

## **Characteristics of Ken Nakajima's Japanese Garden Design : For Overseas Japanese Garden Restoration Projects**

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**Abstract:** Ken Nakajima (1914-2000) was a Japanese landscape architect known for not only designing and constructing the gardens of VIPs, but also for creating many Japanese garden projects outside Japan. His design of the Japanese garden was distinctive and was based on his unique ideas and principles. In this paper, we have summarized the characteristics of his Japanese garden design, hoping that it will be useful for the restoration of overseas Japanese garden projects that he has worked on.

**Keywords:** Ken Nakajima, Japanese garden, Garden design, Waterscaping, Stone arrangement

### **Introduction**

In 2021, we summarized a restoration plan for the Moscow Japanese Garden in the Main Botanical Garden of the Russian Academy of Sciences. This project is being conducted by the government of Japan (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism) to restore overseas Japanese gardens. At that time, we researched the characteristics of the garden designs of Japanese landscape architect Ken Nakajima, designer of the Moscow Japanese Garden. In this paper, we report on the contents of that research.

There are three reasons why we researched this:

- Ken Nakajima is one of the historic landscape architects known for creating more than 20 Japanese gardens not only in Japan but around the world.
- Ken Nakajima is a landscape architect who has unique characteristics and style of garden design. His style of design is one of the typical examples of modern Japanese garden design.
- There are many hardships, passions, and stories in places like the Moscow Japanese Garden and all the overseas Japanese Gardens for that matter, and thus, have long been loved as a symbol of peace. We thought that to restore the gardens properly, we needed to study it in honor of the people who built them and who loved them.

There are still very few documents to tell people around the world about garden designs and styles of historic Japanese landscape architects. We hope that this report will be useful for the restoration of Ken Nakajima's work around the world.

## Ken Nakajima

Ken Nakajima was born in Tokyo in 1914. After he studied landscape architecture at Tokyo University of Agriculture, he did a lot of surveying of old gardens in Kyoto. Through those experiences, he learned the traditional Japanese garden design techniques and the philosophy behind them.

After establishing his own company “Consolidated Garden Research Inc. (Sougou-teien-kenkyuushitsu)” in 1957, he went to Europe and experienced the western garden culture. In the wake of that, he began to create a bright and colorful Japanese garden that incorporates flowers like a western garden. This was a completely new idea not found in the classical techniques of Japanese garden culture. In addition, when he viewed a painting by Russian painter Ivan Shishkin in Moscow in 1980, he was influenced greatly by the portrayal of the forest. Because of this, he has come to create a garden that expresses pristine nature’s depth and true beauty (Fig.1).

Ken Nakajima hated that only the customary shapes and methods of Japanese gardens were inherited as a tradition. He was a landscape architect who constantly created gardens with new ideas based on his creativity and the unique sensibility of the Japanese people. In addition, he had a strong policy to leave the trees that grow in place, and create the garden around them. When he created his gardens, he always respected the natural landscape of the place and he tried to incorporate it into his garden design. This style was the same for his overseas work (Fig.2).



Fig.1. Keiaisha (Minebea)’s Karuizawa Villa.  
Nakajima,Ken. 1985. Japan



Fig.2. Cowra Japanese Garden.  
Nakajima,Ken. 1978. Australia

## Landscaping

The characteristics of the landscaping of Ken Nakajima are that it is flat and bright, has a horizontal spread, and opens the sky wider to create a wide view. It wasn’t his style to create a design with a strong assertion. It is a completely opposite concept to, for example, the landscaping of Mirei Shigemori (1896-1975). Shigemori’s landscaping would use stones vertically in many cases. His landscaping is based on a vertical composition, to make people tense and stimulated. On the other hand, Nakajima’s landscaping is based on a horizontal composition, to make people relax and be calm (Fig.3). Ken Nakajima aimed to create a space where people would want to spontaneously stay there for as long as possible and were relaxed.

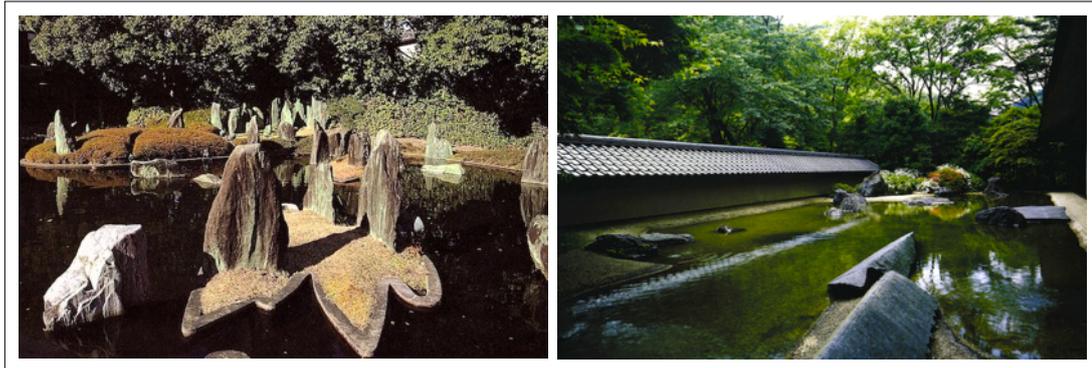


Fig.3. Design style comparison. Left: Matsunoo Grand Shrine, Ho-rai Garden. Shigemori, Mirei. 1985. Japan  
Right: Hotel Kouyou Kan. Nakajima, Ken. 1978. Japan

### Waterscaping

Ken Nakajima designed the garden with an emphasis on the continuity of the landscape that spreads horizontally. For example, if the stones on the edge of a water stream or pond (revetment stones) are conspicuously visible in the landscape of a garden, the feeling of the undulations of the surrounding mountains and the water surface are connected and the view is lost. Therefore, he always constructed the shape of the water structures with a cast-in-place U-shaped concrete frame to reduce the edge stones while the water level is raised up to the limit (Fig.4). He designed this to hide the edge of the concrete and used plants as much as possible. He also made some low waterfalls with stones in a deep and gently curving stream. This way makes the entire stream looked like a horizontal step (cascade) when viewed from a distance. He liked this kind of landscape and has used this design in many of his projects (Fig.5).

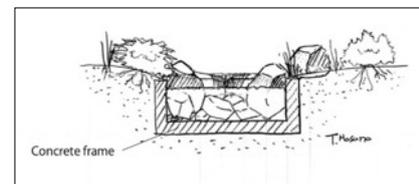


Fig.4. Stream's sectional sketch.  
Drawn by Hosono, Tatsuya.



Fig.5. Montreal Japanese Garden.  
Nakajima, Ken. 1988. Canada

### Stone arrangement

Ken Nakajima taught his students how to assemble stones in landscaping, "Put the stones as if it had rolled down from the mountain and stopped there spontaneously." He believed that the orthodox (traditional) methods of Japanese gardens, such as burying stones to make them look stable and arranging the directions of the multiple stones, is very artificial and does not look like a natural landscape (Fig.6). Of course, he knew the orthodox Japanese garden stone arrangement method, however, he intentionally placed the stones in an unstable position or broke the composition of the stones to express the true beauty of nature (Fig.7).



Fig.6. Moscow Japanese Garden.  
Nakajima, Ken. 1987. Russia

## Discussion

As we mentioned at the beginning, Ken Nakajima was a landscape architect who always tried to create a new Japanese garden style suitable for that present age. In an interview, he said, “The world’s people expect a traditional Japanese garden, but I don’t like to make it.” (Reference № 13. P.31.). On the other hand, he was always thinking about how to create an authentic Japanese garden, that the world’s people have longed for. He created the gardens in many countries while thinking about these two contradictory concepts.

We think that many of the overseas Japanese gardens he built do not look like orthodox Japanese gardens, especially if you look at them in parts. It was because he always searched for a new Japanese garden style and he tried to design them with respect for the natural scenery of the country and with respect to its location.

He has placed authentic Japanese structures such as teahouses, stone pagodas, and bridges in effective locations to make the garden of his modern style look like an authentic Japanese garden, which is longed for by the people world over. This is our hypothesis, but we think it is these Japanese structures that give his Japanese gardens cultural authenticity.

## Conclusion

*The characteristics of Ken Nakajima’s garden design technique can be summarized into the following three points:*

- Bright and colorful, incorporating flowers like a western garden.
- Flat and wide, having a horizontal spread and continuity.
- Intended randomness, to express the pristine nature’s depth and true beauty.

*His concept as a landscape architect can be summarized into the following three points:*

- To search for a new Japanese garden style suitable for that present age.
- To respect for the natural scenery of the country and its place.
- To fulfill the longing of people worldwide for Japanese culture.

Ken Nakajima never tried to make a classic Japanese garden in his work overseas. He created a modern and friendly garden by skillfully combining the idea of a new Japanese garden with the natural scenery of the countries and authentic Japanese structures. That’s why his work has been loved all over the world for decades.

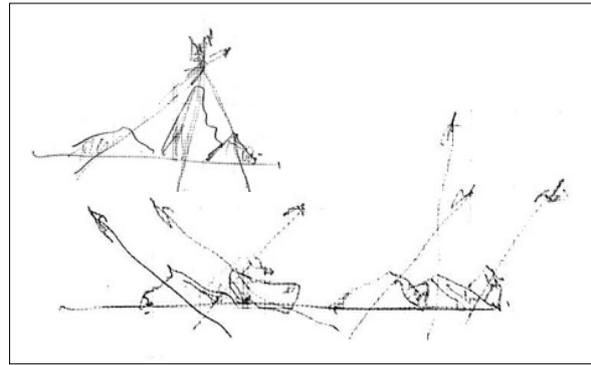


Fig.7. Study sketches of the way of a stone arrangement.

Upper: Orthodox (traditional) way.

Lower: Ken Nakajima’s way.

Drawn by Hosono, Tatsuya.

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