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## Mr. Nakata's Garden Richard A. Smith



Above: The garden seems to be part of the house, and the house a part of the garden.

Right: The house and garden are in a traditional neighborhood in Kanazawa, Japan.

Photos by Richard A. Smith.



Mr. Nakata's house was not always a quiet, dark place of gentle hellos and goodbyes, refined conversation and good cooking. There was a time when armed cavalry gathered in the garden on a cold winter morning awaiting orders to advance. Whispered communications hovered in the air and horses' breath misted the dawn. On command, men and animals charged, filling the house with the clatter of hooves and the cries of battle as they rode through the *toriniwa* and into the street to ambush and slaughter enemy troops who were moving through the town. Or so the story goes.

Mr. Nakata's property, located in a traditional neighborhood in Kanazawa, was known to be ideal for such battle tactics. The size of both house, garden and *toriniwa* (literally, "through passageway to garden") had been specified by sumptuary regulations reflecting the owner's productive capability (measured in bushels of rice) and the military requirements of a feudal government.

Now, as then, the Nakata garden and its *toriniwa* provide the principal means of ventilating the whole house, allowing large quantities of outside air to permeate the darkened interior. The garden also provides a means of escape to the outdoors in the event of fire or earthquake.

Garden walls insure a degree of privacy between houses and can serve to retard the spread of flames from one house to another. Ladders are kept permanently in the garden to allow an escape to adjacent rooftops.

Little gardening, in the Western sense of the word, is done in these gardens. Activity is limited to wetting down the earth and plants, pruning a valued tree or shrub and tending potted plants. Gardens are also repositories for spare roof tiles, other house repair materials and

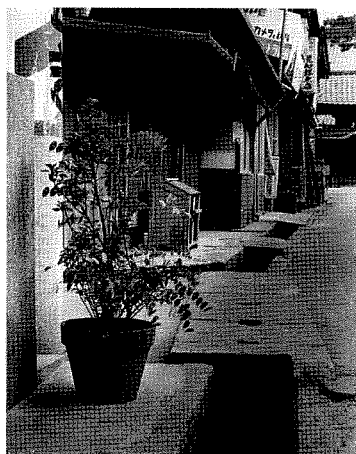
such difficult-to-store items as bicycles and baby carriages.

Although practicality is the foundation of the Japanese house, the essential is supported by aesthetic ideals. The potted plants so carefully tended by Mr. Nakata are being prepared for placement in the street for the pleasure of passersby. Similarly, when seen from the vantage point of an inside room, the colorful line of newly laundered clothes stirring in the garden is a bright accessory to the dark and still house. Threaded onto bamboo poles, they give the garden additional life and are not unlike the banners that decorate religious buildings during festival occasions.

The Japanese domestic garden, in fact, encapsulates many qualities found at Myoshinji, Ryoanji and Kenrokuen. When Mr. Nakata visits these gardens and other historically important places, he finds a confirmation and celebration of the essential elements of his own garden. Conversely, Mr. Nakata's garden is a daily reminder of nobler places.

One of Mr. Nakata's neighbors has a small garden that contains a tree and a large stone lantern that can almost be touched from her bed. The tree and lantern have an imposing presence and seem to find a place in the room. The distinctions between in and out, here and there, are blurred.

The full width of the clear opening that links the indoors with the outside is an important feature of the Japanese domestic garden. Openings without glass or insect screens give the impression that the room is part of the garden and that the garden is part of the room. Glass is a wall, however transparent. It keeps out bird song and the



Above left: Potted plants are cultivated in the garden before being placed on the street. Below: Gardens are a place of escape in times of fire or earthquake; ladders lead to adjacent rooftops.





The colorful line of laundered clothes is a bright accessory to the dark house; it is like the banners that decorate religious buildings during festivals.

smell of damp earth. Insect screens attached to the room opening also form a visual barrier between the inside and outdoors, and they reduce the flow of air.

Mr. Nakata's garden is revealed by the movement of sliding panels, which can be placed in various locations at the edge of his room or removed entirely. The *amado* (rain shutters) or *sboji* (translucent paper panels) can be manipulated with great precision and subtlety and placed to achieve desired effects. They are practical in that they establish degrees and kinds of shelter but there are, also, strong aesthetic consequences as the dimensions and proportions of solid and void are altered.

Mr. Nakata can look from one room through one or two others into a garden beyond and, sometimes, into a room beyond that. The resulting sense of telescoping space is an inevitable feature of contiguous spaces defined by movable screens. Moving about the house provides an infinity of views, never precisely remembered and always new, depending on one's position within the space. The matted room contains the audience and *sboji* reveal the drama of the outdoors. A moment is seized as the scene is revealed. Timing is all. *Sboji* may be parted just slightly to allow the moon to cast its light upon an old futon, and then closed again. The early morning sun falls on wet rocks, or a spring snowfall is caught within the garden and so becomes part of the room. Wet foliage and hot earth release smells that comfort the soul. The chirping of crickets and the sound of birds, some free and some in cages, have their own place within the scenario. The true importance of the garden is in the viewer's imagination.

Beyond its practical and aesthetic meaning, the garden is a place of the spirit. Gardens compensate for the absence of nature in our daily lives. In Japan, the wilderness, as an untrammelled ideal, disappeared long ago.

Mr. Nakata's garden is a metaphor for the vanishing rice paddies and the rocks and islands of a distant sea. The countryside as well as the mountains and forests of Japan are increasingly inaccessible to a people caught up with daily life in the city. Deep within the house, gardens attach themselves to particular rooms which are often the abodes of matriarchs and patriarchs.

In his later years Mr. Nakata finds solace and respite in his garden. It is a refuge from the street, with its traffic and indifference, presenting the prospect of a gentler time and place. The garden, next to Mr. Nakata's bed, is the place he glimpses during sleepless nights and in early morning hours; a place that fosters the contemplation of memories. Here, Mr. Nakata is connected to a more constant order than he is at other times and in other places.

The garden changes little. It simply exists, offering views of green leaves and blue sky, wet stones and freshly laundered clothes lightly moving on a hot summer afternoon, and reminding one that some things are continuous in a life of insistent change.



The sense of telescoping space provides an infinity of views, never precisely remembered and always new.