

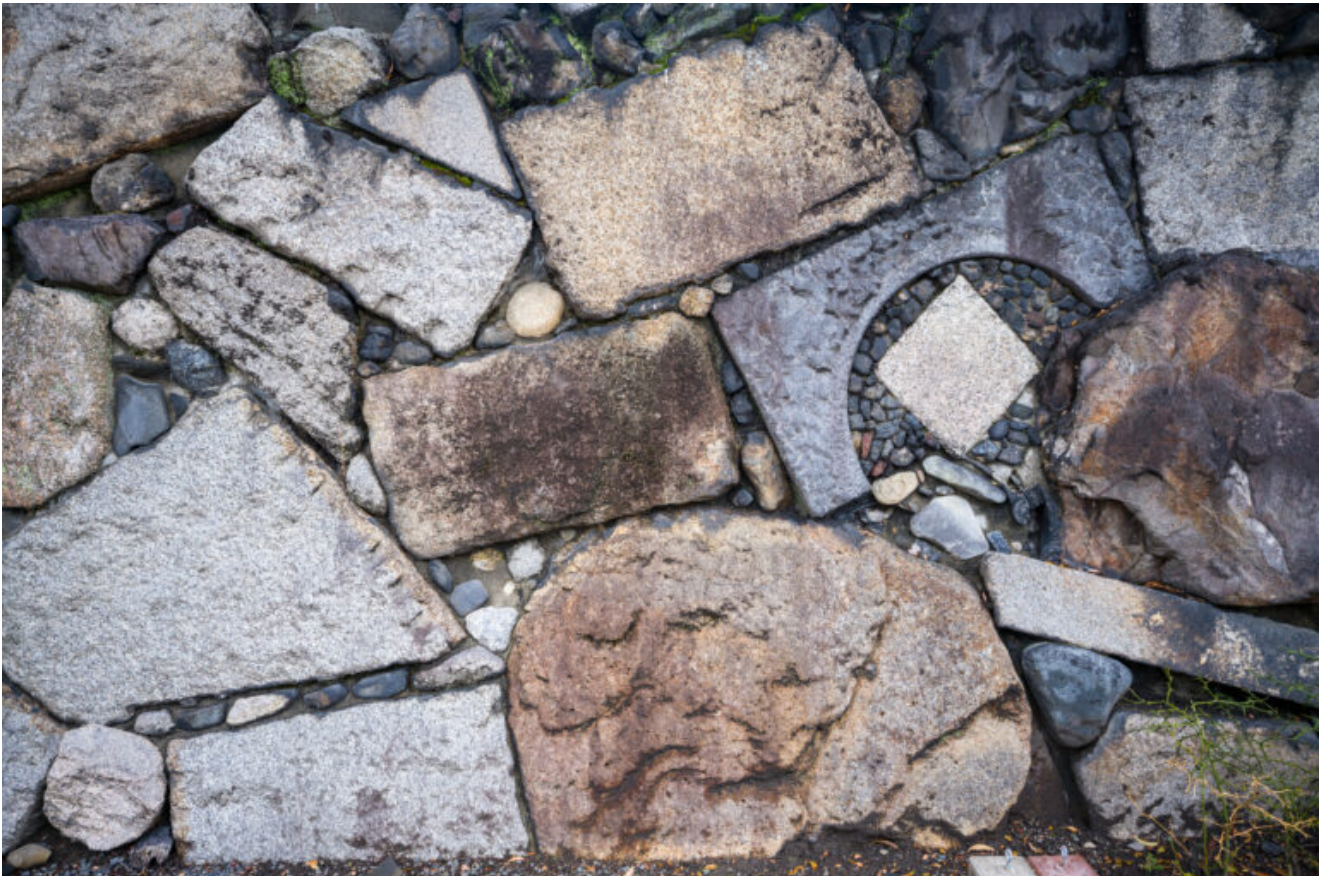
Zen, Time, and Three Gardens in Kyoto

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We were in Japan for two weeks. We spent most of our time in Tokyo—I will write about the Ginza district on the main blog—but this Florilegium post covers Kyoto; Nikko will follow.

Kyoto is a victim of oversaturation, a phenomenon I wrote about last year in [“Oversaturation: On Tourism and the Image.”](#) As visitors arrive to reproduce a photograph they have already seen, contemporary tourism grinds a place into dust. Kyoto confirmed my argument with brutal efficiency. The old Gion

district, where, against my own best instincts, I sought out a specific store was blighted, filled with people with selfie-sticks. The city has already banned tourists from Gion's private streets, fined trespassers, and installed surveillance cameras to stop visitors from chasing geisha and maiko for selfies and pulling at their clothing like spoiled children treat characters at Disney, but it feels hopeless. Arashiyama Bamboo Forest was terrible. Following a friend's recommendation to see it, we took a taxi, got out, saw the flip-flop-wearing hordes choking the approach, and hailed the next taxi back.



Eifuku-ji Temple, Strawberry Queen, and Fxxking Rabbits store, [Shinkyoguku Shopping Street](#), Kyoto

Still, oversaturation is inherently uneven. We managed to find a lovely izakaya at the end of crowded Pontocho Alley ([Otafuku](#)) that did not set out to cater to tourists. My Japanese is virtually nonexistent, and while Otafuku had an English menu, its best offerings were handwritten on chalkboards: the first bonito of the season from Kōchi, charcoal-grilled salt tataki; octopus from Awaji Island; amberjack from Nagasaki; agedashi tofu sourced from [Namikawa Shōten](#), a local maker established in 1925, and the best we'd ever had. Google Translate garbles such text, but Anthropic's Claude can read every word from a snapshot and explain why the first bonito of the year warrants exclamation marks. We went every night we

were in Kyoto. Along the Teramachi arcade—a covered shopping street running through the temple district that the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) created in 1590 by relocating some eighty temples to the city’s eastern edge, now another oversaturated site—I found clothes from avant-garde Japanese designers at two stores in the space of a few blocks: Fascinate and Vektor for menswear as well as outrageously comfortable handmade shoes from Fuchu City at Spingle. A friend recommended Fascinate and Vektor and money spent here goes to independent designers rather than overseas souvenir manufacturers.

The same logic applies to gardens. We again skipped Kyoto’s three most celebrated, Kinkaku-ji, Ryōan-ji, and Ginkaku-ji, all of which are oversaturated today. Of the three, Ryōan-ji is the most recognizable (and Instagrammable)—boulders sitting in raked white gravel, the image around which the entire “Zen garden” myth was constructed. Guidebooks, coffee-table books, and even desktop Zen gardening kits (one of Obama’s favorite gifts under ten dollars) promise enlightenment. Still, the Zen garden is a twentieth-century invention, much like the idea of Zen itself (actual Zen is a highly ritualized monastic practice, hierarchical, rule-bound, centered on chanting and seated meditation under strict discipline, bearing little resemblance to the postwar Western notion of spontaneous enlightenment). Both are joint productions of Japanese cultural diplomacy and Western escapist fantasy. The story of how this happened is worth a detour.



Ryōan-ji, Kyoto
Photo by 663highland, via [Wikimedia Commons](#). Licensed under [CC BY 2.5](#).

The concept of the “Zen garden” was unknown in both Western and Japanese garden literature until 1935, when Loraine Kuck, an American journalist with a background in landscape from the University of California who had lived in Kyoto for three years, published *One Hundred Kyoto Gardens* on the occasion of a visit to Japan by 120 members of the Garden Club of America, a visit that generated such excitement on the Japanese side that an official reception committee of politicians and government officials was formed to receive the delegation of “ladies representing the best of America’s cultured society.” Kuck described Ryōan-ji as “the creation of an artistic and religious soul who was striving with sand and stones as his medium to express the harmony of the universe.”¹

Zen philosophy does not appear in Japanese garden literature before *One Hundred Kyoto Gardens*. The canonical Japanese treatise on gardens, the mid to late 11th century *Sakuteiki*, references not Zen Buddhism but rather the esoteric Shingon and Tendai sects, which it sets within a framework of Chinese geomancy (better known as *Feng Shui*)—Yin/Yang theory, the Five Phases, the Four Guardian Gods—together with Shinto taboos about defilement.² Zen temples did not construct gardens as a spiritual practice. Gardens were funded by warrior-class patrons—*shoguns* and *daimyo* who endowed temples to secure memorial prayers for their lineages—and built by professional craftsmen, not monks. Nor were the builders of Ryōan-ji

Zen monks; they were a class of riverside outcasts (*senzuikawaramono*) who lived on floodplains and were seen as unclean and thus, being impure, could work with soil, a taboo for others. Nor was the original Ryōan-ji the garden that people see today. The first version apparently had only nine stones, not fifteen, with a covered walkway leading through it, and was noted not for its raked gravel and lack of plant life, but rather for a large weeping cherry tree. In 1588, records show that the warlord Hideyoshi visited Ryōan-ji to view its blossoms. A local gardener named Okuda Masatomo, whose family had tended Ryōan-ji for generations, testified that they had dug up stumps of many different kinds of trees from between the rocks.³ In 1797, every building on the site burned, and the rubble was dumped in the garden, thus resulting in the strangely low perimeter wall surrounding the garden. The current fifteen-stone layout dates from the reconstruction, but the reconstructed garden also does not appear to stem from any Zen ideals. Akisato Ritō's *Miyako rinsen meishō zue* (1799), an illustrated guide to Kyoto's famous gardens published two years after the fire, identifies the stone layout as *tora no ko watashi* (an identification first made in 1645), a well-known motif in Japanese garden design depicting a Chinese fable in which a tiger must ferry her cubs across a river one at a time without leaving the leopard cub alone with the others, a logic puzzle that doubles as a Buddhist parable about guarding virtue from temptation. Moreover, the compositional conventions behind such arrangements derived from Song Chinese landscape painting, whose theories of scenic composition Japanese garden-makers absorbed through Zen temple networks, but again, the content was more scenic than spiritual.⁴

If Kuck was the first to (mis-)attribute Ryōan-ji to Zen, she also had two influential local sources, both interested in promoting the idea of the “Zen garden.” The first was her neighbor D. T. Suzuki,⁵ whose *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture* (1938) would systematize the claim that Zen shaped painting, swordsmanship, the tea ceremony, haiku—the whole canon of Japanese high culture. While Suzuki did not mention gardens, his totalizing framework invited others to fill in the gap. Suzuki was married to Beatrice Lane, an American Theosophist who had studied under William James at Radcliffe and ran a Theosophical lodge in Kyoto while his own career had begun in the 1890s under Paul Carus at Open Court Publishing in Illinois, translating Eastern texts for a Western audience hungry for universal mysticism. The Zen he presented to the West was already shaped by Western esoteric traditions, allowing Westerners to connect.⁶ Her other local source was the landscape architect and historian Mirei Shigemori—himself deeply Western in orientation, trained as a painter, a student of art history and philosophy, who had taken his given name from Jean-François Millet and named his firstborn son Kanto, after Immanuel Kant. Shigemori was working on a survey of 242 gardens across Japan, published as the twenty-six-volume *Nihon Teienshi Zukan* (1936–1939). Kuck thanked Shigemori in the foreword to *The Art of Japanese Gardens* (1940) for hours he

spent explaining his research; in turn, Shigemori praised her understanding in an article in *Rinsen* that same year.⁷ In her final work, *The World of the Japanese Garden* (1968), Kuck titled her chapter on Ryōan-ji “Sermon in Stone,” analyzing the composition in the language of Western modernist formalism—balance, movement, rhythm, spatial relationships while dismissing the Tiger Cubs story as “one of those explanations for the simple-minded.”⁸ It’s worth noting that modernist architect Bruno Taut, who visited Ryōan-ji in 1933, called it “an Embodiment of the Zen spirit” in his *Houses and People of Japan* (1937)—another early connection between the garden and Zen, although he does not go into any detail beyond that. Taut was friends with Suzuki, so this comment fits the general atmosphere he would have been immersed in.⁹

After the war, modernists, hungry for abstraction, embraced Ryōan-ji’s austerity as proto-modernist. As Christian Tagsold explains in *Spaces in Translation*, before 1945, the iconic Japanese garden was the Kinkaku-ji—golden, plant-rich, picturesque; Ryōan-ji replaced it.¹⁰ Arthur Drexler, MoMA’s architecture curator, understood the Japanese house as proto-modernist—open plan, modular, with a continuity between interior and exterior—and in 1954 installed one in the museum’s garden with a landscape modeled partly on Ryōan-ji, tended by a member of the family that had maintained Ryōan-ji for centuries. It drew the longest lines of any model house in the museum’s series and is now Shofuso, a Japanese cultural center in Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park. Its designer, Yoshimura Junzo, later admitted: “It is not an original of mine, and, well, it is of course not authentically Japanese. I intended it to be easily grasped by Americans.”¹¹ Isamu Noguchi, who had visited Ryōan-ji in 1931 and returned in 1950 with Hasegawa Saburō lecturing him on Zen, began building gardens that imitated it; his Chase Manhattan Sunken Garden (1964) he called “my Ryōan-ji.”¹²

Adding to the popularity of Japanese aesthetics among modernists, hundreds of thousands of American GIs had returned from the occupation in Japan. The landscape architect Tono Takuma—who would design the Portland Japanese Garden (opened 1967)—argued in a 1962 paper that returning soldiers had been deeply impressed by Japanese flower arrangement, *ukiyoe* prints, bonsai, and Japanese gardens, and that they spread the enthusiasm to their families and communities, sparking a wave of domestic garden-building.¹³ Suzuki moved to the United States where he lectured at Columbia from 1952 to 1957 to audiences that included John Cage, Allen Ginsberg, and Erich Fromm; Kerouac and Snyder read him voraciously, and the Beats carried his Zen into the counterculture. Alan Watts, who had absorbed Suzuki’s prewar writings in London as a teenager, became Zen’s most fluent popularizer through *The Way of Zen* (1957), while Suzuki’s *Zen and Japanese Culture*, reprinted by Bollingen in 1959, cemented the framework.¹⁴ Suzuki did not mention gardens, but in *Zen and the Fine*

Arts (1971), his Kyoto School colleague Shin'ichi Hisamatsu codified seven characteristics of Zen cultural expression and applied them directly to Ryōan-ji, which he preferred to call *kū-tei*, “empty garden,” on the grounds that its emptiness expressed “the Formless Self” of Zen—vegetation would constitute “deception or camouflage.”¹⁵

In 1963, Tono installed a replica of Ryōan-ji at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden; *Newsweek* ran the headline “Zen grows in Brooklyn.” The gravel was sourced from a North Carolina poultry grit supplier, an African American groundskeeper was “jokingly” referred to by the staff as their official “monk,” and young Japanese women hired as interpreters were required to wear kimono. It drew 24,236 visitors before it was torn down in 1987 to make way for a garage. But by then the BBG’s original Japanese garden—built in 1914 by Takeo Shiota, with no connection to Zen—had been rebranded as a Zen garden.¹⁶ By 1992, the idea of the Zen garden had become thoroughly commodified. Running Press published *The Zen Gardening Kit*—the first mass-market desktop sand-and-rake set—created by Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore, a poet who had studied Zen with Shunryu Suzuki in San Francisco in the early 1960s and whose first book had been published by Ferlinghetti’s City Lights. In 2018, the same Running Press published *Zen Garden Litter Box: A Little Piece of Mindfulness*—a miniature litter-box tray with sand, five rocks, a tiny rake, and two cat figurines.

Today Ryōan-ji is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, its garden crowded with heavily-made up, legging-clad, wellness influencers taking selfies for Instagram. The Zen reading stripped away everything that demanded knowledge—the Tiger Cubs fable, the geomancy, the cherry tree, the builders’ caste status. Instead, we visited three gardens in a single day, none of them on any top-ten list. The algorithm has not found Shōsei-en or Matsunoo Taisha, and Saihō-ji long ago took appropriate measures to limit visitors.



Rinchi-tei Reception Hall on the left, Tekisui-ken Reception Hall in the back, Shōsei-en, Kyoto

Shōsei-en

The first garden we visited was Shōsei-en, a *kaiyū-shiki* (stroll garden) belonging to Higashi Honganji temple, not far from Kyoto Station. We visited Higashi Honganji back in 2024 while staying at a nearby ryokan. At the time, we were surprised to find only a handful of people in the massive complex. Meidō Hall is among the largest wooden structures in the world, far larger than its sister temple, Nishi Honganji, a few blocks away, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and attracts many more tourists. Higashi Honganji is not: its halls were rebuilt in the Meiji era after the 1864 Kinmon Incident, when Chōshū troops, retreating after a failed attempt to storm the Imperial Palace, set fire to much of the city. Of course, plenty of sites around the world, such as France's Carcassonne, Warsaw's Old Town, or Lithuania's Trakai Castle, are on the UNESCO list even after being thoroughly rebuilt.

The garden at Shōsei-en dates to 1641, when Shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu donated the land to the temple. The scholar-poet Ishikawa Jōzan, who also designed the celebrated Shisendō (which I have not seen), laid out the original garden around a large pond fed by the Takase River. It was one of Kyoto's great Edo-period gardens, but it burned in 1858 and again during the Kinmon Incident. Like Higashi Honganji, it is a Meiji-era reconstruction, although that reconstruction has been aging for a century and a half. As you

approach the garden, you are blocked by the *taka-ishigaki*—a high stone wall (the feature imaged at the top of this essay), composed of cut stone blocks, river cobbles, the arc of a millstone, and fragments salvaged from throughout the garden after the fires. Many of the stones appear to be discolored and distorted from the heat.¹⁷

As at Higashi Honganji, we had the garden nearly to ourselves, which is how a stroll garden demands to be experienced. I was struck by the wooden buildings on stilts over the pond, framed views, and how the pond prevented me from occupying certain vantage points.



An Ibuki juniper (*Juniperus chinensis*), Shōsei-En, Kyoto

I admired the remnants of a massive dead Ibuki juniper (*Juniperus chinensis*) standing propped upright with a wooden tripod brace and rope. The brace is carefully made, the same attention (maybe more) given to the dead tree as to the living ones. The bark appears to have fallen away. I wonder what befell the tree, how long it lived, and how long the tree has been dead. In American practice, a dead tree is a liability: cut down and hauled away. But a standing snag provides cavities for nesting birds and substrate for lichens and fungi. Shōsei-en keeps its dead for compositional reasons, not ecological ones—different reasoning from the ecologist who values the snag as habitat, but why not think of the snag as aesthetic as well? It's certainly better than any so-called "specimen" tree. It's also no mere sculpture. The tree grew here, probably for centuries, before it died. The sign in the above photo indicates the species, as if it were still alive. I would love to talk to whoever is in charge and find out how they regard this tree. A Western observer might interpret this as an example of *wabi-sabi* or Hisamatsu's "Austere Sublimity," but Higashi Honganji is a temple of Jōdo Shinshū—Pure Land Buddhism, the opposite of Zen, in which salvation comes through faith in Amida Buddha rather than meditation or aesthetic discipline.



Saihō-ji, Kyoto

Saihō-ji

This was my second visit to Saihō-ji, the Moss Temple (*kokedera*), which sits close to Kegon-ji, the Cricket Temple (*suzumushidera*), where bell crickets are bred to sing year-round—unfortunately, it was closed this time, and we missed it (last time we fled because the grounds crew started to use gas-powered leaf blowers, that global curse). Saihō-ji dates to the Nara period (710-794), but the garden we associate with it is attributed to the Zen priest Musō Soseki, who redesigned it in 1339. The islands in the pond were once carpeted with white gravel sand, like Ryōan-ji; on the hillside above, Musō constructed a dry waterfall of some fifty rocks in three tiers—the earliest surviving *karesansui*, the prototype of the entire dry-landscape tradition that leads to Ryōan-ji.¹⁸ The rocks were scavenged from a prehistoric necropolis adjacent to the site. The upper garden is closed to laypeople and I have not been able to find any images of it online; Musō designated it Edoji, the “temple of the defiled world,” a zone of ascetic practice set against the paradise of the pond below. During the Ōnin War (1467-1477), the temple burned to the ground. Shortly after, a flood in 1485 deposited alluvial soil across the ruins. Further destruction during the Sengoku period (1467-1600) and neglect after the Meiji anti-Buddhist policies completed the erasure. In this humid, shaded valley, moss slowly colonized the white sand.



Saihō-ji, Kyoto

Musō is sometimes cited as proof that Zen really did inform garden-making—he wrote of those who “take this worldly feeling—springs, stones, grasses, and trees in their changing appearances following the four seasons—as a means to search for truth.”¹⁹ But one monk theologizing gardens does not create a genre, and the theology was contested in his own lifetime. A monk from nearby Tōji temple wrote that people practicing Zen should not construct gardens at all: “How can one remain in a deep state of Zen if one cannot detach oneself from the daily sorrows that disturb the heart?”²⁰ What created “the Zen garden” as an aesthetic category was not Musō’s fourteenth-century spirituality but Kuck’s 1935 projection, amplified by Suzuki, sold back through postwar cultural diplomacy, then through the Beats and the hippies. Saihō-ji is a Rinzai Zen temple—the one garden in this essay that actually is Zen, designed by the one master who actually theorized the connection—but the thing visitors come to see has nothing to do with his design or his practice. The *karesansui* on the upper hillside, the tradition’s actual origin, is off-limits and lies unseen, while the moss that replaced his white sand makes the garden famous.

In 1977, facing overtourism, the temple closed its gates to walk-in visitors. Now you purchase tickets on the temple’s website weeks in advance and copy forty-nine characters of a sutra by hand before you are allowed into the garden. The website markets this in the language of wellness—“re-discover and return to your original self,” “commence the journey to the next stage of your life.” After everything I wrote about Zen, the wellness language would seem like mere marketing—the postwar concept of Zen adopted by a Zen temple. It is, but it works. Moreover, the application process discourages one round of visitors, while the sutra copying discourages another.



Saihō-ji, Kyoto

At Saihō-ji, the moss reads as distinct textures and micro-topographies—tight mounds beside feathered spreads beside patches so fine they look like velvet, each species holding its niche, a water channel no wider than a hand separating two completely different surfaces. I don't understand how the water channel was created or how it is maintained. It's wild, one of the most amazing landscape features I have ever seen.



Saihō-ji, Kyoto

The pond garden, seen through the vertical rhythm of tree trunks, has the quality of a natural colonnade. Everything here is tended, and yet the garden feels found, accidental, which it was. I am trying to grow moss in some parts of my garden, and it's a very slow process. Centuries of accident and tending have produced something no designer could have.



Matsunoo Taisha, Kyoto

Matsunoo Taisha

Finally, we saw Matsunoo Taisha, a Shinto shrine rather than a Buddhist temple, at the base of Mount Matsuo (the same mountain on which Saihō-ji is located). Founded in 701, the shrine is the guardian of sake brewing: a large covered building houses dozens of *kazaridaru*—offering barrels from sake brewers across Japan. In 1975, Mirei Shigemori, whom we met earlier through his work with Loraine Kuck, built his last landscape here. Again, Shigemori was not trained in horticulture, but rather as a painter and was deeply impacted by Western modernism. That background shows here.



Kazaridaru, Ceremonial Sake Barrels, Matsunoo Taisha, Kyoto

I found Matsunoo Taisha heavy-handed: one area reminded me more of the tilework in Gaudí's Parque Güell than anything, while another section directly invoked Ryoan-ji, even though sources say he was reacting against that concept in the zen garden tradition, which he did so much to create. If so, the correction was hard to read.



Matsunoo Taisha, Kyoto

Shigemori's intervention at Matsunoo Taisha was more architecture or painting than landscape. Shigemori wanted a finished state quickly, something very different from what we see at Shōsei-en or Saihō-ji. I thought about the fire-scarred stones in the taka-ishigaki wall and the dead juniper held upright at Shōsei-en, as well as the centuries of moss at Saihō-ji.

Time is the lesson landscape designers find hardest to absorb. They design for the finished state; they seek to photograph the garden after the planting is done. That's where the specimen tree, imported from a far-off land and the lawn come from, that's the source of the impulse to reshape the land into "landscape architecture" with a bulldozer, such a common move in the Northeast (not far from us there is a property that has been reshaped by a bulldozer-wielding landscape firm almost yearly for six years). But a good garden, like music or a feast, demands time and patience to develop. It's a hard lesson and one that I find difficult to live up to. My property is very steep, dropping fifty feet over its hundred and fifty-foot depth. This means I have unpleasant views of wire fences on two of the three sides of my property. Plus, there is an ugly utility pole at the bottom, sticking up and reminding us daily that care for the landscape is secondary to expediency in this area. Plants grow slowly. Landscapes are for the patient. We can only hope we have enough time to see them develop.

- ¹ Wybe Kuitert, *Themes in the History of Japanese Garden Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 130. ↵
- ² Jiro Takei and Marc Peter Keane, *Sakuteiki: Visions of the Japanese Garden* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 2001), especially 59–85 on the Bureau of Geomancy, 86–109 on Buddhism, and 110–11 on taboos. ↵
- ³ François Berthier, *Reading Zen in the Rocks: The Japanese Dry Landscape Garden*, trans. Graham Parkes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 35 (on the cherry tree and Hideyoshi's visit); Shoji Yamada, *Shots in the Dark: Japan, Zen, and the West*, trans. Earl Hartman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 143 (on Okuda's testimony about trees between the rocks). Berthier is a professor of Japanese art history at INALCO in Paris; his original *Le jardin du Ryōanji* (1989) remains the most vivid scholarly description of the karesansui tradition. It is also, inadvertently, an exhibit in the argument this essay makes: Berthier reads Zen into the rocks as an article of faith—"it is as difficult to understand Zen gardens as it is to understand one's own self"—while simultaneously recording facts (the accidental moss at Saihō-ji, the cherry tree at Ryōan-ji) that undercut the framework. He is doing in 1989, with more erudition, what Kuck did in 1935. ↵
- ⁴ Kuitert, especially 100–107 on Ryōan-ji's history, 113–117 on riverside outcasts and the professionalization of garden-making, and 63–68 on Song compositional principles. One chapter is [available online](#). ↵
- ⁵ Kuitert, 132. ↵
- ⁶ On the Theosophical and Western esoteric shaping of Suzuki's Zen: his wife Beatrice Erskine Lane (1878–1939) was a Radcliffe-educated Theosophist who established a lodge in Kyoto in 1924; Suzuki himself spent over a decade (1897–1909) at Paul Carus's Open Court Publishing in Illinois. See Robert H. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," *History of Religions* 33, no. 1 (August 1993): 1–43, especially 3 and 18; David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 56 on Suzuki, 61–67 on the three discourses of modernity that shaped Buddhist modernism. Those of us who knew Colin Rowe well recall his belief that Madame Blavatsky and Theosophy were behind so much of modern culture. ↵
- ⁷ Miyuki Katahira, [review of *The Art of Japanese Gardens* by Loraine E. Kuck](#), North American Japanese Garden Association, 2018. Katahira argues that Kuck's interpretations "especially of Zen gardens and the Edo period gardens, were very likely derived from her discussions with Mirei Shigemori." Kuck thanks Shigemori in the foreword for "many hours spent explaining key ideas" in his *Nihon teiensi zukan* (1937–1938); Shigemori praised Kuck's understanding in an article in *Rinsen* (1940). ↵
- ⁸ Loraine E. Kuck, *The World of the Japanese Garden: From Chinese Origins to Modern Landscape Art* (New York and Tokyo: Walker/Weatherhill, 1968), 163–166. I was unable to find a copy of *One Hundred Kyoto Gardens*. On Shigemori's Western orientation: Christian Tschumi, *Mirei Shigemori—Rebel in the Garden: Modern Japanese Landscape Architecture* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2007), 25–29 on his training in art history and philosophy, and 48 on naming his children after Kant, Goethe, Hugo, and Byron. On the projection of modern experience onto medieval makers: Kuitert, 133–134. ↵
- ⁹ Yamada, 196–199. Taut visited the Katsura Detached Villa on October 2, 1933, and Ryōan-ji the following day; both visits were arranged by the modernist architects Ueno Isaburō and Kurata Chikatada. Katsura was his revelation—clean lines, modular proportions, no ornament—and he arrived at Ryōan-ji already primed to see Japanese abstraction as proto-modernist. The "Embodiment of the Zen spirit" caption appeared in *Houses and People of Japan* (1937), but Taut left the manuscript and negatives with the publisher before departing for Istanbul; Yamada thinks the editors may have written the captions. ↵
- ¹⁰ Christian Tagsold, *Spaces in Translation: Japanese Gardens and the West* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 103. ↵
- ¹¹ Tagsold, 107–109. ↵
- ¹² Yamada, 205–206 on Noguchi's two visits to Ryōan-ji (1931 and 1950), Hasegawa's Zen interpretation, and the Chase Manhattan Sunken Garden as "my Ryūanji." See also Isamu Noguchi, *Isamu Noguchi: A Sculptor's World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967), 163, 171. ↵
- ¹³ Tagsold, 112. ↵
- ¹⁴ Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Bollingen Series LXIV (New York: Pantheon, 1959), 63. Originally published as *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture* (Kyoto: Eastern Buddhist Society, 1938). ↵
- ¹⁵ Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, *Zen and the Fine Arts*, trans. Gishin Tokiwa (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1971), 29 on the Seven Characteristics (Asymmetry, Simplicity, Austere Sublimity, Naturalness, Subtle Profundity, Freedom from Attachment, Tranquillity), 87–89 on Ryōan-ji as *kū-tei* ("empty garden") and the claim that

vegetation would constitute “deception or camouflage.” The logic was circular: Hisamatsu inferred his characteristics from objects like Ryōan-ji and raku tea bowls, then used those characteristics to prove the objects were Zen. See Yamada, 214. ↩

¹⁶ Tagsold, 48–49 on the Morris Arboretum, and 110–111 on the Brooklyn Botanic Garden’s retroactive Zen rebranding. Meghan Mettler, *How to Reach Japan by Subway: America’s Fascination with Japanese Culture, 1945–1965* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 128–130 on the replica’s details. ↩

¹⁷ “[Shōsei-en / Taka-ishigaki](#),” Regional Tourism Resources Multilingual Commentary Database, Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, Japan. ↩

¹⁸ Berthier, *Reading Zen in the Rocks*, identifies the upper garden as “the oldest surviving example of karesansui” and notes that the islands were originally carpeted with white sand, characterizing the moss as “parasitical vegetation.” ↩

¹⁹ *Sun at Midnight: Poems and Letters of Musō Soseki*, trans. W.S. Merwin and Sōiku Shigematsu (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989), 32. ↩

²⁰ Kuitert, 137. ↩