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## “The Way of Stone”, The Art of Japanese Rock Gardens

\*Mertkan F. TEKİNALP<sup>1</sup>, Özgür YERLİ<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ömer Halisdemir University, Faculty of Architecture, Department of Landscape Architecture, Niğde/TURKEY

<sup>2</sup>Düzce University, Faculty of Forestry, Department of Landscape Architecture, Düzce/TURKEY

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**Abstract** Japanese garden art is an ancient garden art with distinctive and unique characteristics known as “Karesansui”, Japanese rock gardens seen as both ancient and modern because of its symbolism and abstract design. Japanese rock gardens are very popular worldwide and many rock gardens have been created outside Japan. Being a garden art, Japanese rock gardens have design elements and principles that makes it unique and its examples requires to reflect these characteristics to be able seen as a Japanese rock garden. Aim of this paper is to determine these design elements and principles that make a garden to be called a Japanese rock garden, making suggestions for new Japanese rock gardens and to be a support and guide for new Japanese rocks gardens that will be designed in the future.

**Keywords** Design Elements, Design principles, Japanese Garden, Rock Garden, Zen garden.

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### Introduction

Rocks and stones have always been an important part of mankind. From making tools to shelters, rocks and stones has been used for numerous things since the ancient times. Japanese people have associated the nature elements with divine, and formed the Shinto faith. According to Shinto, forests, rocks, waterfalls, mountains have divine beings in them and they protect the divine land of Japan [1]. Japanese people see the elements of nature in a broader perspective and use these elements in their garden art as design elements with symbolism and abstract concepts. Japanese rock garden art called “Karesansui” which literally means “dry landscape”, is a unique and abstract garden art [2]. They have been a part of the Zen temples for centuries and also called as “Zen gardens” even though they haven’t built based on spiritual connection to “Zen” principles. Rising popularity of “Zen” concept have also drawn attention to the Japanese rock gardens. The connection between Zen and rock gardens, is to some extent an assumed one. “Zen garden” is rarely mentioned in Japanese texts before 1950s. Associating rock gardens with “Zen” occurs for the first time in American Lorraine Kuck’s 1935 publication called “One Hundred Kyoto Gardens” as Kuck describe the gardens with “Zen Garden” term in this book [1]. Because of its popularity, many rock gardens have been built outside Japan all over the world.

### Design Elements and Principles

Japanese rock gardens have specific design elements and principles. They usually have three important design elements in them. These are rocks, gravel and sand. Some gardens may include some vegetation but usually only inanimate objects are used. When selecting rocks, gravel and sand for a garden, it is important to consider the shape, color, size and texture of design elements. Rocks are the most important structural elements of the gardens and they usually represent mountains, rugged shorelines and waterfalls. Sand and gravel are also very important, as they represent they represent the flow of clouds, streams and oceans. Sometimes rocks are selected because of an interesting or unusual shape, or because they resemble animals, birds or human artifacts. In



general, however, Japanese have preferred asymmetrical, natural shapes to representational or fanciful ones, and have placed more emphasis upon the integration of rocks into the composition than upon the uniqueness of individual rocks [3].



*Figure 1: Banryutei Rock Garden “Spiral Dragon” forms*

Zen’s rejection of superstition have transformed stones into purely artistic, abstract features of the garden. In these gardens, an atmosphere conducive to meditation was created. As devices to aid meditation, these gardens were also viewed as works of art, created within set frames designed to be viewed in the same way as a painting or a hanging scroll [1].

Rocks for the backbone of Japanese rock gardens designs. Appropriate rock shapes must be used to depict various features of real natural scene. Various techniques are used to round off the composition, after the main rock clusters are set. “Motoishi” or base stones can place the foot of the main rock in a triad to harmonize the balance between the rocks. “Suteishi” or nameless stones are randomly placed low, inconspicuous rocks that are used to make a rock group look more natural and make garden look more spontaneous [4].

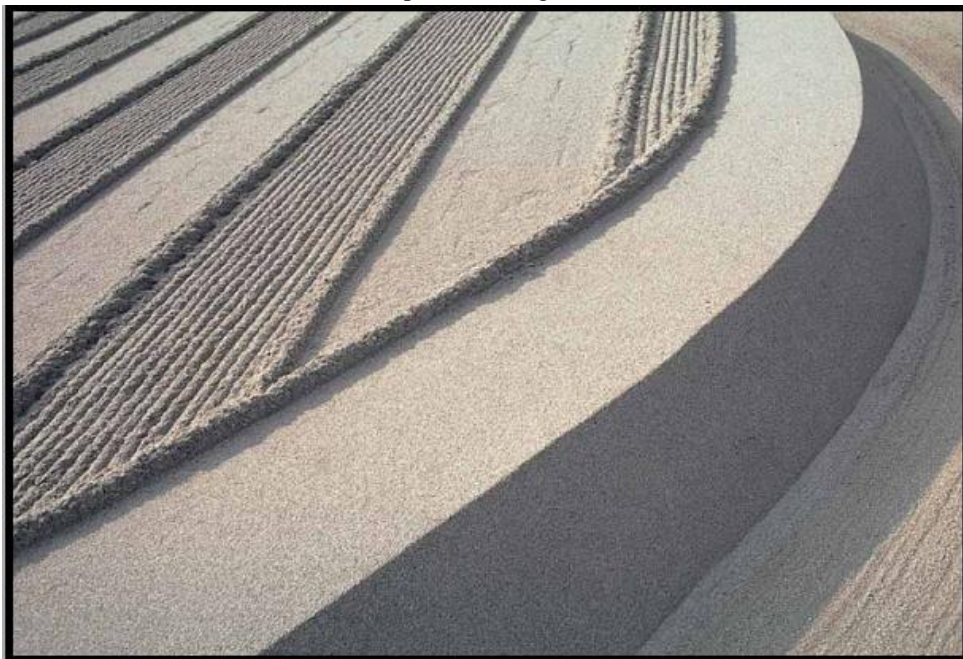
Traditionally, rocks were classified according to shape: tall vertical, low vertical, arching, reclining and flat. There also are classifications for the number of rocks in a composition: two, three, five or seven. An arrangement of three rocks is the most common. The use of three components, one large, one small and one medium, to create a dynamic balance of odd numbers is not limited to garden architecture but is a basic principle in other arts. Generally, a rock should be set into the ground far enough to provide a feeling of stability and a sense that the rock has been there for some time. The dynamism of sand patterns also complements the static nature of rocks. Used together, rocks and sand patterns suggest various contrasts important in both continental and Japanese cosmology, such as the contrast between yin and yang [3].





*Figure 2: Five rock composition in a rock garden [5]*

Gravel and sand is often used in a traditional dry landscape garden, but it was almost always of a light gray color as seen in figure 2, with the most commonly used type being the famous Shirakawa suna. In 20<sup>th</sup> century famous Japanese landscape architect Mirei Shigemori used different shades of gravel for the first time. It has been accepted as renewal and modern form of Japanese rock garden art [5].



*Figure 3: Silver sand sea at Ginkaku-ji [1]*

In creating sand patterns in Japanese rock gardens, the size of the grain is important. If the grain is too small, it is easily disturbed by wind and rain; if the grain is too large, it is difficult to rake. Color is also important. White



sand carries connotations of purity and can be dazzling in the sunlight, whereas darker colors, such as gray or brown to bluish black, are said to convey feelings of tranquility [3].

The rocks that could disrupt the composition and spirit of the gardens should be avoided. Distance between the rock groups should also be taken into consideration as they have an effect on the harmony of the elements of the garden [6].

“Sakuteiki” one of the oldest Japanese garden manual in the world that dates nearly a thousand year ago suggests visualizing the famous landscapes of the country and understating their most interesting points. Then recreating the essence of those scenes in the garden not strictly but interpretatively [7].

### Results and Discussion

It is clear that Japanese rock gardens have unique and distinctive design elements and principles. These findings can be observed in most rock gardens in the Japan. However outside the Japan, there are numerous Japanese rock gardens that lack the required elements and design principles. Designers should research this ancient garden art properly and use the right techniques and elements when building the gardens. This applies to all kinds of garden art applications. Otherwise these designs only bear the name the intended garden art but not properly reflect the characteristics of it.

### Conclusions

Japanese rock gardens are one of the most ancient garden art in the history. It has become very popular worldwide, many examples of it have been created all over the world and it seems to continue to be made in the future as well. In order to respect this very old garden art that have roots going for centuries and successfully recreate Japanese rock gardens, it is very important to follow the design guidelines properly as it will carry the name of the garden art even when it is not done correctly. Continued applications of such acts could degenerate the garden art as they will be an example for future. Therefore when creating specific gardens using specialized garden arts, extra caution and attention to detail must be maintained in order to successfully convey them to the future.

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