

# Wybe Kuitert

Two Japanese Gardens  
to contemplate in Paris

SHAKKEI 15/1 2008

## DISCOURSE AND CREATION

### Two Japanese Gardens to contemplate in Paris

#### INTRODUCTION

Japanese gardens in Europe often raise among their visitors the question "is this a real, true Japanese garden or not?" The unusual language of forms, exotic garden details like stone lanterns, or even small Buddha statues arouse curiosity, but also uncertainty. It is a world of forms with which one is usually not familiar; and "can this be done outside Japan?" Soon the expert comes in. He, or she, has read a book about Japanese Gardens and knows what is right and what is wrong about this particular garden. Not so with two Japanese Gardens you may visit when being in Paris: great silence reigns for the Japanese Garden made by Takano at the Museum of Albert Kahn in Boulogne, strictly speaking just outside Paris, and at the UNESCO garden attributed to Isamu Noguchi. Leaving the beaten tracks of Japanese garden book wisdom behind, we enter the world of the modernist and contemporary garden.

#### TAKANO'S JAPANESE GARDEN AT THE MUSEUM ALBERT KAHN

Visitors to *Le Jardin Japonais* at the Albert Kahn Museum usually come to see the one that was built about a century ago, as part of the garden world of banker Louis Kahn. As an idealist of a universal understanding among all mankind, his legacy, shown in the museum, including the gardens, is certainly worth visiting. Indeed, the Japanese Garden he has left us is a beautiful and impressive piece of garden art. But there is more to see. Shaded by some old trees, a peculiar garden is found right behind the halls of the Museum. Little pebbles cemented into geometric shapes line a canal of running

water that ends in a spiral concrete funnel, decorated with small blue, white and red patches of ceramic in the French tricolor. A Japanese Garden!

To understand this creation of landscape designer Takano Fumiaki and his colleagues, we have to stretch our understanding of the art of gardening, in particular post-war landscape architecture in Japan. Takano Fumiaki was always in the midst of the newest developments, and we should first examine his early career.

In 1966 Takano Fumiaki took his diploma from Hokkaido University, the Faculty of Agriculture, and left for America where he graduated from the Graduate School of Environment Design, University of Georgia, in 1971. For a young Japanese of about 27 years old, this was quite an achievement. From 1973 he worked in the office of Simonds and Simonds in Pittsburgh. John Ormsbee Simonds was in the front line of those establishing landscape architecture as an academic field. He was an energetic writer and his book *Landscape Architecture* was, for all its errors, a major inspiration for new generations of teachers from Denmark to Tokyo. A consciousness for "the ethnic" in landscape design is one of the lessons that every young landscape architect can learn from Simonds. He explains a Cameroon Village alongside the New York Rockefeller Center, and Stonehenge next to the Sydney Opera House. Together with Gropius, by whom he was impressed, Simonds studied "Zen" extensively, after having visited Japan before the War. When Takano was in Simonds and Simonds, John Simonds was troubled by the incredible materialism of the quickly industrializing Japan, forgetting about "the subtle flame of Zen" in Simonds's own words.

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Takano returned to Japan in 1975 and set up his office, Takano Landscape Inc, in a former primary school in a Hokkaido countryside village. Three years later he got his first big commission from Japan's National Government: the Okinawa Children's Play Castle. Helped by another designer, Takano experimented with a vaguely ethnic approach, reminding of the winding outworks of the old castle of the Okinawa Kings. Having successfully completed this commission, which also gained him the JILA Design Prize, Takano followed in the years 1979-1987 with another government job: the *Michi-no-ku Mori* Lakeside National Government Park.

Takano managed to define a typical style and design approach for his office in this period, and Michi-no-ku Mori is a key work. The spiral forms in the design of this huge park are fully exploited and enjoyed as an expression of authentic, indigenous energy. Meanwhile, most of the execution and construction was done by the members of Takano Landscape themselves. These two points are clarified below.

The spiral forms at Michi-no-ku Mori were inspired by *karakusa*-motifs found in decorative arts from Japan's ancient times. Later in the design process it became better defined, more precise and more powerful as an inspiration by motifs found in Japan's prehistoric Jomon-pottery. It should be valued as a search for another identity of Japan, reacting against the Kyoto-dominated modernist view of Japan's arts, grasped in concepts expressing minimalism, such as "Zen art", *wabi*, and *sabi*. These ideas of the Japanese garden appealed so much to the modernists of the West, who never understood that there is much more to Japanese gardens besides and beyond this. For Takano the real thing is in



Right: Michi-no-ku Park at present (from the web)

Below: Michi-no-ku Mori Lakeside Park, first design by Takano Landscape, ca. 1979

Bottom right: The Jomon prehistoric period in Japan is known through excavations that reveal an impressive decorative sense in the spirals, rings and curves on pottery

Far right: *Karakusa* patterns found in textile design of the Edo period



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the authenticity of the northern Japanese landscape in which one finds many, be it rudimentary, remnants from an even more authentic culture of the original inhabitants of Northern Japan, the bear-hunting Ainu people, or even older Jomon people. That is long before the sophistication of *sabi* developed. In the 1990s a more narrowly defined "Jomon-boom" was seen in Japan as expressing the self-confident identity of Northern Japan, where Michi-no-ku and its Lakeside Park is found. Takano was, from an early period, certainly well aware of the potentials of Jomon as a cultural inspiration.

The workshop approach in the self-construction of landscape works as done at Michi-no-ku was inspired by Takano's experiences in America, that is to say the workshops of Lawrence Halprin. From 1968 on, when Halprin started his Driftwood Village projects, he developed the workshops as a means of generating expressions of collective creativity, making direct use of materials and resources found in the environment. Young Takano was impressed. The design for Michi-no-ku was first trialed on a scale 1:10, which is huge for a model. The hands-on emotion and energy generated from this experience, can also be read from the realized park, that was build in a series of workshops, scale 1:1, over many, many years. Presently Takano Landscape regularly holds such workshops with graduates from landscape courses joining as apprentices, and villagers and locals being invited.

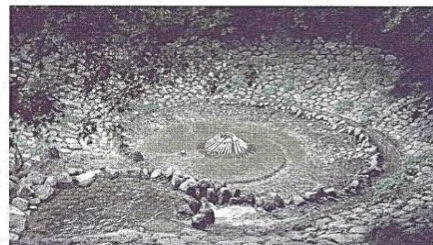
*Team Zoo (Zo Sekkeishudan)*, a group of architects and designers around the architect Mrs. Reiko Tomita, often closely cooperates with Takano Landscape, also as in the museum Albert Kahn project. In fact Team Zoo has a Hokkaido workshop in the neighboring village. Works of Team Zoo show usually an ethnic vocabulary.

#### A FRENCH COMMISSION

In 1985 a great chance opened up for Takano Fumiaki when he was asked to join a project at the Europe-Asia Centre INSEAD in Fontainebleau, France. He designed the *Jardin Francais*, that in spite of its name, was actually one of the four Japanese style gardens around the building. His garden shows a miniature Mont Saint Michel along a coastal shoreline, just like the real one that attracts crowds of tourists that come to see the famous church and village stuck on a steep rock in the muddy flats of the French coast. Takano's mini Michel sits at the edge of a white-gravel, symbolic ocean with gently sloping turf and many flowering plants that remind one of the glorious countryside of France. It was an utmost designer's effort to an innovative expression within the creative limitations of the standard Japanese gardeners that were called in to construct all four gardens. The three other gardens are in a neat, patternised, traditional, Japanese style. One garden, the Garden of Universe, is even an attempt at a, let's call it, Ryoan-ji-style. The project drew the attention of the Japanese Embassy in Paris, and when the Albert Kahn Museum wanted a true Japanese garden, Takano was proposed as he was the only one who had done government jobs before, and seemed a reliable partner for this overseas experience. The garden was financed by The International Cultural Exchange Association (Mr. Osamu Murata).

#### THE JAPANESE GARDEN AT THE MUSEUM ALBERT KAHN

Design and work on the garden at the museum Albert Kahn took place in 1988-1990. At first, the plans that



Above: The death of Albert Kahn is symbolized with water spiraling down, disappearing in a well covered with a bamboo hood in this picture. Photo by author.

Takano Landscape designed were rather traditionalistic, being requested to design a Japanese Garden. It was a normal reaction in face of the responsibility of a commission to represent Japan in Europe. But soon they realized that they were not experts in traditional Japanese design and that making a typical Japanese garden was no challenge to their creativity. Also, according to Mr. Kanekiyo, who was most responsible as a representative for Takano in this project, they thought it not a good idea to explain Eastern Philosophy in the form of a garden. It was decided to leave out any traditionalism and only express the life of Mr. Albert Kahn, from birth to death. Expressing life from birth to death was indeed a popular idea in previous European Japanese Gardens.

Later, Takano Landscape developed an increasingly complicated design strategy for the garden, partly fuelled by the collaboration with Team Zoo who,



being a more architecture-oriented design group were probably more used to rationalize design with theory. Zoo stressed *dualism*, something they thought was the typical way in which Europeans view the world. The idea was to make the garden easier to understand for Europeans: thus dualist polarities of male versus female and of birth versus death entered. Actually quite a number of polar axes were included as backbones to strengthen up the dualistic design.

The experiences at Michi-no-ku were added to the design in the course of working, with spirals playing an important role. But workshops with volunteer workers of twelve nationalities in Paris could not always be controlled to the last detail by the artistic intentions of Takano and Kanekiyo.

#### INTERVIEW AND EVALUATION - JARDIN JAPONAIS

At the interviews I had with some people of Takano Landscape in August 1997, I asked for an evaluation of the Jardin Japonais at the museum Albert Kahn now, that is seven years after the opening. Mr. Takano told me then: "It is too dense (*mitsudo ga koi*); there is no rest (*kuhaku ga nai*); there is no blank." Also, he added: "This is the first time that we can talk about this garden at ease" and: "Journalists always search for symbolism in half an hour."

Mr. Kanekiyo said: "We made it in a hurry, losing control, and had to open it the very day after it was finished. It looked so sad, so we added many trees, too many. Because we hurried, we did not succeed in letting time flow slowly through the garden, I wanted to let it flow



more slowly (*jikan wo motto yukkuri nagashitakata*). Now too many people are squeezed through the narrow paths of the garden in too short a time."

The garden design shows two main axes. One is the axis of life and death, i.e. the life of Albert Kahn, another axis crosses this one and is a line of male and female. Both may be seen as Yin and Yang - if you like. When we were discussing these polar axes in the office of Takano Landscape, Kanekiyo added: "I did not necessarily want to make this so (*Doshite mo kore wo tsukuritakata demo nai*)."

Takano was asked by the museum Albert Kahn to incorporate a not too overt, French interpretation of the neat-traditional, Japanese, Kyoto-style as he had done in Fontainebleau. In fact Takano was not working alone,

Right: Plan of the garden at Albert Kahn, showing axes of birth-death, male-female, and others as pencil lines that cross the garden. Plan by Takano Landscape.

and the artistic world of his group Takano Landscape was already developing in quite a different direction, that is towards a Jomon-inspired language of forms. Moreover, Takano Landscape is better qualified as a group of land-artists than garden designers, or gardeners. As artists they are reliable and authentic in their will to create. For instance, they do not rely on the mass media for their commissions, and they consider their work free in its expression and not an applied art in the conventional sense of garden design.

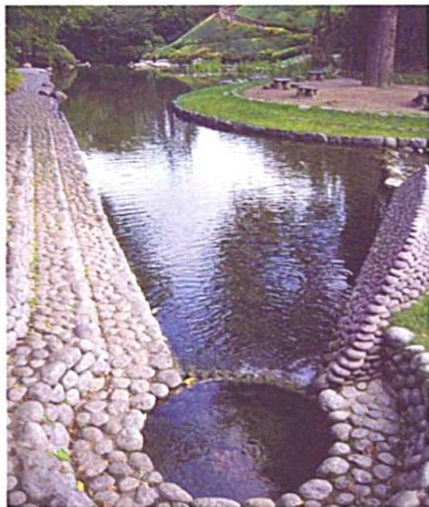
The honour of working in Boulogne made Takano Landscape zealous but perhaps they also lost a little self-confidence because of too much pressure. Working together with Team Zoo made for introducing a stereotyped element of art theory: the supposed dualism in Western thinking that was quickly recognized by the

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average French journalist as authentically oriental. A veritable European discourse was added to the creation process of the garden. It should be noted that most of our post-war understanding of the deeper spiritual meaning of Japan came via the Kyoto school of Zen-philosophy, through the works of such influential writers as Carl Jung and Erich Fromm, where such a dualism is indeed the greatest sin of us Westerners.

During the production process of the garden the discourse came to influence the work strongly, and it became pregnant with all kinds of explanations, and interpretations that should not necessarily have played a role. Finally, the garden was completed rather motivated by theory, unconsciously co-produced by the French side - the journalists, than by a one-sided artistic *Kunstwollen* of an independent artist or garden-designer. This left some feeling of non-satisfaction among the group of artists. But looking at it from some distance, one may value that it unexpectedly resulted - in a very true sense - in a cooperative mental exercise that expresses the universalism of Mr. Albert Kahn much better, that is to say not only in the garden created, but also in its discourse. The spiritual content of the creation is in this sense far more profoundly international than the international aspect of the twelve nationalities of all workers involved - proudly but mistakenly, advertised in some brochures as thirty nationalities. It is hoped that the management of the garden will continue to be done in the same spirit of mutual influencing of Takano Landscape and the gardeners of the museum.

So far, the work that Takano Landscape has made at the museum Albert Kahn is rather a work of art than



Above: The Japanese Garden of Takano seen with the place of Birth, far in the background, shaded by big trees that form the axis of male - female. Photo by author.

a garden. A garden is a sensuous way of naturalizing nature, as the French say. The understanding of nature has not played a role of major importance, so far. For example, the enormous amount of concrete that was used in the construction clearly expresses the idea that nature is not important. However, nature itself is now making an effort to encroach on the cemented pebbles.

The work is certainly valued as Japanese, a rare-in-Europe and therefore precious expression of Japan's contemporary movements in artistic landscape design, *randosuke-pu dezain*, in Japanese. It covers quotations from prehistoric Japan, and an authentic sense for designing with these quotations. The workshop approach, learned from America, is indeed Japanese in its contemporary sense, just as the Walkman and the Game-boy are Japanese. I think that with time and loving care, the future management should be in a direction of bringing it to life as a garden in compliance with Naturalizing nature. Some thinning of trees, and the taking out of some less successful details will help. Pebbles will loosen from the cement, moss and weeds will enter the cracks, thus, with time, the concrete will Naturalize. Time must also be able to flow more slowly. Then it will start to work as a garden, as an artistic expression that is Japanese. I do not think it is worth worrying about the Japaneseness of any Japanese garden, but if you want to, I would not object to call Takano's garden a true Japanese Garden.

### NOGUCHI'S GARDEN AT UNESCO

Quite different from Takano, Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988) has been characterized as a "strong, self-centered, personality". Noguchi, as an American by birth, was strongly influenced by America, the America of the Modernist movement. Historically speaking, the modernists' interest in Japan's art and architecture falls exactly into Noguchi's most active period.

His brother-in-spirit, the Bauhaus architect Marcel Breuer, approached him for the garden at his UNESCO building. Noguchi was only given the triangular space

at the side of the building, nevertheless he managed, by suggesting a Japanese garden, to get a commission for the sunken area around the corner as well. In Japan Noguchi was well received with open arms and could get support for his project that is not to be imagined now. In fact most of the materials were gathered and the work for the sculpting was done, before even appointments were made about the budget, payments, contracts, *et cetera*. At this time, 1956-1958, Japan was trying to recover, not only materially from the War, but also spiritually from the profound collective trauma over the defeat. And then there suddenly opened a perspective to UNESCO in Paris! Any Japanese involved in the project would have volunteered and been sponsored without the slightest problem. It was basically up to Noguchi to do the producer's job and it was difficult for him to choose his helpers as so many possibilities were opened and offers were made. It is interesting that the immensely creative modernist Mirei Shigemori (1898-1978) helped him choosing stones in Shikoku, the blue lo stone that Shigemori liked so much. Perhaps it is this Shikoku-experience that made Noguchi like the place, where he later set up an atelier, now the Noguchi Museum.

Anyhow, Shigemori profoundly understood the Japanese garden tradition and the primordial qualities of stones and rocks. He must have helped Noguchi to liberate himself from the patternized ideas of the Japanese garden that were very strong and dogmatically understood at that time. Shigemori, a strong personality with a strong will to create himself, no doubt also understood the strength of Noguchi and therefore did not volunteer to help with work on the site in Paris.

Mentally supported by the experience of meeting Shigemori, Noguchi could freely speak of "the awareness of the inner purpose" of the Japanese garden, and play with all kinds of quotations of the Japanese garden and art tradition, like the *hanamichi*, the "Happy Land" (= *jodo*), *horai*, *et cetera*. Such design motifs were generously included in the production of the UNESCO garden. In this we clearly recognize the design attitude of Shigemori. Later Isamu Noguchi managed to get Japanese gardeners who did the work: at first Noguchi (not related) and Shizue, and finally the young Toemon Sano V from Kyoto to come over and help. Sano is one of the gardeners that stayed in touch with the management of the UNESCO-garden and helped in making it into a true garden, giving more and more room to nature. Interestingly, Isamu Noguchi did not know this, until it was told to him, some years before his death. Mr. Van der Staay, working for UNESCO and in touch with Noguchi, told me this in a letter. It shows that Noguchi remained a sculptor, ignorant of the inner meaning of the art of gardening.

## CONCLUSION

A good garden is a work of art with a strong impact on its visitors. It must be entered rather than seen from a distance as with a painting or a piece of sculpture. Then it must be seen, heard, smelt, felt, and tasted. The best way to appreciate a garden is therefore to enter it, and not to talk about it. The appreciation is done with our five senses and is primarily emotional, and not intellectual.

Japanese gardens in Europe are a good example to understand this kind of working, as the discourse is basically a European discourse. A discourse on gardens

serves an intellectual purpose that is only part of a total appreciation, and in Japan in general, the discourse on gardens is badly developed anyway. This makes for easy interpretation by anyone for any purpose. William Chambers chose the Oriental garden to make a critical statement on the garden art of his time in England. Later in history, flowers, colours, ornament and decoration were the European discoveries in the Japanese garden around the Victorian *fin-de-siècle*. For modernists like Simonds, the Japanese garden was almost synonymous with "Zen", not a religious thing, but rather a quality that backed up the functionality and absence of decoration in Western modernist design. Dualism was the key word in the discourse on Takano's work at the museum Albert Kahn. Discourse on gardens is free and open-ended. On the other hand it will always and ever be nature that naturalizes and makes a Japanese garden in Europe into a real garden.

Perhaps the best conclusion is rather simple: We can learn a lot about gardens by studying Japanese gardens in Europe.

Wybe Kuitert

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Interviews and research were made possible by the Kyoto University of Art and Design, Japan. This article is a revision of a paper presented at an international conference on Japanese Gardens in the Albert Kahn Museum organized by the *Collège International de Philosophie, Paris*, 21<sup>st</sup> of October, 1997



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