THE CARLETON GARDEN

Bardwell Smith

In the November/December 1998 issue of JOJG Doug Roth underscored the necessity of sufficient endowment funds if a carefully designed and constructed garden is to flourish over time. This article echoes that advice but also stresses the need for an ongoing relationship between the designer/builder and the person (or committee) serving as the client, steward, or advocate for the garden's well-being to the sponsoring institution. Having acted as client for Carleton College's "Garden of Quiet Listening" (Jöryõ-en) since 1974 when David Slawson was contracted to create our garden, I draw from my experience of consulting with him at every stage along the way over a twenty-six year period of time. The article's main point is that without a continuing collaboration regarding the innumerable decisions about how the garden is to be maintained and what changes are to be made no garden, however fine its design and construction, can remain a living work of art.

THE CARLETON STORY

Having first "visited" Japan as a Marine on Okinawa in April 1945 it was not until my second visit in the summer of 1965 that I discovered Kyoto and its wealth of gardens. Following that trip, I vowed to myself that Carleton College, where I had begun to teach in 1960, would someday have a garden of its own. More important than my own hopes was the fact that Carleton had had a long connection with Japan since the late 19th century and by the 1960s began to offer four years of Japanese language, had established a strong program in Asian studies, and created in 1970 with Amherst College a junior year program in Kyoto (known as the Associated Kyoto Program). Without that base of educational, cultural and historical interest I would not have thought it appropriate for Carleton to have a Japanese garden on campus.

By the early 1970s the decision was made to raise the money for this project and to secure the best possible designer and constructor. Both of these tasks fell into my lap. When Abe Masao, the well-known Kyoto School philosopher, was a visiting professor in 1974-75, I asked him for assistance. That was when I first heard the name of David Slawson, who had recently been an apprentice under Nakane Kinsaku in Kyoto and for whom Nakane had a high regard.

One thing led to another and I arranged for David to visit the college, select with us the site, create the design, locate the rocks, and finally construct the garden over a two-year period (1974-76). In other words, we did not rush into this process, as we wanted to make sure that the administrative and financial ground for this project was solid before we turned a spade at the site itself. The funds for its construction were essentially raised by me, but, just as important, endowed funds for its maintenance were the the beginning set aside in a special budget. The construction was begun and completed over a ten-week period in the summer of 1976.

OUR GARDEN
Because Carleton owned over 900 acres there were many possible places for such a
garden, but we decided on an empty site surrounded on three sides by college buildings. This
includes a seven-story high-rise dormitory (Watson Hall) located nearby to the west, with curved
walkways from this building to a small gymnasium more remote from the garden on the north
and to a small dormitory through a cluster of tall arborvitae to the south. On the east, beyond a
thick border of medium-size arborvitae is a wooded hillside that descends steeply to an attractive
area of playing fields.

In part for practical reasons connected with maintenance we decided on a dry landscape
or karesansui style. The garden's dimensions are approximately 35 meters on each side, fitting
comfortably but not tightly between the buildings which surround it. This juxtaposition of
buildings, garden, open areas, and previously existing evergreens and deciduous trees has proven
to be an excellent blend. Because this is a garden on a college campus we selected a site which
did not have heavy traffic, yet which could be enjoyed by the many students whose rooms face
this view and by those who walk by it on a daily basis.

From a visual point of view, appreciation of a garden's beauty depends not only upon
what lies inside the garden proper but on whatever the eye beholds from within the garden. The
significance of this factor, known as borrowed scenery (shakkei), has long been recognized in
Japanese landscape design. Its counterpart, the virtue of screening certain features of the larger
site is of equal importance. In any case, the nature of the surrounding site constitutes a key
criterion for where the garden is to be located.

GARDEN CARE

While the specific person or committee serving as advocate for a garden's well-being will
change with time and while the original designer will at some point be succeeded by another
competently trained professional, the continuance of such a relationship is crucial to any garden's
proper maintenance. As JOJG discovered in its survey of 300 public Japanese gardens in North
America, over 80% of them are "understaffed and, by Japanese standards, neglected". It has been
our experience at Carleton that key elements in sustaining the garden's quality have included
having David Slawson return for several days annually to observe the garden's condition and
recommend improvements; to train and work with the head gardener in pruning, fence building,
and many other tasks; and to consult with the superintendent of grounds about care of the
transition zones surrounding the garden.

Caring for a garden is like caring for a young child; it is a time-consuming and loving
process. As it is impossible to anticipate everything in caring for a child, so one cannot know in
advance all that will be needed over the years in nurturing a garden's beauty. Any institutional
decision about changes to the surrounding site impinges directly on how the garden itself is
viewed.

INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT

While a strong institutional commitment to having such a garden seems obvious, the
depth of such a bond cannot be taken for granted and can be dissipated if broad consensus is
lacking from the start. This is particularly true when there are plans to locate a new building near the proposed garden site, or the reverse, without either the building's architect or the garden's designer being consulted. Or, when a garden is located "off the beaten track," making it more vulnerable to abuse and less convenient to maintain. Or, when there is emerging consensus that some portion of the original garden has proven to be unsatisfactory but where agreement about what should be done is missing. While these problems were not part of our experience at Carleton, they are sufficiently common to warrant mentioning and they underscore the value of regular consultation.

More typical are concerns about how to care for a garden after it has been built. Primary among these is the importance of having an adequate budget for maintenance, employing trained personnel, providing for the consultant's annual visit, and for launching construction modifications meant to enhance the original design. While a budget for meeting these needs varies with a site's size and complexity, no aspects of a garden's evolving beauty are more essential. The role of the client is therefore central in this regard. Otherwise, those with little grasp of what constitutes skilled Japanese garden care will determine what funds should be allocated and who should be employed. Without continuing consultation the results can be disastrous, and without adequate endowment and a carefully-trained staff it is a garden in name only.

If there is one mistake we made, it was when the budget for the Japanese garden was combined five years ago with the larger Asian studies budget, thus undermining the garden's originally independent budget. This placed the responsibility for maintaining the garden in the hands of someone who did not necessarily have a strong interest in the garden's well-being. We are now seeking to rectify this by raising a separate endowment to ensure proper maintenance in the future.

UNPREDICTABLES

Maintaining a balance of these many elements is a dynamic and creative process. It is one whose changing features one cannot foresee ahead of time. When asked to give a lecture at Amherst College where a new garden is being built, on how one anticipates the construction of a Japanese garden, I mentioned my own experience 25 years ago prior when I had little sense of how our garden was to evolve or how its needs might unfold with time.

In that talk I suggested "the art of imagining ignorance" as a way of encouraging my audience, which included people from the buildings and grounds department, to face the future of their prospective garden with an open mind, recognizing that they too would not be able to confidently predict its future. By realizing this, one becomes more sensitive to changing needs and opportunities than if one views the garden as a finished product from the start.

One example of how institutional decisions can impinge on the garden occurred a few years ago. To make walking easier, especially in the winter months, it became necessary to construct a more permanent walkway from Watson Hall through the arborvitae wooded area to the smaller dormitory beyond. The principal issue was how to incorporate this path with the Japanese garden in an aesthetic manner.
The initial suggestion of an ordinary concrete walk lacked aesthetic appeal and would have detracted from the view of the garden. As a means of beautifying the pathway to the wooded area and as a visual prelude to the garden proper, we decided upon a serpentine, exposed-aggregate walkway with a landscape berm placed halfway along the walk to both lightly screen and orient passersby to the garden. The end product combined a practical need with a means which actually improved the overall visual relationship between the garden and nearby buildings. An active and ongoing consultation between garden builder, client, and superintendent of grounds made this possible.

Other equally fundamental decisions relate to the removal of dying plant material, especially large trees adjacent to the garden, and replacing them with suitable substitutes. An ongoing relationship between concerned parties has enabled these decisions to be worked out in ways which enhance the total environment. Without this type of regular consultation, important decisions will be made without appropriate consideration of their impact on the garden. The same is true about the importance of weed control in nearby areas, the proper use of fertilizers and chemical sprays, and the long-term care for the wooded hillside area which had been neglected for more than two decades.

Inevitably, some original plant materials will prove unsatisfactory aesthetically or because they fail to survive in the local environment. In this sense, the garden becomes a kind of testing ground for which plant materials thrive in a particular site with its own ecosystem, and its varying forms of microclimate and microsoil. Similarly, from time to time, there is need to repair and replace materials on structures such as viewing pavilions and wooden fencing, and for fresh gravel to replace whatever has become soiled with the years. While decisions of this sort may or may not be predictable, they provide opportunity to make improvements on what had existed before.

An example of this was when an elegant 

*A Public Presence*

Among the pleasures of a well-designed and well-maintained garden is its diverse appeal to visitors, both local and from afar. As a way of stimulating interest in the garden we have taken various steps to generate interest and help educate people about what constitutes "authenticity" in a beautiful Japanese garden.

The most ambitious step was to conduct an alumni seminar on gardens in Japan, with two weeks in Kyoto, Kanazawa, and Takamatsu in October 1987, led principally by David Slawson and Nakane Kinsaku (Slawson's mentor). By including Carleton's superintendent of grounds as a participant in this seminar, the trip provided him with a better sense of Japanese garden aesthetics. In 1996 we made it possible for him and for Mary Bigelow, the principal caretaker of the garden, to attend the first International Conference on Japanese Gardens when it convened in...
Portland, Oregon in 1996. And, we have, of course, subscribed to JOJG since its founding in 1998. These efforts at ongoing education are an important part of our efforts to improve ourselves as well as our garden.

As a way of encouraging a deeper understanding of the garden, brief talks throughout the year are given at the site (Parents Day, Reunion Weekend, etc.). Art students from local elementary schools and from Carleton gather to contemplate and sketch the garden. On several occasions the garden has been used to invite Japanese garden specialists to lecture on this art form, its role in Japanese history and culture, and its adaptation to the culture of a college campus.

GARDEN OF QUIET LISTENING

It has been my perception over a quarter of a century, however, that the single most important contribution of the Japanese garden at Carleton has been its existence as a place to which individuals come for moments of quiet reflection. Such a role is, in my estimation, of greater importance than all the talks about the garden, however valuable these may be. In fact, I resisted naming the garden for fifteen years until I was sure what name would be appropriate. I settled on the name Jo-ryo-en, or Garden of Quiet Listening.

I am convinced that this name is entirely fitting. In the busy life of educational institutions like Carleton there is need for places of quietude and relative privacy which are beautiful and well-maintained. This quality of invited contemplation teaches us nothing in particular. The garden seeks not to provide meaning but to animate inner reflection. We are not provided religious, philosophical, or any other interpretation; we are not distracted from the garden by forms of abstract meaning. In this sense, the garden becomes an arena of quiet listening, listening to one's own inner spirit. Through experiencing such a garden's quiet beauty and elegant simplicity one may be called into a more genuine awareness of our connections with the rest of existence.