



In Praise of the Past

Architect and author of
*Traditional Japanese Architecture:
An Exploration of Elements and
Forms* **Mira Locher** explains her
passion for Japan's buildings and
gardens of yore.

It was an image of a stone lantern in a mossy Kyoto garden that convinced me to take my first trip to Japan. I was a graduate student in architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, and a new summer program was being launched. I was intrigued but unsure if I could afford to spend five weeks in Japan. Yet that image of the lantern, with its lichen- and moss-covered stone cap, surrounded by lush plants in innumerable shades of green, was unlike anything I'd ever witnessed. I knew I had to see it.

Since then, I have encountered countless lanterns and my interest in the physical elements of Japanese gardens and buildings has continued to grow. After completing my studies, a poor US economy gave me the courage to move to Japan and work for a Japanese architectural firm. The initial year or two was filled with new concepts and ways of working, visits to traditional buildings and gardens, explorations of ideas and methods of connecting the old with the new. With so much to grasp and investigate, I stayed for seven years.

Many teachers—master carpenters and plaster craftsmen, architects and designers, photographers and gardeners—shared their wisdom along the way.

Traditional Japanese Architecture is a result of all that they have taught me and all I have observed since that first trip to Japan more than 20 years ago.

Although many wonderful and inspiring books about Japanese architecture and gardens have been written (and fill the shelves of my office), most focus on the unified whole of the building or garden. While this has been useful for my studies, as an architect I was intrigued with the role of individual elements within a building or garden.

What was the origin of the lantern that first caught my eye and what role did it play in the overall design of the garden? *Traditional Japanese Architecture* is an exploration of these aspects that teases out the stories that encompass their particular development, construction, function and symbolism. From roofs, walls and floors to door pulls and kettle hangers, the book places the stories firmly within the natural environment and traditional culture of Japan.

Living and working as an architect in Japan in the 1990s, I realized that the country

is one of only a few places with a high level of design literacy. People of all ages and backgrounds appreciate a well-designed building, garden or object and, because of this, the design arts flourish. Modern Japanese architecture is renowned for the quality of its concepts and construction materials and techniques.

Traditional architecture is loved for these same reasons, as well as for its strong relationship with nature. Many contemporary architects have learned from the older methods and forms and utilize these ideas in their work. Meanwhile, traditional arts like tea ceremony and flower arranging offer many people moments of respite within their hectic daily lives.

It is clear that classical culture and historic architecture are important components of life in Japan today, yet often they are separate rather than integrated. Increasingly, the schism between tradition

and modernity is growing. Although many citizen groups work to save old buildings, the structures are difficult to maintain and challenging to live in—cold in the winter and hot in the summer.

There is not enough support from the government to make the preservation and continued use of these buildings easy.

At the same time, the recent trend toward the abstract in Japanese architecture (pure, white surfaces and a seeming lack of detail) represents a move away from incorporating traditional elements, as people opt for the current fashion, as well as the convenience of a bed over a futon and the sense of permanence of concrete over wood.

I do not believe, however, that traditional architecture will disappear completely from Japan; it is too embedded in the national culture and psyche. The stories woven into the buildings and gardens, both symbolic and functional, may fade over time, though. There is much to learn from these tales and many concepts that can be integrated into buildings, gardens and modern ways of living. *Traditional Japanese Architecture*, with spectacular photos by longtime Japan resident and photographer Ben Simmons, is a first step in documenting these stories. □

Traditional Japanese Architecture: An Exploration of Elements and Forms is available at the Library.



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