

Architecture of Repose: Creating *Place* for Retreat and Intimacy

Jordan Odor

Abstract

The fast-paced nature of contemporary culture acts as a catalyst for anxiety due to overstimulation. This paper explores how the built environment can be designed in order to bring people from a state of overstimulation to a state of dignified calmness and composure. The goal of this exploration is to understand architecture's ability to help people live thoughtful and relational lives. Research continues to prove the links between the built environment and personal well-being. What are the qualities of places that relieve us from the disharmonies of contemporary life and lead us towards a life of intimacy and repose? This investigation is explored through the analysis of three case studies. The first case study is a combination of analysis and an experiential description of a walk through Chicago to Millennium Park in downtown Chicago, Illinois. The second case study explores Fay Jones' Thorncrown Chapel in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. This discussion is largely informed by writings from "*Outside the Pale*": *The Architecture of Fay Jones*. The third case study analyzes the Japanese tea hut typology and the roji, the connected entrance path, as written about by authors Kakuzo Okakura and Ann Cline. The reader will learn how spaces and environments can affect personal and social well-being. The result of this discourse will be a greater understanding of how environments can provide relief and retreat for the refreshment of an anxious culture.

**Architecture of Repose:
Creating *Place* for Retreat and Intimacy**

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By

Jordan Odor
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
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Committee Chair: _____

John Reynolds

Reader: _____

Dick Overton

Reader: _____

Gülen Çevik

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Methodology	5
Case #1: Walk to Millennium Park, Chicago, Illinois	6
Case #2: Thorncrown Chapel, Eureka Springs, Arkansas	12
Case #3: The Tea Room and the Roji	16
The Need for a Retreat	18
Moving Forward; Conclusions	19
Bibliography	21
Figures	22

Architecture of Repose: Creating *Place* for Retreat and Intimacy

Introduction

Every man should have a place where he can have communion with himself and his surroundings, a personal environment free from disharmony and frustrations, a place to nurture his ideals and aspirations. – Fay Jones¹

The influence of architecture in our lives goes beyond the fulfillment of basic human needs for shelter and safety. The environments we encounter each day influence our perception of the world, as well as how we view ourselves within it. The spaces we inhabit help us identify ourselves within a greater context and direct our actions within those spaces. Through our senses we experience environments that affect both our physical and emotional well-being. Merriam-Webster defines well-being as “the state of being happy, healthy, or prosperous.” Quantitative research has continued to show connections between environments and personal well-being. For example, background noise in the workplace is known to “increase employees’ stress hormone levels, undermine short-term memory, reading comprehension and willingness to engage others.”² For architects, there are opportunities to not only provide shelter, but also environments in which people can better relate with others while simultaneously gaining crucial self-awareness.

Society is experiencing anxiety due to overstimulation that is impairing personal well-being. This overstimulation hinders personal relationships, productivity in the workplace and individual health. Environmental factors are not at fault for all of these stresses. The fast-paced nature of contemporary culture acts as a catalyst for many problems of anxiety due to overstimulation. Overstimulated individuals can reach a point of full saturation that is damaging to their health in many ways.³ This

¹ "Outside the Pale": The Architecture of Fay Jones. University of Arkansas Press, 1999, 34.

² "A Holistic View: Body Mind Environment." Steelcase.

³ Meindl, Susan. "Living Too Close To Edge." Talent Develop. August 19, 2010.

discourse serves as an exploration into how environments can provide relief and retreat for the refreshment of an anxious culture.

The purpose of this exploration is ultimately to gain an understanding of spaces that bring us to a state of repose. Merriam-Webster defines repose as, "A state of resting after exertion or strain; eternal or heavenly rest." While the stress affects many aspects of human life, I am most concerned with how they affect relational well-being. I believe that when someone comes to a state of repose, they are able to better relate with others as well as themselves. This exploration's purpose is motivated by my religious and personal beliefs that we are to be in meaningful relationships with God and with others. Regardless of one's beliefs, the benefits of understanding the environment's effects on relational and personal well-being can be of benefit to all. What are the characteristics of spaces that will lead to a sense of repose? What are the qualities of places that offer relief from the disharmonies of contemporary life and lead towards a life of dignified calmness and composure? These questions ask how the holistic human being functions, relates and dwells within the world. This exploration has to do with quality of life and how one lives.

Methodology

In order to better understand architecture of repose, the primary exploratory method is the analysis of three case studies. These three cases serve as examples of retreats within both man-made and natural contexts. The first case study is a combination of analysis combined with personal experience of a walk through Chicago to the Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park in Chicago, Illinois. The second case study explores Fay Jones' Thorncrown Chapel in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, which is largely informed by writings on Jones' collective works. The third case study analyzes the Japanese tea hut typology and the roji, the connected entrance path, as written about by authors Kakuzo Okakura and Ann Cline.

These case studies were chosen because of their varying characteristics, as well as their varying degrees of removal from the density of city life: Millennium Park in the city, Thorncrown Chapel in a far removed area from the city, and the tea hut with no defining relationship to the proximity of a city. The cases are discussed in terms of their creation of place as discussed by Martin Heidegger and Christian Norberg-Schulz, as this has to do with how we dwell and how we live. The cases are assessed in terms of their provision for holistic human needs, which are defined by psychologist, Abraham Maslow. Finally, they are examined based upon their sensorial experience that is specific to their place. This has to do with their implementation of materials, amongst other phenomenal factors.

These explorations bring forth conclusions of the qualities of places that offer relief from the disharmonies of contemporary culture, which lead to an understanding of how to design places for retreat and repose.

Case #1: Walk to Millennium Park, Chicago, Illinois

In September of 2014, I had the opportunity to travel to Chicago for a weekend of exploration with colleagues. Upon arrival at our hotel, I was awestruck by the degree to which the city of Chicago had been built up. I had feelings of comic disbelief and discomfort as I looked out of our hotel's bedroom window. I stared across the street at a desolate concrete yard that surrounded a ten-story abandoned building. I was disturbed that the only sense of nature that remained in my view was of the sky and of

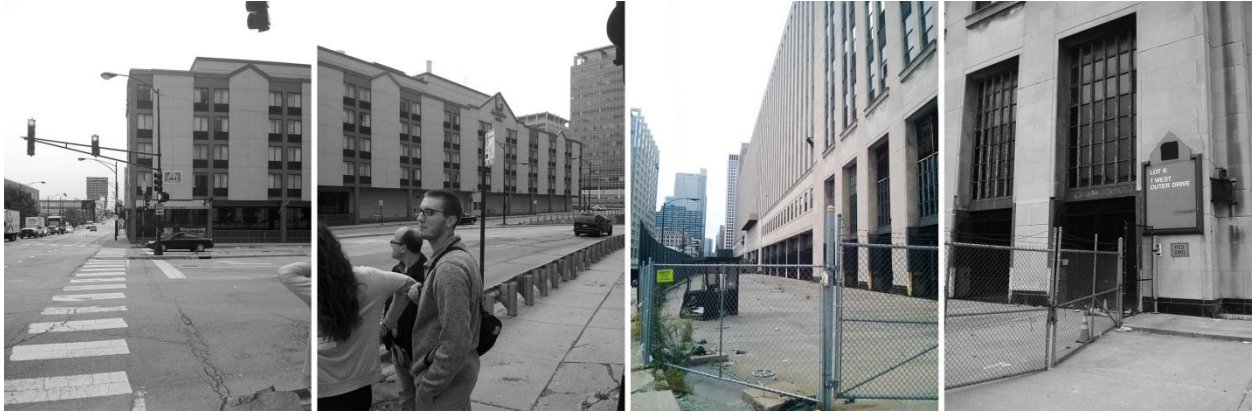


Figure 1. Concrete yard across from hotel.

the unrestrained weeds that were growing from the concrete yard. There was uniformity in the building's design and in the materiality of the place. Concrete, asphalt and metal reigned supreme as the most commonly used materials within the vicinity. The scale of the neighboring building made it feel alien to my entire body. The hard materials were cold to the touch and reflected harsh sounds at the passing of each car. I had come for a weekend in the city but I soon desired an escape to the woods.

As we left our hotel and journeyed towards the city, we walked across the intersection of Jackson Boulevard and La Salle Street. We were deep within Chicago's urban center and the area displayed little of resemblance to a natural landscape. It was an alternative, man-made landscape that lacked human relation and intimacy. The monumental buildings displayed strength through the breadth and width of



Figure 2. Intersection of Jackson Blvd. and La Salle St.

their structural members. The pediments displayed ornament and detail. The rustication of the buildings beyond created diversity within facades and a sense of order and hierarchy. However, these buildings did not relate to the human scale. In contrast with my group of colleagues, nearly all that seemed to exist were extensions of buildings to the sky.

The idea of the natural landscape gets lost in the vertical nature of downtown Chicago. For Christian Norberg-Schultz, an understanding of how one dwells in space is in relation to the natural landscape. How are we to relate to our surroundings when our environment has included the vast removal of the natural landscape? With the replacement of the man-made for the natural, is there a newfound difficulty in how to relate to the new landscape? This absence of identification inhibits the way one dwells. Architect and architecture professor Ann Cline questions this man-made environment but acknowledges its relevance in contemporary society.

As we are born into the air, we are born into buildings. After that, we tend to take both for granted. The frailty of our human bodies... make[s] buildings so necessary and possible that they don't seem artificial at all. Instead, they seem an extension of the earth's circumstance and our own being in the world.⁴

After walking through the city for a while, we were in need of a reprieve. We knew we were close to Millennium Park so we decided to go there. Upon arrival, the park seemed to be an oasis within the city. The boundary of vegetation acted as a visual and auditory buffer between the sounds of the city and us. Continuing on, we finally came to rest at the lawn of the Pritzker Pavilion.



Figure 3. Trellis Superstructure.

Underneath the steel trellis structure, I finally felt as though I could relax. This area was unique from the rest of the city. Once I was removed from the lowly streets between the buildings, I was able to orient myself within the area. Where I once felt an ambiguity of place due to uniformity and cosmic scale, I now felt certain and assured of where I was. The horizontal interweaving gestures of the trellis structure suggested a positive communal environment as opposed to the stark individuality felt while walking under the domineering shadows of the vertical buildings.

⁴ Cline, Ann. *A Hut of One's Own: Life Outside the Circle of Architecture*. Vol. 17. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997, 107.

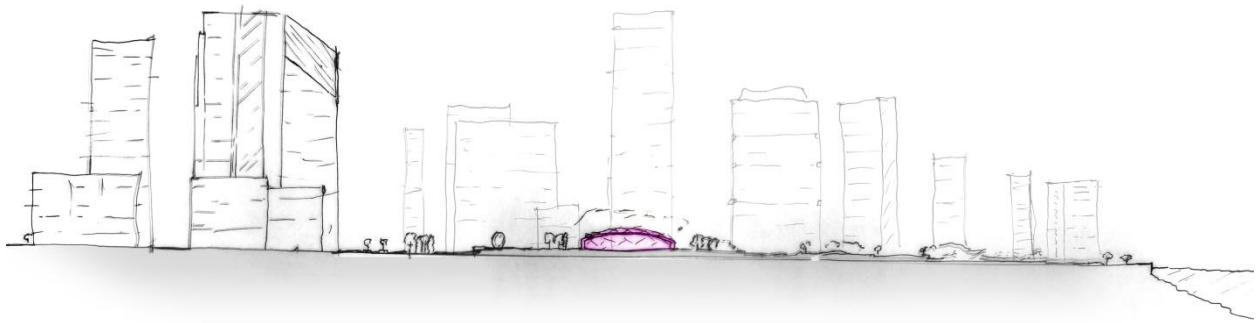


Figure 4. Scale relation and city presencing.

In Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture, Christian Norberg-Schulz discusses the creation of place through the placement of an entity within the natural landscape. Norberg-Schulz is referencing Martin Heidegger's illustration of a bridge that "visualizes, symbolizes and gathers, and makes the environment become a unified whole."⁵ In the illustration, a bridge is placed across a stream. Heidegger continues to explain that the land on either side of the bridge and the stream did not truly exist until the bridge was placed there. Norberg-Schulz "emphasize[s] that the [natural] landscape as such gets its value through the bridge. Before, the meaning of the landscape was 'hidden,' and the building of the bridge brings it out into the open."⁶ Norberg-Schulz writes that architecture exists to uncover the potential meaning in the environment.⁷

How do we relate when the meaning that has been 'uncovered' in the environment becomes ambiguous? How does one identify a place within a natural landscape that no longer exists? Downtown Chicago is now almost entirely a man-made environment rather than a natural one. It is for this reason that Millennium Park is so crucial to the whole of Chicago. Continuing off of Heidegger's illustration, the park offers identification similar to how the bridge does, in that it reestablishes place for the individual

⁵ Norberg-Schulz, Christian. *Genius loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. Rizzoli, 1980, 18.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

within the man-made environment. In the same way that the bridge defined the stream, the park defines the city.

Underneath the structural trellis, I was both outside and inside. The scale of my surroundings was greatly reduced. The open structure above allowed me to feel secure yet open to the sky and environment. I was mentally sheltered from the visual presencing of the city. The steel and concrete superstructure was met by greenery at its bases. The structure appeared powerful in its span and width of members yet it was not domineering. The combination of power and grace in the structure evoked a sense of ease for each of us.



Figure 5. Millennium Park boardwalk.

We left the park to go exploring buildings to the north, only to once again come back to the park at a later hour. This time we walked just south of the superstructure along the wooden boardwalk. The boardwalk's unfinished wood alongside a stream of slowly running water provided a calming and relaxing setting. The softness of the various surrounding grasses and bushes buffered us from the city enough that we could view the city's architectural diversity with much appreciation.

Relating to our experience in the park, a study was done where natural environments were proven to bring attention restoration to the subjects tested. Throughout the day, especially the work day, peoples' minds become fatigued from long periods of voluntary attention. The results showed that time spent in restorative environments with space for resting "can aid in renewing voluntary attention."⁸ The takeaway was that when urban designers or architects are planning out spaces, they should "consider the importance of accessible natural environments... particularly in downtown areas where there are many fatigue-inducing elements."⁹ This concept is crucial to understand, especially when creating place for refreshment and repose for people living an active life in the density of a city.

Case #2: Thorncrown Chapel, Eureka Springs, Arkansas



Figure 6. Photographs of Thorncrown Chapel.

Thorncrown Chapel was designed by regionalist architect Fay Jones and was completed in 1980. It is an "expression of glass and wood"¹⁰ that rises towards the sky adjacent to its neighboring trees. Jones believed there was benefit that could come from placing oneself within nature.

If what we build, our interventions in the natural situation, aligns itself with the attributes of nature, perhaps it can... inspire the inhabitants to align themselves in a more beneficial and meaningful way with

⁸ Berto, Rita. "Exposure to Restorative Environments Helps Restore Attentional Capacity." *InformeDesign*. 2005.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ "*Outside the Pale*": *The Architecture of Fay Jones*. University of Arkansas Press, 1999, 84.

the natural forces, the natural conditions, the natural rhythms of life. Surely there are benefits to be derived from living close to, and in harmony with nature.¹¹

Regarding earth and sky, Jones was concerned with the location and the placement of the building. As a pupil who was influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright, Jones insisted that the building should not be on, but “of the hill.”¹² In its creation of place, Thorncrowne does not dominate the site by crowning the hill; rather, it is among the trees and within the hill. Jones believed that “man and nature should benefit immeasurably from one another.”¹³ In this way, there is a harmony between the man-made and the natural environment. This harmony is meant to be intangibly understood by visitors who attend the chapel.

The chapel carries a visual and material connection between the interior and the exterior. There are moments that are obscured where the building ends and nature begins. One moment designed by Jones is at the seamless connection of glass to stone in place of a bottom window sill. For the visitor of

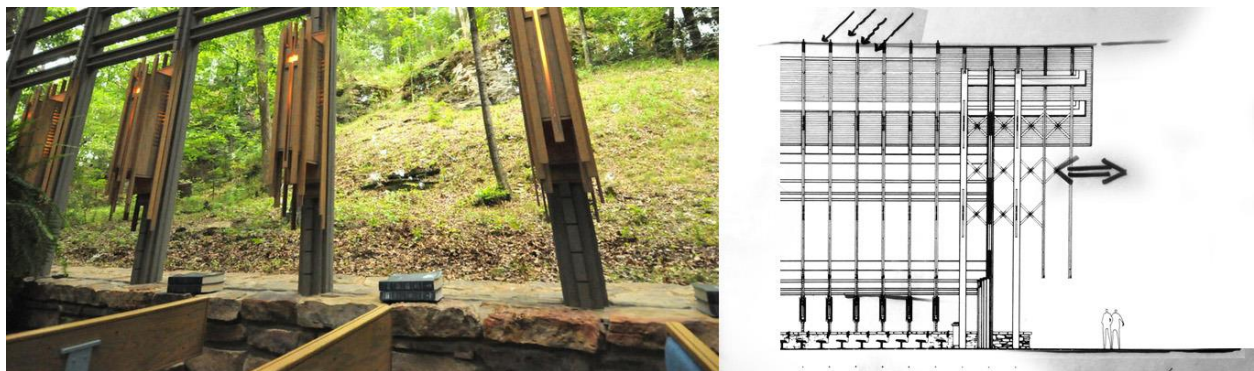


Figure 7. Left; Photograph of glass-stone connection. Right; Relation of interior and exterior.

this space, they are physically grounded and enclosed but mentally open to the surrounding context.

Another way that the chapel grounds the user is by giving reference to the sky through the ceiling

¹¹ Ibid, 42.

¹² Ibid, xi.

¹³ Ibid, 60.

skylight and clerestory. In looking up, it is as if one is peering through the trees into the sky. A visitor is enclosed and sheltered yet perceptually open to the natural landscape.

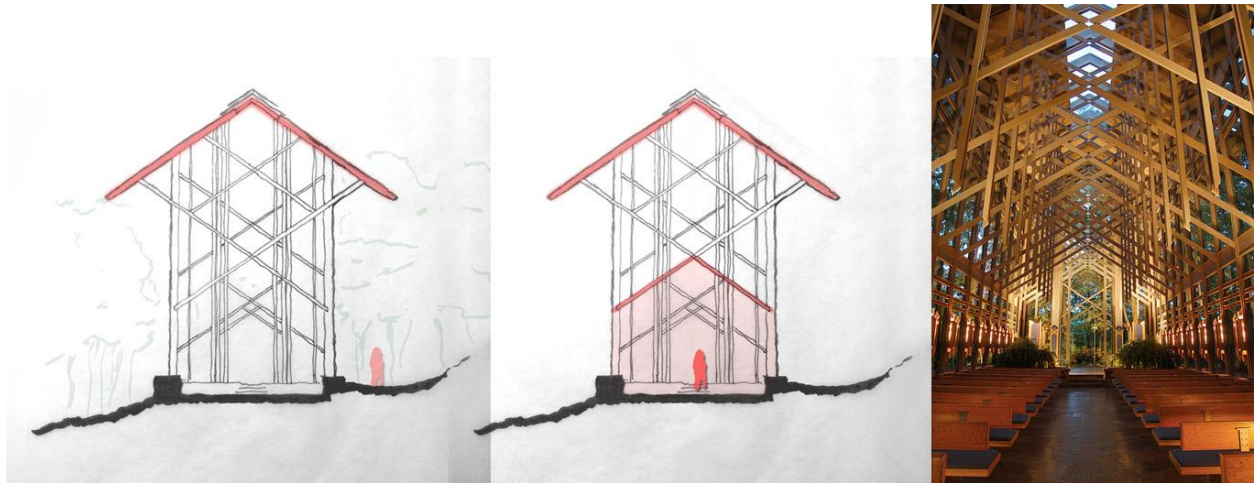


Figure 8. Left; Scale relation to exterior. Middle; Scale relation to interior. Right: Photograph of interior.

As one approaches the exterior, they are dwarfed by the chapel which rises forty-eight feet.¹⁴ As one enters, however, the tall interior space plays with one's spatial perception. When seated and facing forward, the repetition of the wooden structure alludes to separation of interior spaces within the open volume. This repetition resembles multiple planes that slice through the air, suggesting multiple levels to the space. The lowest protruding diagonal members disrupt the vertical nature of the volume. The apparent volume of the room is brought down to a smaller, more intimate scale.

The implementation of materials is of great significance to the chapel's design. The material choices are responsive to the natural environment. The main materials used are a series of two-by wood pieces, stone, sheets of glass and primary steel members. The primary use of the wood pieces is in the structural frame in the open air above the seating. The structural wood pattern imitates the complexity of the forest. Although the structure looks varied and complicated in a perspectival view, the overlaying diagonal pattern is simple and orderly. The mathematical order of the structure turns it into an

¹⁴ Ibid, 84.

expressive device that adds layers to the space.¹⁵ As one sits and observes the surroundings, the repetitive pattern of the structure leads one's eyes upward and into the space.¹⁶ The simplicity and layering within this chapel provides opportunity for one to sit in repose to contemplate their situation.

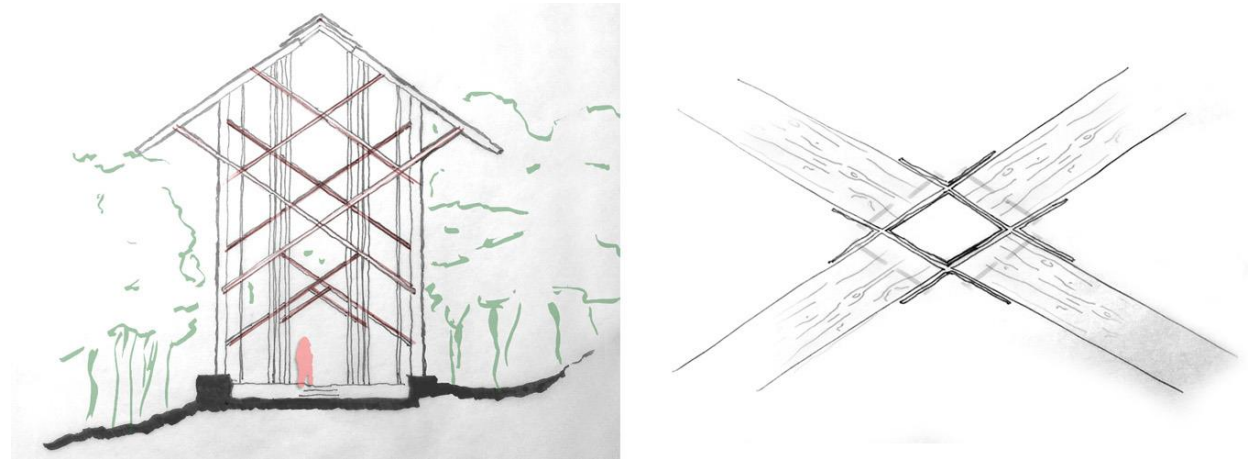


Figure 9. Left; Section through diagonal members. Right; Diagonal two-by detail representing void.

The multiple sub-spaces created within the frame allow for variations of perspective and thought. Another subspace is created in the detailed connection between the diagonal wood members. The empty space in this connection creates a metaphorical void for one's mind to fill.

Although the chapel includes various design moves that play with one's perceptions, there is an ordered simplicity to the space. Jones claims that he gleaned the idea of simplicity in design from his mentor, Frank Lloyd Wright. Regarding Wright's teachings Jones said,

I couldn't quite see why he was preaching simplicity while designing buildings that had complex forms and complex spaces. I was equating simplicity with plainness. It became clear that the idea was more involved, multidimensional. I think there's a difference between something that is complicated and something that is complex; there's a difference between simplicity and plainness.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid, xiv.

¹⁶ Ibid, 84.

¹⁷ Ibid, 47.

When considering designing for an anxiously overstimulated culture, the ideas of simplicity and repose in Thorncrown Chapel offer thoughtful suggestions. This space gives the opportunity for an individual's thoughts to transcend to something greater. At the same time, the intimate scale of the interior space accepts communal gathering. The same design brings about both a vertical and a horizontal nature; providing opportunities for people to relate with others as well as with themselves.

Case #3: The Tea Room and the Roji



Figure 10. Left; Roji walkway. Middle; Tea pavilion. Right; Tea room.

In the fifteenth century, Japan elevated the association of tea from poetry and amusement to a form of aestheticism known as Teism. The values held in Teism lead towards a life of humility, cleanliness and simplicity.¹⁸ An eastern philosophy that came to take up ideals of Teism is called Zennism, which has to do with the stripping down of things to discover how one should best live.¹⁹ It was from a Zen ritual that the tea ceremony began.²⁰ And so, the necessity for a space to perform the ceremony was created. The tea room became a physical representation of the ideals of Teism and Zennism. The tea room became a representation of simplicity and purism.²¹

¹⁸ Okakura, Kakuzo. *The Book of Tea*. ed. Everett F. Bleiler. Dover Publications, Inc. (1964): 15, 1.

¹⁹ Locher, Mira. *Zen Gardens: The Complete Works of Shunmyo Masuno, Japan's Leading Garden Designer*. Tuttle Publishing, 2013, 21.

²⁰ Okakura, Kakuzo. *The Book of Tea*. ed. Everett F. Bleiler. Dover Publications, Inc. (1964): 15, 19.

²¹ *Ibid*, 33.

The tea room is a retreat from the outside world. “One may be in the midst of a city, and yet feel as if [they] were in the forest far away from the dust and din of civilization.”²² The serenity of the room is attributed to its stripped down and unadorned nature. Wood and bamboo are commonly used as finished surfaces. No great attention is called to any of the decorations in the tea room. There is a “fear of repetition” in the decorations, colors and design in order to prevent monotony.²³ This is done in order to aid the participant in focus and thought. In the tea room there is a conscious decision to “[leave] something unfinished for the play of the imagination to complete.”²⁴

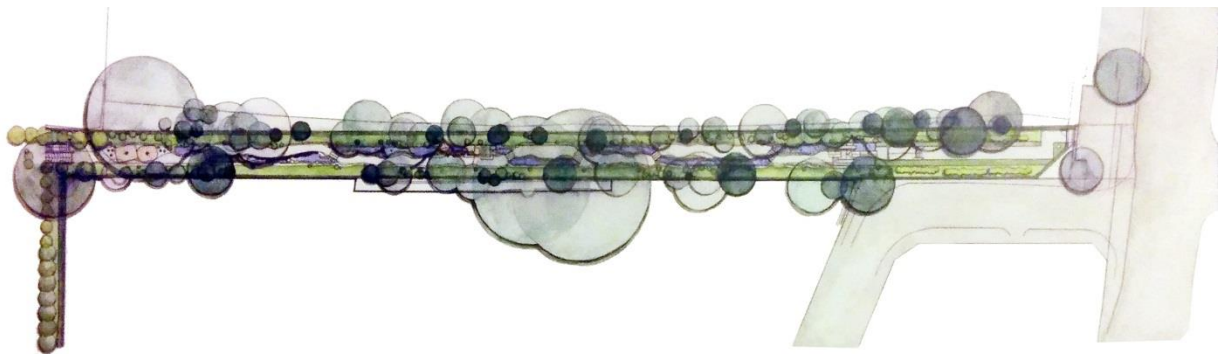


Figure 11. Roji garden walkway at Nassim Park Residences designed by Shunmyo Masuno.

Leading to the tea room is a garden path called the roji. According to Zen garden designer Shunmyo Masuno, the roji, meaning “dewy ground,” is a carefully designed transitional space for the purpose of bringing forth repose prior to beginning the tea ceremony.²⁵ According to the author, Kakuzo Okakura, “The roji was intended to break the connection with the outside world, and to produce a fresh sensation conducive to the full enjoyment of aestheticism in the tea-room itself.”²⁶

²² Ibid, 34.

²³ Ibid, 40.

²⁴ Cline, Ann. *A Hut of One's Own: Life Outside the Circle of Architecture*. Vol. 17. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997, 27.

²⁵ Locher, Mira. *Zen Gardens: The Complete Works of Shunmyo Masuno, Japan's Leading Garden Designer*. Tuttle Publishing, 2013, 18

²⁶ Okakura, Kakuzo. *The Book of Tea*. ed. Everett F. Bleiler. Dover Publications, Inc. (1964): 15, 34.

The tea room and the roji hold an unmistakable place of value for individuals of Zennism. In contemporary western society, these spaces would have a unique sense of place largely due to their sense of emptiness and unadorned nature. They both provide spaces for relief and refreshment. If a place akin to the roji or the tea room were in an urban context, it would be of great benefit for overstimulated individuals for the betterment of their well-being.

The Need for a Retreat

In a discussion with John Johnson, a pastor of a local church in Oxford, OH, I asked him his thoughts on calming and refreshing spaces. During the conversation, he mentioned that every year he attends a silent retreat at an abbey. He believed that the silence was necessary for him as a human being. During our conversation, I asked him about his favorite place to go while at the abbey. To my surprise, he said that it wasn't the main sanctuary; rather, it was in the personal and intimate spaces that he felt most at peace. His favorite places were in the library and on a trail that circulates the abbey's grounds. Jokingly, he remarked that when he returns from the retreat, his wife asks the question, "What happened to my husband?" It was in the context of nature that John felt renewed. Every year John proves the connection with the way we dwell in space and our personal lives.²⁷

At a leadership retreat in August of 2015, I attended an interview of Ed Catmull, the co-founder of Pixar Animation Studios and the president of Walt Disney Animation Studios. The interview was primarily about creativity, storytelling and team-building. However, in the final three minutes of the interview, the conversation took a turn. Ed spoke about his need for personal retreats to refresh his mind. "Being in a calming place allows me to come back with a new perspective... Organizations should be balanced, but so should our lives... To do that we need to take care of our soul."²⁸ Ed urges that people are in

²⁷ John Johnson (Pastor) in discussion with the author, February 2015.

²⁸ Ed Catmull (Co-founder of Pixar Animation Studios and president of Walt Disney Animation Studios) in discussion with Bill Hybels at the Willow Creek Leadership Summit, August 2015.

need of regular retreats to rejuvenate the mind and gain a new perspective. The retreat helps him to go back to his creative work feeling more balanced and refreshed.

In May of 2015, I travelled to Kauai, Hawaii, on my honeymoon with my newly wedded wife. Kauai is known as the most untouched and natural of the Hawaiian Islands. While we were there, we enjoyed the beauty found in the natural environment. It was the ultimate retreat of refreshment and repose.



Figure 12. Enjoying Kauai.

At the time, I was convinced that everyone needed to have an experience like we did to get away from the stresses of contemporary culture. While Kauai is beautiful, it is not a viable option for the majority of people. Most people are in need of places of temporary relief and retreat that exist in the areas where they live normal life. Overstimulated individuals need places for daily refreshment and repose.

Moving Forward; Conclusions

All people, especially the overstimulated, are in need of places where they can be relieved from the disharmonies and frustrations of life. Through their relief will come a life of greater personal and relational well-being. Through the analysis of the case studies, I have come to believe that there are (at least) three main concepts to consider when designing place of repose. They must contain the following qualities.

Balance

Something happens where buildings meet nature. As was the case with the three case studies, there was a balance of integration with the natural and the man-made environments. This recognition of nature within the man-made may bring about a harmony that can be restorative for the individual.

Simplicity

There should be an innate simplicity to the design that does not distract or overwhelm the user of the space. This does not mean that the space has to be disinteresting. As seen in Thorncrown Chapel, its design and structure are simple rather than plain; complex rather than complicated.²⁹

Emptiness

Emptiness leaves room in the mind for things unknown and unfinished. There exists an innate grandeur in the wild and unknown. In Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, He refers to this grandeur as "intimate immensity."³⁰ This immensity is felt when we allow the mind to be still and roam. In the emptiness, we allow our mind to be still and roam as one would in the void felt in the tea room or in Thorncrown Chapel.

In creating places of retreat for overstimulated individuals, architecture of repose can bring about an intimacy that will be for the benefit and well-being of all, both now and in the future.

²⁹ *"Outside the Pale": The Architecture of Fay Jones*. University of Arkansas Press, 1999, 47.

³⁰ Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Vol. 330. Beacon Press, 1994, 183.

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Figures

- Figure 1 – Concrete yard across from hotel. Photographs by Author
- Figure 2 – Intersection of Jackson Blvd. and La Salle St. Photograph by Author
- Figure 3 – Trellis superstructure. Photographs by author
- Figure 4 – Scale relation and city presencing. Image by author
- Figure 5 – Millennium Park boardwalk. Photographs by Author
- Figure 6 – Photographs of Thorncrown Chapel. Photographs by Daniel Terdiman, CNET
- Figure 7 – Left; Photograph of glass-stone connection. Photograph by Daniel Terdiman, CNET
Right; Relation of interior and exterior. Image by author
- Figure 8 – Left; Scale relation to exterior. Image by author
Middle; Scale relation to interior. Image by author
Right; Photograph of interior. Photograph by Daniel Terdiman, CNET
- Figure 9 – Left; Section through diagonal members. Image by Author
Right; Diagonal two-by detail representing void. Image by Author
- Figure 10 – Left; Roji walkway. Photograph by Shunmyo Masuno
Middle; Tea pavilion. Photograph by Shunmyo Masuno
Right; Tea room. Photograph by Shunmyo Masuno
- Figure 11 – Roji garden walkway at Nassim Park Residences designed by Shunmyo Masuno. Image by Shunmyo Masuno
- Figure 12 – Enjoying Kuau. Photographs by Author