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The polysensory dynamics of ambiance

Example of a Japanese garden (Murin-an, Kyoto)

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Abstract. *While ambiance is often felt as something that envelops us, it should not always be considered as spatially homogeneous. While a given garden can be understood as a spatial totality through the experience of its specific, distinctive ambiance, this ambiance can be experienced as dynamically structured as one moves through the space. The aim of this paper is to explore this issue through the analysis of a specific example: the dynamic experience proposed by the visual and sonic features in the garden of Murin-an in Kyoto.*

Keywords: *Japanese garden, Murin-an, water, soundscape, sonic effect*

Introduction

Since there is no other reason to walk in a garden than the desire to do so, luring on the visitors – appealing to their curiosity again and again – is one of the spatial feats that the garden has to accomplish. In order to achieve this, the spatial composition of all gardens large enough to require exploration through motion must set up a variety of ‘morphological strategies’. The most pervasive strategy, that of hiding and revealing objects or spaces that visitors might discover as they walk around, plays on the two-fold modality of spatial experience involving a variety of spatial attitudes, based on the duality of rest (‘here’), and expectation or movement towards... (‘there’). The goal is not only to create a succession of (more or less expected) surprises, but also to invite the visitors reconstruct in imagination a sense of the whole garden beyond what is actually perceived at one given moment (Szántó 2014a, 2014b).

Such strategies can be found in every garden style, each using its own morphological vocabulary, whether geometrical as the French baroque garden or naturalistic as in the landscape garden. Western visitors experience it with particular pregnancy when visiting Japanese gardens: the relative small scale of many gardens (or subspaces within larger gardens), the sharply delineated network of paths, the variety of compositional devices playing with refinement on the articulation of several sensory modalities, offer a density of synaesthetic spatial experience seldom encountered in European gardens. (This may explain the appeal they hold even for visitors who are not familiar with the culture that created them.)

The spatial strategy of hiding and revealing found in Japanese gardens is often mentioned, but it is mainly discussed in terms of visual cues. Yet sound is also a very powerful and emotionally more pregnant tool to articulate spatial experience by

playing with the two modalities ('here' and 'there') of spatial intentionality. The aim of this paper is to explore this issue through the analysis of a specific example: the dynamic experience proposed by the visual and sonic features in the garden of Murin-an in Kyoto.

The garden of Murin-an

Designed by the garden designer Ogawa Jihei VII (known as Ueji) at the end of the 19th century, Murin-an incorporates the spatial know-how of centuries of garden design in Japan, together with the new requirements for a 'natural' garden coming from the encounter with Western landscape gardening.

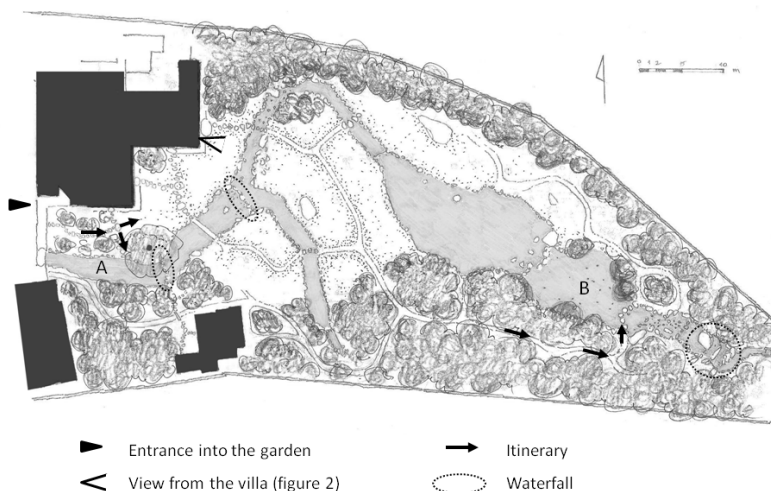


Figure 1. Map of Murin-an. Drawing C. Szántó.

A: Entrance into the garden. B: Towards the three-tiered waterfall

Despite its small size (a mere 3135 m²), Murin-an is very rich in its spatial composition, the variety of ambiances it offers and the articulation between them. The area is wedge-shaped, slightly rising toward the Eastern tip. The entrance and the buildings are located on the Western side. The main part of the garden is made of a central open space partially occupied by a large pond and surrounded by a wooded hem of varying width (figure 1). From the veranda of the Japanese-style villa, there is wide open view over the central clearing surrounded by woods that seem to continue all the way to the distant Eastern mountain range visible above the tree canopy (figure 2). This use of the traditional 'borrowed scenery' technique gives the viewer the impression that the garden is nestled within the natural forest covering the mountains, far removed from the bustle of the city, as its very name suggests (Murin-an means 'hermitage with no neighbour').

The 'naturalness' of the garden is reinforced by the design of the stream that crosses it. The stream draws its water from the then newly built Biwa canal and includes many features recalling mountain streams, cascades and lakes. While water is



Figure 2. View of the garden from the villa, with the Eastern Mountains in the background. Photo C. Szántó, November 2015.

present in every part of the garden, the design of the paths (and particularly the paths accessible to today's visitors) is such that it cannot be experienced as a continuum but only as a succession of visual and sonic punctuations. The movement of water allows for the creation of many sound-making devices, such as the large three-tiered water cascade at the farthest end of the garden, stones and water-steps deliberately placed in the lake – and streambed. Each creates a specific sound that can be defined as so many distinguishable 'sound objects' (Schafer, 1977). As visitors moves through the garden, one 'sound object' will become audible while the other will fade away. Sometimes visible from the path, sometimes hidden or partially hidden by landform and vegetation, these sound-creating features qualify the ambiance of the space in which they are heard. They also create distant spatial appeals (over there) that complete and articulate the polysensory experience offered by a given space at any given moment (here). Of course, the way they are heard depends on the specific conditions on the day of the visit: the atmospheric conditions, the seasons (including the seasonal sound of animals, such as the summer cicadas), but also the sound of the heavy traffic from the road outside the garden.

Murin-an: experiencing the garden

In what follows, I will describe two 'sonic effects' (Augoyard and Torgue, 2005) where the sound plays a double role, as both a qualifier of the actual ambiance ('here') and an invitation to walk on towards a distant goal ('there').

Moment of choice (A in figure 1)

The first 'sonic effect' occurs soon after we enter the garden and move forward on a narrow path of stepping stones, between the Japanese house and the stream (figure 3). It is created by the superposition of two 'sound objects', coming from two visually (and spatially) unrelated areas: the stronger sound of a waterstep located

nearby but invisible, reinforcing the 'natural woodland' character of the area beyond the stream, and the weaker sound of another, glimpsed ahead in the distance, inviting us into a bright clearing promising a wide open view. Thus the sonic effect partakes in the double structure of the spatial experience, enhancing the 'here' of the space where we find ourselves (a shady woodland with a brook) and the 'there' of the contrasting distant view.

As we move forward on the stepping stones of the path, we suddenly reach a larger stone. It is a traditional marker for a place where a path divides. Here we have to decide whether to turn left and continue toward the clearing, or turn right and step down towards the river and try to get a glimpse of the sound source.



Figure 3. Path proposing a choice between a visible goal (view of the bright clearing) and a hidden one (sound of a small waterfall).
Photo C. Szántó, April 2015

At this point of choice the most pregnant character of our spatial experience is not the 'here', but the two competing spatial calls ('there'): one along a clearly visible path towards a visually appealing goal (the bright clearing), and the other towards an invisible goal whose appeal is mediated through sound. However, the two spatial calls have unequal strength (view of a visible goal vs. sound of a hidden one), and most visitors choose to continue towards the clearing, probably not even consciously aware of the choice they are making.

The appeal of a distant sound (B in figure 1)

Later in our walk, after having looked at the view from the villa (figure 2) and crossed the clearing, we enter the 'woods' where the density and closeness of the natural objects surrounding us turn our limited and texturally rich visual space into an essentially haptic (tactile) one.

At some point along our progress, we might notice the roar of a waterfall ahead. First the sound is distant, its source hidden from sight. It is somewhere ahead of us, in the indefinite zone between the garden and the mountains, in that imaginary spatial realm that the view from the villa suggested. Here our sense of space weaves together the multiple scales of the space that we perceive and imagine: the haptic scale of what is close enough to be touched, the limited scale of the accessible space

(how far we see the path), the indefinite scale of the woodland whose limits we cannot see, and the wide sonic space suggested by the distant roar, which seems to expand far into the distance, even – recalling our previous view of the garden from the villa – all the way to the horizon of the Eastern mountains.

As we advance, the sound becomes stronger, but its origin remains invisible. We reach a place where the path is blocked by a slight rise of the ground, planted with trees and tall shrubs which block our view. There it drops to the left and a few steps lead us down to stepping stones crossing a brook (figure 4). This might take us by surprise: we had lost sight of the water upon entering the woods. However, encountering the brook holds a promise: we can reasonably expect that it flows from that yet unseen waterfall. Walking down next to a large block of stone blocking our view until the very last minute, we reach the water, step onto the first stepping stone – and indeed, as we expected it, the sight of the waterfall suddenly unfolds (figure 5).

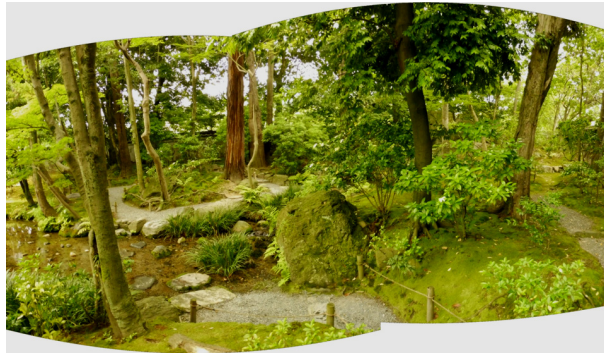


Figure 4. Path presumably leading to the still hidden waterfall.
Photo C. Szántó, June 2015.



Figure 5. Facing the three-tiered waterfall.
Photo C. Szántó, June 2015.

Conclusion

In the Tale of Gengi, written in the 11th century, the hero, when designing a garden, places a stone in a specific location under a waterfall to produce an intended sound. Of course, it is all too easy to create a shortcut between those gardens built one thousand years ago and those we visit today (although this is often done). However, we find in that mention a sensitivity to the aesthetic qualities of natural sounds which contemporary visitors cannot fail to notice in Japanese gardens today.

In the two examples we discussed above (chosen among several others), it became quite clear that the aural qualities of the sonic atmosphere of an area within the garden may not be simply described by a single typifying name ('waterfall') and the measure of sound levels. The soundscape that we hear is composed of multiple sounds, each with its own sonic qualities, its temporality, its direction and distance, its way of 'occupying' space. The superposition of these multiple sounds (which together make up the soundscape) adds to the complexity of the visually mediated spatial experience.

1) Some superpositions of sounds can truly be thought of as sonic compositions. Such is, for instance, the three-tiered waterfall in Murin-an observed from a sort of promontory over the water, where, if one listens carefully, one can distinguish the sound of each single fall, and also the tinkle of the water flowing in a thin sheet over small pebbles just below our feet.

2) Sound creates a variety of ambiances through the emotionally pervasive qualities of sound (the burbling, splashing, babbling...). An area where a stream flowing between trees sounds like a mountain stream thanks to the appropriate placement of stones in the stream bed, evokes the atmosphere of mountain forests much more powerfully than the sole plantation of trees.

3) Sounds define (delimit) sub-spaces within the garden. These auditory spaces do not necessarily correspond to the visually perceived spaces. An example of this is the roar of the waterfall at the end of the garden, which dilates a visually limited (but not defined) space, thus suggesting a synesthetically perceived wide expanse in relation to the garden.

4) Sounds create spatial appeal (a sound over there whose source may or may not be seen). Their role is just as important as that of the visual appeal in creating the dynamic conditions for that distinct form of aesthetic act that we call 'promenade'.

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Auteure

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