Portland Japanese Garden

Hoffman Builds... Cultural Connections

Since it opened in 1967, the Portland Japanese Garden has provided residents and visitors alike with an oasis of serenity and a connection to Japanese ideals and values. Located adjacent to Washington Park in Portland’s west hills, the Garden is considered the finest of its kind outside Japan.

In 2015, the Garden partnered with world-renowned Japanese architect Kengo Kuma to expand the facility to accommodate rapid visitor growth, as well as enhance its ability to immerse visitors in Japanese arts and culture. It was the first significant renovation in over fifty years.

As part of a highly collaborative team that included local design firm Hacker, Hoffman doubled the size of the Garden and added a series of buildings that support its cultural mission. Scope highlights included a 20-foot tall Japanese castle wall meticulously constructed by stone artisans, a tea café, a building featuring classroom, workshop, and gallery space, a library, a courtyard for festivals and performances, and five new gardens. Hoffman also replaced the existing parking lot to provide improved shuttle service and accessibility.

“The Portland Japanese Garden is a place to discard worldly thoughts and see oneself as a small but integral part of the universe.”

Portland Japanese Garden Society
The team faced the challenge of crafting an approach that honored the aesthetics and traditions of Japanese design, construction techniques, and culture. From woodwork details and landscaping to owner furnishings, preserving the elements of a traditional Japanese garden and incorporating authentic materials and methods drove every aspect of the project. Hoffman project manager Derek Monson summed up the team’s ethos when he said, “We made sure that everybody understood, this was not a normal project. Saying ‘we can’t do it that way’ was not an option.”

A Cross Cultural Commitment to Excellence

Japanese Garden staff carefully guided landscape operations to ensure even the smallest details achieved the highest level of quality and authenticity. Shown above are Garden Curator Sadafumi Uchiyama (right) and staff member Desirae Wood.

An unusually heavy snowfall in the winter of 2016 added to the project’s challenges. The only route providing access for deliveries remained frozen for too long, making it almost impossible to get materials to the site. The team maintained the schedule by staggering activities to utilize materials that had been delivered before the cold snap.

Snyder Roofing and Teufel Landscape worked closely together to install green roofs that incorporated Komatsu tile imported from Japan. The Sedum was grown in Teufel’s nursery for 8 months prior to installation.

Grinding out the details. The project’s quality culture reflected the Japanese tradition of craftsmanship.
The Quest for Authenticity

The Garden’s procurement process ventured far outside a typical construction project. For example, the massive stones used to construct the 20-foot Japanese castle wall: the rock had to have a specific, weathered look. It wasn’t something that could be ordered from a vendor. After a lengthy search, the Garden’s Curator, Sadafumi Uchiyama, found the answer in an abandoned quarry in Baker City, Oregon, three hundred miles east of Portland. Large boulders were scattered throughout the site, all covered in moss and scarred from years of exposure. Mr. Uchiyama, along with 15th generation Japanese master stone mason Suminori Awata, hand-selected 800 tons of rock, which was hauled to Portland in 34 flatbed trucks.

Craftsmanship on the project reflected the Japanese tradition of attention to detail and pursuit of aesthetic beauty. Once the castle wall stones were transported and staged on a lot in Portland, the team began a meticulous process of hand-cutting and shaping the stone into the required shapes and sizes. Using techniques passed down from the 17th century, a group of experienced masons worked under the direction of master stone mason Suminori Awata. Although the Garden did hire a translator to assist in this effort, the bulk of the work was accomplished through hand gestures, and the common “language” of stone shared by the key participants.

“Facing the complex site limitations, while honoring authentic Japanese aesthetic details, Hoffman worked closely with us and the design team to accomplish an amazing and timeless project which enriches the City of Portland.”

Sadafumi Uchiyama, Portland Japanese Garden Curator
PROJECT SNAPSHOT

Location: Portland, Oregon
Client: Japanese Garden Society of Oregon
Architect: Kengo Kuma and Associates with Hacker
Completion Date: March 2017
Recognition:
• Garden Society of Japan Garden Design Award
• AIA Portland Honor Award
• Engineering News Record Northwest Project of the Year and Best Cultural/Worship Project
• WoodWorks Beauty of Wood Design Award
• Certified LEED Gold

“Hoffman stewarded the Japanese Garden expansion project from nuanced vision to elegant reality, in their day-to-day care, as well as their willingness to find solutions together with the entire design team. Hoffman’s team could see that the quality of the work was more than the sum of its architectural parts. Our collaboration was defined by mutual respect, collegiality, friendship, and a strong undercurrent to get things right. This was a journey that could only have been taken together with Hoffman.”

Balazs Bognar AIA, Partner, Kengo Kuma & Associates

Kudos to the entire project team for making the Japanese Garden Cultural Crossing a case study in true collaboration, innovative construction practices, and world-class quality.

Preparing the district for a short overview demonstration of the Japanese tea ceremony.

New gallery space showcases a variety of Japanese arts and crafts.

The Garden Gift Shop offers a unique mix of hand-selected items from Japan, including several items available nowhere else in the United States.

The Village House stair entry is a key architectural element, set adjacent to a vertical screen wall of Alaskan Yellow Cedar wood slats. It was installed by the Japanese firm Takumi Company.

The tea café offers visitors an immersion in the natural landscape as part of an authentic presentation of the Japanese tea ceremony.

Preparing the utensils for a short overview demonstration of the Japanese tea ceremony.