the route, and this traditional method of design is what I try to incorporate in my residential houses," explains Takehara.

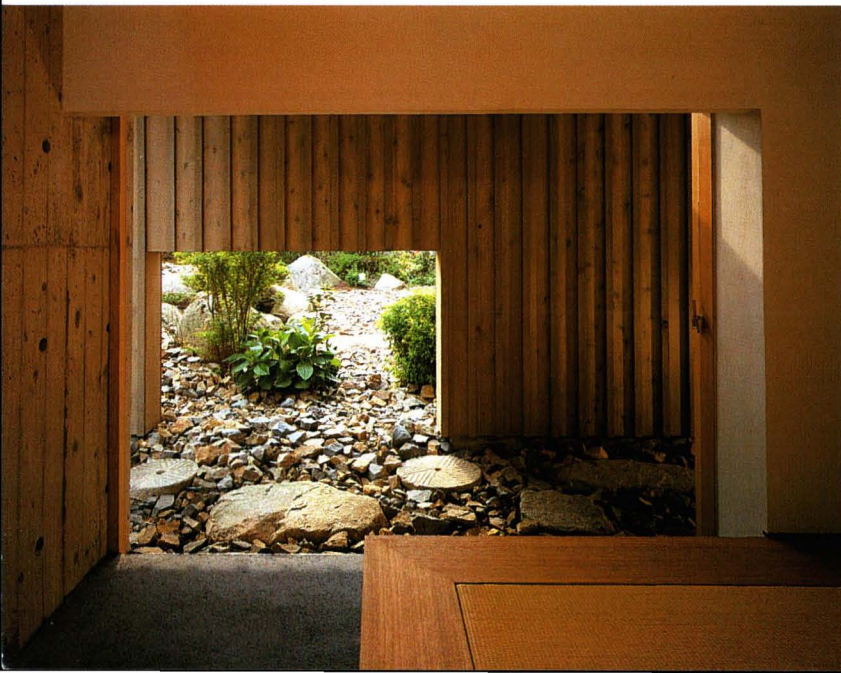
An essential part of this unexpectedness is to give glimpses and partial or blocked-off views, so as to intrigue the visitor. These may or may not be resolved by further views from within the house, but the uncertainty and ambiguity are important to Takehara in order to establish interest. (He achieves this in a different way by creating interconnected spaces in the garden on pages 56–9.) Here, he wanted to control the immediate view from the street entrance. The short path leads to the front door, in a wing of the house that contains a modernized *tatami* room, or *washitsu*, a room floored with mats of reinforced rush. Left alone, this layout would reveal a side view of the dry-stone garden, and Takehara wanted to avoid such an immediate exposure. At the same time, however, he did not want to hide it completely, but rather to let the visitor know that something interesting is about to happen.

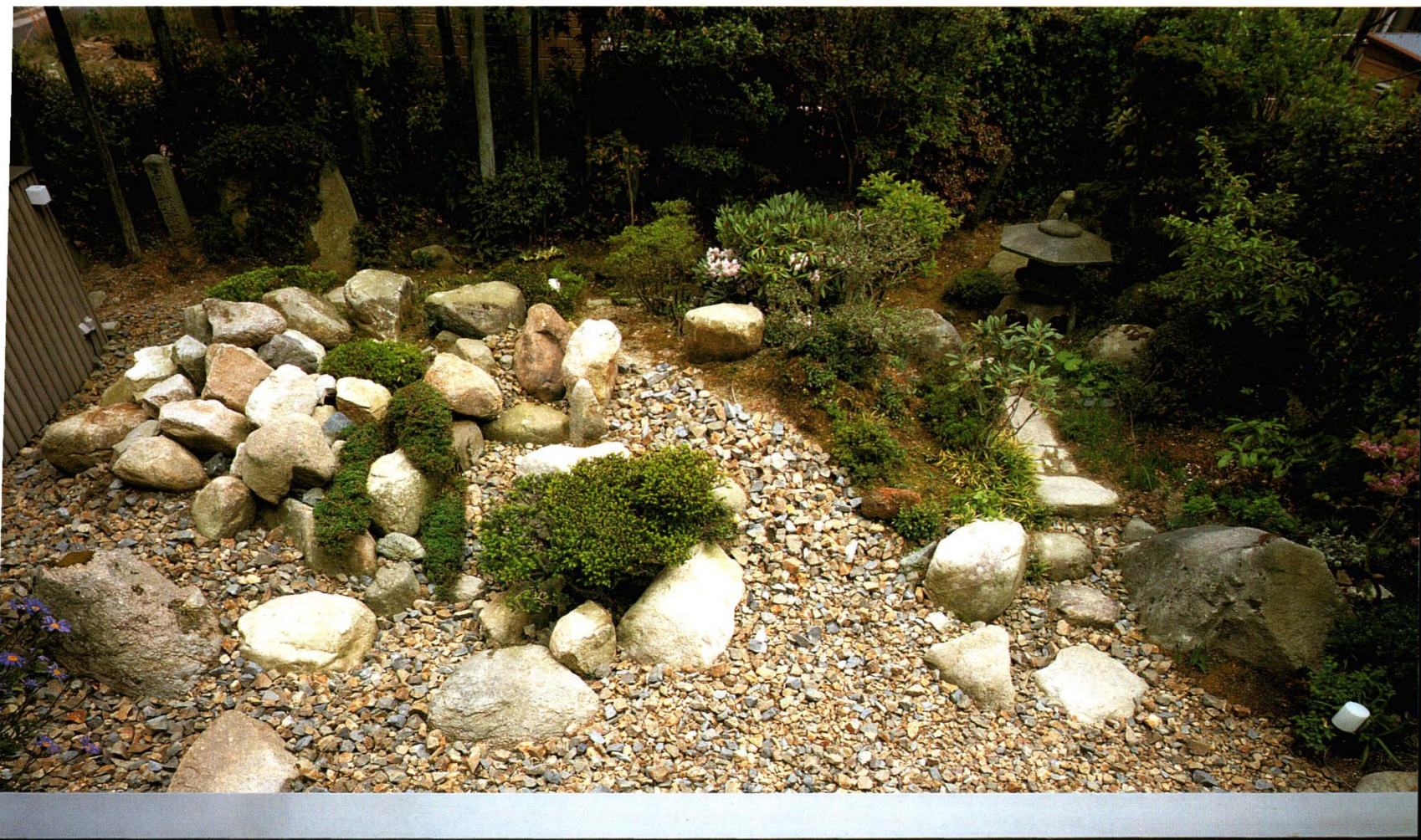
His solution was to construct a massive, free-standing wooden arch – a thick wall with a low rectangular opening. Structurally this is ambiguous, and seems to have no function. In fact, its purpose is to encourage the visitor to walk over and crouch down to see what is on the other side. Indeed the size and positioning of the opening intentionally resembles the "wriggling-in entrance" of a tea-ceremony room. In setting it 1m (3ft) in front of the *tatami* room, Takehara simultaneously added a small passageway, which offers another invitation to walk down and see what there is. "To make various things happen as people walk between houses is an essential part of my architecture," he says.

Eventually the visitor is rewarded with two complete views of the dry-stone garden. The first is from the ground floor, where a raised *tatami* floor gives a perfectly framed view. Here Takehara insisted on keeping the level of the lower concrete floor at exactly that of the garden (conventionally it would be higher), in a deliberate move to confuse interior and exterior. In the upper-floor dining area, screens can be slid back to reveal a view from above.

Immediately to the left of the front door of the house is a small *tatami* room for use by guests and for the display of the owner's textile designs. A floor-to-ceiling screen in the far wall slides back to give a view through a wooden arch. The concrete wall on the left was cast with wooden planks, to echo the texture of the wood used for the arch.

The architect's design makes maximum use of different views across spaces. As one leaves the view on the left and rounds the corner, the arrangement of openings and geometric planes on the other side of the *tatami* room gives a different framing of a few key stones in the garden beyond.





☾
The view from the upper floor looks down onto the garden and includes a balcony lined with flowerpots. Traditional dry-stone gardens do not have such an overhead view.

bringing the garden into the house

design: suiko nagakura

One of the outstanding features of traditional Japanese housing is the integration of house and garden. Indeed the word for garden, *niwa*, when written in the archaic form, uses the characters that mean "house front." The use of paper *shoji* screens, which slide back to open the interior up completely to the exterior, with a veranda as a connecting space that is neither inside nor outside, plays an essential role in this.

Here, in the house of potter Suiko Nagakura, the idea appears to have been taken to an extreme, for the dining room is the garden, and a fairly wild one at that, with ferns growing around the legs of the table. The fecundity of the room is not surprising, given that the floor is earth, which the owner keeps well watered, adding to its nourishment by throwing onto it the remains of the occasional cup of green tea. This interior garden extends down another side of the house as a kind of inside-outside corridor, while the conventional living areas, floored with *tatami*, are on a raised platform, partly enclosed by the L-shape of earth and greenery. The exterior walls that enclose the garden are plastered wood, with full-height sliding windows along the south-facing corridor, allowing plenty of light for the pink and red geraniums growing there. All of this particularly suits the owner's dog, Lily.

If one considers the Japanese architectural tradition, the idea of bringing the garden into the house is not actually as strange as it may at first seem to a Westerner. The earth floor is a direct descendant of the *doma* – an interior space with a floor of packed earth that has almost completely disappeared from Japanese houses. The *doma* was a workspace, a traffic space, and a location for the kitchen, while the proper floor was raised. Indeed, at the entrance to almost every Japanese house today, the lobby area where shoes are removed is a step below the main level, and is still called the *doma*.



Packed earth has long been a feature of Japanese houses, but it was restricted to the area immediately surrounding the raised floor, and never used for normal rooms, such as this modern dining room, except in the poorest homes.







Before the house was built in 1995, the land was a field of barley and tobacco. “Maybe that is why things seem to grow easily here,” says Nagakura. “Sometimes there is barley, sometimes dandelions, without my having to do anything. Last winter a frog came in to hibernate.” At first she had not thought of creating a garden, but just wanted to have the convenience of a *doma*. Gradually, however, plants began to invade, such as the curled mallow (*Malva verticillata*), a famous symbol for the Tokugawa shogunate, and she enjoyed the effect so much that she started to add her own plants, including the medicinal aloe, with its thick, sword-like leaves, bamboo palm, and Japanese hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla*). She found that the natural style of her ceramics blended well with the ferns and other plants, so she set a number of pieces strategically around the room, including under one side of the dining table, as focal points. The room now doubles as a showroom for her work. In addition to arranging temporary exhibits around the room, she has permanently embedded others in the garden among the plants.

The slight element of natural chaos, or at least the unplanned progress of nature, is in accord with Nagakura’s own ceramic works. “What I like about this garden is that it obeys no man-made rules – just like clay. Both are elements of nature, and I do not want to impose any artificiality on it.” One of her techniques with clay is to introduce random effects: at a certain stage in the modelling she closes her eyes and squeezes or hits it. In an analogous way she welcomes the accident of wild species taking hold in the dining-room garden. Pointing to the maidenhair fern (*Adiantum capillus-veneris*) growing beneath the table, she says, “When it first established itself it was over there, a little more to the north, but day by day it has been moving round to the south.”



The view from the side of the house near the rear reveals the relationship between house and garden. The living room, floored with *tatami* mats, is raised at the left, so that the garden runs around it. Sliding screens can be opened completely, allowing the owner to enjoy a full view of the interior garden.



As the first room to be entered from the front door, the dining room doubles as a space in which to show off the owner’s ceramics, which have an organic quality that matches the invading garden. Some pieces are temporarily displayed on shelves and on the table (right), while others are embedded in the garden (far right), where they act as an anchor for plants. Their presence helps to blur the distinction between the man-made and the natural.

