

## AESTHETICS OF AMERICAN ZEN: TRADITION, ADAPTATION, AND INNOVATION IN THE ROCHESTER ZEN CENTER GARDEN

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Enthusiasts of Japanese Zen gardens are used to juggling terms like *wabi-sabi* and *yugen*.<sup>1</sup> But how often do they find themselves talking about the use of red bricks to evoke a flowing stream or contemplating an abstract Buddha figure made out of cement fondue? Such unusual approaches must be applied when investigating the Rochester Zen Center's Japanese-influenced garden, where Asian and North American traditions meet to produce an emerging American Zen aesthetic. This aesthetic, emerging from the fluid contact of two cultural, religious and artistic spheres, can be seen in numerous Zen centers throughout the United States. Examining the garden at the Rochester temple, one of the country's first and most influential convert Zen centers, provides a particularly clear window into this phenomenon.

In America, where immigration has played a key role in shaping the religious landscape, scholars have often studied how Old World religions are transmitted and adapted to New World situations.<sup>2</sup> Those few who have looked at Buddhism's transplantation have mainly explored theological concepts like enlightenment or ritual practices such as meditation.<sup>3</sup> Much rarer is the detailed study of material culture. Yet Buddhist America is undeniably full of material items, ranging from *zafu* cushions to plastic power beads to ancient imported statues. Careful attention to architecture and artifacts can provide useful information about

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<sup>1</sup> See Lennox Tierney, *Wabi Sabi: A New Look at Japanese Design* (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> See Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972). Immigration plays a much smaller role in American Zen's history than in most American religions. Zen has mainly been transmitted by individual Japanese teachers to a Western audience, presented as a therapy or spiritual practice rather than an ethnic, family-based traditional religion.

<sup>3</sup> See Charles S. Prebish, *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

American Buddhist groups. Three important points can be employed when analyzing American Buddhist material culture. “Tradition,” the form used historically in Asia, is the starting point for all Buddhist lineages in the New World. “Adaptation” occurs when the new situation demands modifications to tradition, such as materials more suited to the new environment or the use of unusual objects because the traditional ones are unavailable. “Innovation” is a more radical response to new surroundings – it involves actively seeking new expressions or methods of manufacture for the sake of expanding the range of possible forms.<sup>4</sup> Motivation is the most important distinguishing factor between the latter two categories: adaptation is undertaken due to necessity and is practical in orientation (though often quite imaginative in execution), while innovation is pursued for its own sake, to play creatively with the untapped potential of Buddhist material culture.

It takes a certain kind of determination to live in Rochester, New York, where the average temperature is below freezing five months of the year and winter typically dumps more than seven feet of snow over the city. With the same latitude as Sapporo in Hokkaido, Japan, Rochester presents a very different environment from that of Japan, and it might seem like a strange place to find a garden designed along Japanese models. But in fact, for thirty years, the students at Rochester Zen Center have been working on

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<sup>4</sup> While I use these terms to analyze American Buddhist material culture, they may also be employed in other areas, such as analysis of theology or ritual. For example, *zazen*, the basic form of seated Zen meditation, is a traditional practice in Japan, usually performed by priests and monastics. The way in which it is widely performed by the laity at Rochester Zen Center is an adaptation to a new situation, where middle-class Western laypeople are the primary group interested in pursuing meditation practice. Americans have started to alter the practice in significantly innovative ways, such as the creation of “Zen driving”; see K.T. Berger, *Zen Driving* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988). Despite the presentation of three separate terms, it should be acknowledged that these are not static categories. Traditions are always in flux, adaptation can be quite innovative, and innovations may be pursued with the goal of reaching some state imagined to be more traditional or authentic. This typology is meant to suggest lines of investigation, not pronounce the final word on any phenomenon.

their large and distinctive garden, finding a middle path between the demands of Japanese tradition and the need to adapt to the realities of bleak Northeastern winters.

The center was founded in 1966 by Philip Kapleau, who studied Buddhism in Japan for thirteen years.<sup>5</sup> Kapleau actually viewed the unforgiving climate as a plus, believing it would help his disciples more readily direct their attention inward.<sup>6</sup> By 1968, the group had purchased a house at 7 Arnold Park, but a disastrous fire soon after they moved in kept them busy with renovations for several years.<sup>7</sup> The back garden benefited from some landscaping and a small pool with a fountain in 1972, but this was only the prelude to what was shortly to follow.<sup>8</sup>

In 1974, the Center purchased 5 Arnold Park, and students began transforming the yard behind the Zen Center's two buildings into a garden based on Japanese aesthetics. At that time, the center's community included James Rose, a famous landscape architect who studied design and architecture in Japan. The suggestion for a garden designed with Japanese Zen aesthetics came from Rose and was quickly picked up by the other American students.<sup>9</sup> Casey Frank, a senior member of the community who was on the building committee at the time, explained:

In the beginning, us young people were enamored with the Japanese aesthetic, more so than Roshi. He never, ever wanted the place to look Japanese. At the same time, he appreciated the beauty and practicality of the Japanese forms. That theme was in all our minds.<sup>10</sup>

Original center member and master gardener Audrey Fernandez echoed Frank's sentiment:

I've been very interested in Japanese gardens right from the beginning. I read the original article in *House Beautiful* on shibui

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<sup>5</sup>Audrey Fernandez, *American Zen Twenty Years* (Rochester, NY: Rochester Zen Center, 1986).

<sup>6</sup>Bob Schrei, "Roshi Takes a Bow," *Zen Bow* 9/3-4 (1976): 53-57.

<sup>7</sup>Casey Frank, "Arnold Park-ji," *Zen Bow* 18/2 (1996): 18-22.

<sup>8</sup>Philip Kapleau, "Editorial," *Zen Bow* 5/3 (1972): 3-5.

<sup>9</sup>Casey Frank, Phone interview (10/29/2003).

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. Roshi is a term for a Zen master, applied here to Philip Kapleau.

and wabi and sabi, and oh! I was just thrilled, I just couldn't imagine anything more beautiful. And I actually contributed a book on Japanese gardens to the library, it's up there now. So I was very aware of this...it just seems natural to get some things that people also use in Japanese gardens.<sup>11</sup>

Despite Kapleau's apparent reluctance regarding the creation of the garden, other members of the center forged ahead.

The garden debuted on October 26, 1974. Drawing heavily on the dry Zen garden tradition of *karesansui*, it featured long, curving swaths of white pebbles that swirled around islands of grass or leafy ground cover.<sup>12</sup>



Interesting rocks and trees rose here and there from amongst the greenery, aligned in ways that suggested balance and asymmetrical relationship. In his design, Rose relied on the traditional Japanese aesthetic notion of *wabi*, which conveys a sense of distance, age, quiet, and loneliness, like an abandoned fisherman's hut on a gray, windy day.<sup>13</sup> Rose and his assistants drew upon the *wabi* aesthetic in choosing weathered rocks, and in designing

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<sup>11</sup> Interview (5/14/2004). *Shibui*, *wabi*, and *sabi* are terms used in Japanese aesthetics. They will be defined in the course of the article.

<sup>12</sup> Frank, "Arnold Park-ji." *Karesansui* is a Japanese gardening style that uses dry elements such as rocks and sand to suggest water. All photographs included in this article were taken by the author.

<sup>13</sup> Vincent T. Covello and Yuji Yoshimura, *The Japanese Art of Stone Appreciation: Suiseki and Its Use with Bonsai* (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1984), p. 30.

the garden as an interplay between gravel streams and grassy islands.<sup>14</sup> Several small bridges, especially a miniature curved bridge, added to the sense of scale by making the scene appear distant and unattainable. Irregularly-placed stones allowed people to move carefully along a few prescribed paths, but as with many of the traditional Zen gardens of Japan, the garden was primarily for contemplating, not exploring.<sup>15</sup>



However, the beautiful and traditional Japanese design soon presented problems. The bridges froze and became precarious.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, space was at a premium, and the popular Zen center was already bursting at the seams, creating a dilemma. The gravel river was not meant for walking on, and the intrusion of human beings inevitably destroyed the sense of scale, turning strolling Zen students into giant monsters marching across the landscape.<sup>17</sup> Tradition was all fine and good, but necessity demanded adaptation.

To remedy the “Godzilla effect,” in 1975 the Zen center hired David Engel, another important architect. Like Rose, Engel was an American strongly influenced by Japanese design aesthetics, and he quickly hit upon an elegant solution. Directing teams of Zen center volunteers, Engel removed the immaculate gravel flows and laid down 28,000 red bricks in their place.<sup>18</sup> The bricks were laid down lengthwise, providing a flowing sense to the paths, thus preserving the *karesansui* tradition of utilizing solid materials to evoke the fluidity of water.

<sup>14</sup> Anonymous, “At the Center...,” *Zen Bow* 7/4 (1974): 22-23.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Tadgell, *Japan: The Informal Contained* (London: Ellipsis, 2000), pp. 156-157.

<sup>16</sup> Audrey Fernandez, Interview (5/14/2004).

<sup>17</sup> Casey Frank, Phone interview (9/29/2003).

<sup>18</sup> Frank, “Arnold Park-ji.”



In some places they actually swirl into a circular pattern, creating an eddy or pool effect. Some trees and rocks were shuffled around and the miniature bridges were removed, eliminating the distant look of the garden and returning to it a normal sense of scale.

The introduction of red brick into the garden, a building material absent from Zen gardens in Japan, was not such a departure for Rochester itself. Brick of this type is a staple construction material of the city – several of the Zen center’s own buildings are made out of it. Here we see the use of adaptation in the transformation of Zen in the West. Adding in brick, Engel and his helpers created a new look unfamiliar to Japan, yet tied to the aesthetic familiarity of the Rochester environment. Brick provided needed practicality. With the paths now fit for walking and with benches to sit on, the garden became a fully interactive space to be viewed from within, not without.

Engel further modified the garden by designing a new area, characterized by staggered box shapes and right angles, departing from the curving elements that Rose relied upon. Benches placed in this open yet



ordered space invited people into the garden for exploration and rest. While the garden continued to be used as a place for meditation, it lost its role as a tool for abstract contemplation.

People could now poke around in the garden, but Engel deliberately arranged trees and other elements so that visitors could still only see a portion at a time:

One shouldn't be able to see the whole garden from one view. There should be some taller things in the foreground. Occasionally the view should be interrupted to increase the perspective. There shouldn't be all just one space – there should be some compartmentalization, a progression from narrowing down to opening up. It should have some strength and structure.<sup>19</sup>

The only way to discover the shape and character of the garden is to experience it directly, walking from area to area and focusing on the changing surroundings. This simultaneous revealing and masking of the garden plays on the Japanese notion of *yugen*, which is characterized as dark, mysterious, subtle, and unknown, like the moon behind a veil of clouds.<sup>20</sup> In Japanese Zen gardens, *yugen* is achieved by arranging elements in such a way that they partially obscure each other, so that one cannot take in the entirety of the garden from any single viewing point. The *karesansui* at Ryōanji in Kyoto is a classic example – from no vantage point can all fifteen stones be seen.<sup>21</sup> Engel also added an important new element which drew on another feature of Japanese aesthetics, known as *shibui*. The notion of *shibui* is one of order, propriety, elegance, and refinement, like a formal tea ceremony.<sup>22</sup> The solid brick and right angles of the new resting area provoke a definite sense of *shibui* in the viewer. Compared with the rest of the garden, this section feels most civilized and ordered.

In 1976, a third architect further modified the Zen garden. Once again, the center was privileged to call upon the talents of a major artist, in

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<sup>19</sup> David Engel, Casey Frank, Tony Caprino, and John Botsford, “Meeting: afternoon, trip to stone quarry” [minutes] 5/6/1976.

<sup>20</sup> Covello and Yoshimura, *The Japanese Art of Stone Appreciation*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>21</sup> Loraine E. Kuck, *The World of Japanese Gardens: From Chinese Origins to Modern Landscape Art* (New York: Weatherhill, 1984), p. 258.

<sup>22</sup> Covello and Yoshimura, *The Japanese Art of Stone Appreciation*, p. 83.

this case George Nakashima, an architect and furniture maker whose woodwork is preserved in the Museum of Modern Art. The Zen center had decided to convert the 1896 carriage house in the back of the garden into a formal Buddha Hall.<sup>23</sup> Nakashima supervised the renovation, adapting the old structure for its new use.<sup>24</sup> His most important contribution was the addition of a covered wooden walkway that runs along the outside of the Buddha Hall and the main building, connecting them in a seamless flow that crosses through the garden itself. At the same point where this walkway crosses the garden, it is also penetrated by it, as this is conspicuously the only section that lacks a waist-high wall of wooden planks, allowing movement into the garden and creating a sense of spaciousness.



Furthermore, the brick pathway that navigates the garden leads to and under this nexus point, evoking the old *shinden* style of Japanese architecture, which included streams known as *yarimizu* that run under and through the buildings of the estate.<sup>25</sup> Ever so subtly, the walkway actually rises at this point, as if it were a bridge spanning a flowing brook.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Anonymous, "Work," *Zen Bow* 8/4 (1975): 22.

<sup>24</sup> There is only space in this paper to mention the most prominent designers who directly made their mark on the Zen Center's grounds. However, this is not intended to slight the work of the many other architects, carpenters, gardeners, and volunteers who worked alongside Rose, Engel, and Nakashima. There is no room to go into detail about the contributions of such workers as Barry Keeson, Pat Simons, and John Botsford, but this should not diminish the fact that the garden arises from the visions and labor of many people.

<sup>25</sup> Gunter Nitschke, *Japanese Gardens: Right Angle and Natural Form* (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> Casey Frank, Phone interview (9/29/2003).

The circumambulating manner in which the walkway snakes along the outside of the Buddha Hall, rather than simply leading directly from door to door, mirrors the exterior walkways that surround Shinto shrines. The walkway is an intentionally interstitial space that belongs neither wholly to the inside nor completely to the outside. Beneath its overhanging roof, one is sheltered from precipitation yet exposed to the temperature. The circuitous route invites walkers to pay attention to their journey, rather than simply hurry along the straightest line between two points. This emphasis on attention to the present moment, free from wandering thoughts or preoccupations, is emphasized as the path to enlightenment among practitioners of American Zen. Here we see one of the ways in which architecture is marshaled to the cause of producing *satori*.<sup>27</sup>

Particularly interesting, wherever the walkway is fully open to the garden, as in the entrance to the Buddha Hall, a further mediating element is introduced in the form of a strip of gravel bounded by small rocks, with larger flat stones providing diversion and places for stepping into or out of the garden.



The outer edge of the border is exactly aligned with the edge of the walkway's sloping roof, indicating that it is meant to further blur the distinction between interior and exterior. Such borders can often be found in both Zen gardens and traditional Japanese tea houses.<sup>28</sup> All of these

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<sup>27</sup> *Satori* is the Zen experience of spiritual insight, the goal of practice at Rochester Zen Center. See Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).

<sup>28</sup> Masao Hayakawa and Richard L. Gage trans., *The Garden Art of Japan* (New York: Weatherhill, 1973).

techniques for diminishing the separation between the outer natural spaces and the inner human world point back to a key concept in Japanese aesthetics, the non-differentiation of nature and humanity.

Cleverly, Nakashima managed to suggest an alignment between the straight support poles of the walkway and the straight trunks of the trees in the *shibui* section, increasing the sense of order and relationship between the buildings and garden elements.



The snaking, weather-beaten walkway, which is perpetually gloomy and suggestive, continues the theme of *yugen*, and the *okarikomi*, a type of clipped bush, obscure the path and buildings.<sup>29</sup> Yet, the very mysteriousness of the walkway also serves to highlight the general cleanliness of the garden in the patio section it borders, enhancing that area's feeling of *shibui*.

All of these developments – the gravel paths, the replacement with bricks, the Asian foliage, the winding walkway, the carriage house turned into a Buddha Hall – demonstrate the creative tension between tradition and adaptation seen at numerous Zen centers in America. But there is one more aspect of the contemporary Rochester garden that must be analyzed. While it includes elements of tradition and adaptation, another concept, that of innovation, best describes this next feature.

The heart of the garden is found toward the back, a little beyond the entrance to the Buddha Hall. From a distance, it appears to be a tall mountain, rearing up from the sea of green foliage like a classical *Horai* stone, a type of vertical rock that suggests the land of the immortals. Up close, it resolves into a clear though abstract seated figure. This six-foot high sculpture is known as the Universal Buddha, and it directly evokes the

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<sup>29</sup> William Morrow, *Japanese Gardens* (New York: Harper Collins, 1979).

traditional images of Buddha seated in the full-lotus posture of *zazen* prized by Zen Buddhists. The full-lotus is the most stable seated configuration,



good for long periods of intense meditation, and its triangular peaked shape replicates the feel of a mountain, a recollection that Zen teachers frequently explained. Philip Kapleau makes use of this metaphor in *The Three Pillars of Zen*:

According to Dogen, one must sit with a sense of dignity or grandeur, like a mountain or a giant pine. Moreover, since body is the material aspect of mind, and mind the immaterial aspect of body, to assemble the hands and arms, and the feet and legs, into a unity at one central point, where the joined hands rest on the heels of the locked legs, as in the full-lotus posture, facilitates the unification of mind. Finally, however intangibly, the lotus posture creates a sense of rootedness in the earth, together with a feeling of an all-encompassing oneness, void of the sensation of inner or outer.<sup>30</sup>

For Zen Buddhists, sitting in *zazen* like a mountain is ideal. As students approach the Buddha Hall, the Universal Buddha silently manifests to them the proper form for *zazen*, acting as a mirror and model for which to aspire.

However, while the sculpture alludes to elements of Zen tradition, it is in fact highly innovative in design. This sculpture draws more heavily on North American principles of abstract art than any Japanese precedents – it is neither purely symbolic like the *Horai* stones, nor plainly representative

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<sup>30</sup> Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, p. 10.

like the fully articulated Buddha statues of Japan. Its prominent placement and size is also innovative, driven not by the practical need to adapt to different circumstances, but by a new imaginative conception and use of space and balance absent from Japanese Zen gardens. Also innovative is a secret that this deceptive abstract Buddha holds. To all appearances, it is a rough jumble of individual stones, artfully arranged to evoke the idea of a Buddha seated in meditation. But in fact, this Universal Buddha is a single piece, molded by the sculptor to look like discrete stones.

In the mid-1980s, Kapleau decided that there was an element that he would like added to the garden. He enlisted John Filion, a Toronto-area sculptor, to create a Buddha without a face based on designs Kapleau had sketched out. Filion decided to mold the Buddha out of a curiously-named industrial construction material: cement fondue.<sup>31</sup> Cement fondue is actually a powder, which is mixed with water and massaged into whatever shape is necessary. The material is so pliable, in fact, that it can be used to take casts of individual fingerprints. Therefore, the rough-hewn look of the Universal Buddha is a deception – rather than a gathering of venerable, weathered stones, it is actually a block of construction-grade cement fondue, deliberately crafted to disguise its true nature. The sculpture does succeed, as visitors are unaware that the piece is not in fact a rock statue.<sup>32</sup>

At first, the Zen center's more Japanophilic students were not quite sure how to take the introduction of this unusual figure into the garden. "I could never make up my mind whether it was a stroke of genius, or he was completely *meshuggeneh*," said Casey Frank.<sup>33</sup> Yet the Buddha did eventually win the community over. One reason was that the Universal Buddha manages to convey a range of interpretations. As Frank explains, "The Buddha has no ethnicity; it is all humans, transhuman."<sup>34</sup> The name and shape point to the universal Buddha-nature of all beings, to which the practice of Zen is designed to awaken the practitioner.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the Universal Buddha lays out both the path and the goal to the Zen student who stops to

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<sup>31</sup> Casey Frank, Phone interview (9/29/2003).

<sup>32</sup> Jason Martin, "Triple Specials: A visit celebrating Roshi's birthday at the RZC," *Toronto Zen Centre* (9/30/2003): [www.torontozen.org/tzc\\_article\\_triple.htm](http://www.torontozen.org/tzc_article_triple.htm)

<sup>33</sup> Phone interview (9/29/2003). *Meshuggeneh* is Yiddish for "crazy."

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Audrey Fernandez, Interview (5/4/2004).

contemplate its features. This aspect was intended by Kapleau, and points to innovation more than simple adaptation.<sup>36</sup> Kapleau sought to present a new, non-traditional look, not for purposes of adaptation to the environment, but to highlight an aspect of Zen thought. The Universal Buddha is a thesis advanced in cement fondue.

Also notable is an elongated section on the left-hand side (when facing the sculpture) that can appear to stretch to the ground. There seems to be a suggestion here of the *bhumisparsa mudra*, the gesture of touching the Earth with his right hand which the Buddha performed at the moment of his enlightenment. This gesture signifies the Buddha's great awakening and the intimate connection with the Earth which is a natural subject for any garden.

The awakening motif was further suggested by a magnolia tree (since removed due to disease), whose branches stretched out to shelter the Universal Buddha. The Buddha was born beneath a tree in the garden of Lumbini, which suddenly bloomed as he appeared. In springtime, the magnolia burst with color like a nimbus of blossoms, visually recreating this mythic motif. Significantly, this blossoming usually occurred in April, the month associated with the birth of the Buddha in Japan. The Buddha also attained enlightenment under a tree, and he passed away between two trees. On the approach to the Buddha Hall, the Universal Buddha appeared to be situated between two trees, the magnolia on the left and the Japanese maple on the right. Thus, this arrangement simultaneously evoked the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha, as well as demonstrating the proper form of *zazen* and suggesting a mountain with all the attendant associations in Zen.

On a final note, the proper understanding of a Zen temple garden includes not only its aesthetic appeal and evocative suggestions, but also an understanding of its role as a place of Zen practice. While *zazen* is emphasized in Zen, the true goal is to carry the attitude of meditation away from the cushion and out into the world. Thus, Zen practitioners at the center also engage in mindful activities, such as sweeping, raking, shoveling, planting, and pruning.<sup>37</sup> Other activities conducted in the garden

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<sup>36</sup> Scott Jennings, Interview (5/13/2004).

<sup>37</sup> Richard von Sturmer and Joseph Sorrentino, *Images From the Center: Daily Life at an American Zen Center* (Rochester, NY: Rochester Zen Center, 1998), p. 15.

include seated and walking meditation, ceremonies, picnicking, and relaxation.<sup>38</sup>

The *Sakutei-ki*, a classic manual of garden architecture written in the eleventh century, says, “when copying the gardens of famous masters of old, bear in mind the intention of your patron and design your version according to your own taste.”<sup>39</sup> This illustrates that for more than one thousand years, a certain level of flexibility, spontaneity, and freedom of expression has been part of the Japanese gardening tradition. Norris Johnson has suggested that careful observers can trace a phylogenetic lineage of Buddhist architecture from India to China and Korea, and then to Japan.<sup>40</sup> Now it appears that the lineage has successfully made the transition to a new land, mixing with the native aesthetics and construction materials to produce unique offspring that nevertheless bear the stamp of the old forms. When fire is passed to a new torch, the flame is neither exactly the same fire as the original, nor is it entirely different. Likewise, the transmission of Japanese Buddhist aesthetics to America has resulted in the creation of something that is neither the same nor altogether new. Through combining traditional, adaptive, and innovative elements, this blend of new and old, Asia and North America, defines the emerging American Zen aesthetic.

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<sup>38</sup> Christopher Taylor,).

<sup>39</sup> Gunter Nitschke, *Japanese Gardens*, p. 57. Though not specifically Buddhist in origin, the *Sakutei-ki* was often consulted by designers working on temple gardens.

<sup>40</sup> Norris Brock Johnson, “The Garden in Zuisen Temple, Kamakura, Japan: Design Form and Phylogenetic Meaning,” *Journal of Garden History* 10/4 (1990): 214-236.