GARDENS, A JOURNEY;
SHOW GARDENS AS DESIGN LABORATORIES

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design

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July 2017
Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Lim In Chong

25/07/2017
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my Supervisor, Sand Helsel, who has got the patience of a saint. This thesis would not have been possible without her help and guidance.

I would also like to thank Dr. Richard Black whose timely advice and encouragement has been of great help, and also Dr. Graham Crist with whom I first started this journey.

I am also grateful to:

One time fellow students Dr. Archie Pizzini and Dr. Hoan V. Tran for their encouragement.

My fellow gardeners in Japan and elsewhere in the world.

My late grandfather who opened my eyes to the delightful world around me.

My long suffering late father, who made it possible for me to receive an education and to indulge in my earlier works.

My mother who introduced me to the birds and orchids.

My wife, Gek Cheng, and my children Hui Hiang and Chuang Chek for their love and support.

To everyone else whom I have missed out who made this possible.
This thesis on Landscape Architecture is based on a practical hands-on approach to the crafting of architecture and landscape, both hard and soft. As I have had no formal training in either field, nor studied existing theories on the subject, I choose at the onset of this Master’s research, with the consent of my course tutors, to reflect on how I have arrived with an end product from a particular starting point.

To this end a unique and unconventional framework was devised for this thesis which traces the early childhood influences of the realm of nature, and arriving at architecture and landscape architecture through hands-on experience.

The building and maintaining of gardens afforded me the opportunity to reflect, pay attention to errors, and mentally correct my design approach to preclude such mistakes in the future. Each garden is informed by the lessons learnt from previous works.

The garden shows came at a fortuitous time of my practice, and allowed me to experiment and practice building gardens over and over again in a quick succession.

I had to struggle to map out a complex chain of thought and consequent actions to realise the concepts and ideas that sprung to mind, as I designed my gardens, be they commercial bread-and-butter commissions, or competitive show-gardens.

What was intuitive and natural responses to site and brief tend to suffer somewhat under the scrutiny of a logical approach. There is no formulaic approach to my garden design. Each garden requires a unique approach as each site and brief is unique.

I have been able to venture beyond the confines of my comfort zone to explore and push my creative boundaries outwards and have not relied on time-tested models. In hindsight, all may seem clear or obvious, but in the midst of sorting out design issues or physical site problems, the way forward is seldom clear cut, and always seem hazy and nebulous.

Nevertheless in this thesis I attempt to demonstrate what I have learnt in the years of practice, particularly through gardens, and where this learning is applied in practice.
Abstract

This thesis traces my early childhood years growing up in a post war Malaya. It describes my early experiences and the memories that have influenced my design directions.

It also traces my participation in show gardens in Japan and elsewhere describing how these show gardens were used as laboratories for experimentation on soft and hard landscapes.

I further reflect on how these experiments have influenced my work on permanent gardens.
List of Illustrations


June Snow, (2011, July 30). Retrieved from: www.youtube.com/watch?v=0w8f9V9U5xI


Bento Box, (date unknown). Retrieved from: otakumode.com
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to gardens, Malaysia has a poor history despite the fact that the surrounding regions are rich with traces of historical landscapes.

Mainland South East Asia and the Indonesian archipelago lies between the Hindu and Chinese civilisations, thus its landscape and architecture is heavily influenced by the Hindu cosmology, as evidenced by the surviving temples and palace complexes in Cambodia, Indonesia, and Thailand. In these countries, architecture and gardens were laid out to reflect the landscape of the mythical Mount Meru, complete with terraces and moats. In the case of Vietnam, the formal imperial palaces and gardens of neighbouring China with its pavilions, water features and courtyards exert a great influence on its design sensibilities.

The Peninsula of Malaya failed to take part in the development occurring in the region surrounding it and if there had been gardens in the Hindu settlements in Bujang Valley in Kedah, north of the peninsula, they had long ago been obliterated by the creeping jungle.

The history of the Malaccan Sultanate was first established by a Sumatran prince and lasted less than two hundred years before it was conquered by the Portuguese, and then the Dutch. Both the Portuguese and the Dutch were principally interested in controlling the spice trade through the Straits of Malacca, and did not bring with them nor develop a local gardening typology.

The English, who made a huge impact on Malayan society, were the last to rule Malaya before it gained its independence in 1957. They were mostly interested in commerce, mainly in growing rubber and extracting tin.

To be sure, the botanical gardens in places like Penang, Taiping and Singapore were created in the craze for all things botanical during the Victorian era. However, in design they were little more than depositories of plants, built to display them, a bit like a museum of natural sciences.

What little gardening that was done manifested itself in the rose and dahlia beds up in the highlands, where the cool subtropical climate was much more suitable for the growing of English summer border plants.

In existence were some open lawns and hedgerows installed with giant rain trees in some planters' bungalows and also, the ubiquitous tree-lined padang in front of government offices throughout the peninsula.

In theory there should exist in Malaysia a great gardening tradition to learn from due to the fact that Malaysia is right in the middle of the significant gardening cultures of Persia and India on one side, China and Japan on the other, as well as having been colonised by the English who have a long history of gardening along with Malaysia’s great wealth and diversity in its flora. However, due to the fact that there is little tradition and few typologies to emulate and develop from because of the reasons stated above, anyone wishing to develop a skill in Landscape Design will have to develop it in a non-conventional way.

Having no tertiary or formal training in neither Architectural nor Landscape Design to give a theoretical basis to my designs, I have had to design without recourse to any pedagogical structure.

Two sets of practical experiences have been particularly helpful. Firstly, reconstructing, extending and living in traditional houses helped me understand construction methods and the craft of building, and also to understand space and spatial arrangements. Secondly, the participation in multiple show gardens have enabled me to use them as research laboratories, where I was able in a hands-on manner to test, often repeatedly, ideas, strategies and materials. The short duration and large number of visitors also meant that I could get a wide audience feedback.

In joining this Master’s Programme, I seek to explore and understand and articulate my design process.

This thesis is divided into five main parts:

Firstly, to explore my early formative years, to find images, emotions and concepts which have influenced my outlook in life, and attitude to design.

Secondly, to study my early works to see what I was doing then, and how they may have influenced my later work.

Thirdly, to examine my show gardens which I took as my laboratory, a testing ground of ideas and a catalyst in developing design ideas. In addition, to find out how they may have influenced the professional work that I completed around that same period of time.

Fourthly, to look at three of my permanent works and their relationship to the findings from the show gardens.

Lastly, to analyse and conclude on the discoveries that I have made and how those might have a wider application.
Of the thousands of events and millions of experiences – sights, sounds, smells and feelings which are stored, only a limited number can be recalled instantly and identified. Others hide in the inner recesses of the mind, subtly influencing our choices. I sought to identify some of these childhood experiences that have had such a strong bearing on our adult worldview; thus it was critical for me to examine my childhood to discover the roots of my designs.

I was born in the front room of the upper level of a rented shop house. This was the type ubiquitous to towns across the then British Empire in the tropics. These were terraced and constructed out of load-bearing brick walls finished with lime plaster; the second storey was supported by 4in x 8in timber joists, and the roofs covered with Chinese roof tiles. The shops were connected by “five foot ways” so that one could walk the entire length of the streets without having to put up with the noonday sun, or indeed being caught in a tropical deluge.

My grandfather started life in China in the late 1800s and had immigrated first to Thailand where most people from the area around Swatow tended to gravitate, then to Singapore, and finally to Batu Pahat in Johore. There he operated a book store downstairs in the two-storey traditional shophouse.

In a way this was a rather unremarkable life, as millions of Chinese who had immigrated to Southeast Asia, settled in not a dissimilar lifestyle.

Batu Pahat was essentially a Chinese town. We had Hainanese, Hakka, Hokkien, Cantonese, Hing Hua and Teochew neighbours but there was also a Punjabi roti stallholder and a Tamil eye healer. Strangely, we did not have many Malays in our town. These neighbours had all been first generation immigrants and had retained their cultural traits from their various regions of Asia.

This meant that we had to cross over cultures and subcultures, speaking multiple dialects every single day. We got to learn for example, the different cuisines that the various dialect speakers ate, right down to details of funerary practices which you would find out about if you went to a funeral wake. Things such as the Teochews would have their coffins leave the house feet first, while Hokkiens do it in reverse.

The town itself was laid out in a grid pattern with the District Officer’s house overlooking the government offices and the padang. The main road led from there to the river side where a small port facilitated the export of commodities. As far as I remember the main town that lay between the mudding river and padang was completely devoid of any vegetation. I had always admired the forest, mangrove covered river sides, rubber small holdings and the kampongs with their vibrant nature. This was in stark contrast to the towns devoid of vegetation.

The irony of growing up in a country rich with floral diversity yet in a town devoid of trees, living in a country surrounded by a region with magnificent gardens yet in a garden typology of its own, became a catalyst for my interest in Landscape Design. This together with my rich childhood experiences that have had such a strong bearing on our adult worldview; thus it was critical for me to examine my childhood to discover the roots of my designs.

From the age of seven, I was sent to an English medium school and although I was given Mandarin Language lessons simultaneously, virtually everything I was to read from then on was in English, which in time replaced Teochew as my most proficient language and this gave an additional layer to the cultures that I had already encountered.

The international boarding school, the United World College of South East Asia, with its emphasis on relationship building between individuals and communities that I spent four upper secondary years in, brought me in contact with people from many countries from around the world. This reinforced my ability to understand people from various cultural backgrounds and to gain insight into their way of thinking.

This early exposure gave me the ability to move comfortably between cultures while remaining rooted on my own. It later translated to the ability to communicate with builders and designers from different cultural backgrounds and it also gave me the ability and flexibility to eventually create gardens for people of different cultures.

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The year in which I was born, that is 1955, was a specific and pivotal period in history. The Japanese invasion had been repelled and the communist insurgency made the continued occupation by the British colonial powers too expensive, leading to the granting of independence to Malaysia. Although the new political elites were chosen from among the upper strata of society who were British Educated Anglophiles, the high point of British Cultural hegemony had been breached and the ebb had begun. As the tide receded further and further, more and more space emerged for other cultural narratives to enter the design
A mangrove forest full of life, where I spent many happy times observing fish, monkeys and listening to the loud call of the white breasted kingfisher piercing the stillness of the swamp. The dark waters produced a very deep reflection in its stillness. This was to become a repeated feature in a number of my show gardens.

The primary rainforest was within a short bicycle ride from Batu Pahat town and contained an enormous treasure trove of plant life of various shapes and sizes that can be used in garden designs. I was later able to utilise my observations of this natural environment in the creation of the Spice Garden.

Clear running streams of my childhood teemed with tropical fish. This served as inspiration for the many water features in my garden designs using clear water complete with fish and underwater plants.

References:


The Sultan of Johore’s house on a knoll on the outskirts of town built in the colonial style. This was the type of architecture used for grade one civil servants’ housing. This typology was inspired by the traditional Malay house. The house sits off the ground on plastered brick piers or stumps. Although the architecture was of great interest to me, the garden was relatively bare apart from a small tree and a few desultory shrubs; a stark contrast to the natural forest just behind and out of sight.

The row of traditional two-storey shophouses diagonally located from the one where I spent my childhood, built in a similar architectural style. This was my first experience of architecture. An entire town was made from this architectural typology. However this part of town was completely devoid of any vegetation.

References:
Teochew street opera. A miracle in transformation.

Once a year, during the birthday of the local deity Tuah Pek Kong, the Chinese temple is a hive of activity. In town the local Chinese community waits with bated breath. The ancient art of Teochew opera would be performed again. In this era, the only form of entertainment available to the public was the wireless (this was before the introduction of the television) and black and white movies in cinemas. It was also the era before globalisation stripped the people of their interest in their own culture; when dialects were still widely spoken in Johore, before Mandarin learnt from schools in Singaporean television deprived the Chinese diaspora of their native dialects.

For any young child, this was an exciting time. If you were taken to the opera, you would be allowed to stay up past midnight until the show was over. The magic starts with the building of the opera stage. A lorry would come bearing nothing but poles, some planks and a few sheets of canvases. Within two days, the structure would have been lashed together with bamboo screens and ready for the performance.

And what a performance indeed. Ordinary women transformed into princesses in gorgeous embroidered gowns, men into scholars, judges and generals, even emperors strutting across the stage, playing out stories of wars, intrigues and romance, moving the audience to excitement, outrage and tears.

The colours, the period costumes, the back drops, the music, the singing, all brought us back to a different time and a different place. Entire lives would be lived out in one night, and then it would be over. We would then return to our individual ordinary lives, only to return to live again vicariously the following night until the ten or so nights had run its course.

For me this was magical. From bare ground to a receptacle of lives lived, stories told and back to bare ground again. It was a concentric circle of ephemerality; the stage, the lives of the audience, the actors and short lives of the character that they played.

The intense relationship that the audience had with the opera taught me that designers can only be successful if their work can touch the emotions of the audience. Of course I had not realised this when I was a child but looking back, I can see how the sense of the ephemeral was able to acutely intensify the feeling of loss and thereby enforcing the memory.

References:
1 Bamboo Scaffolding, (2015, April 5). From: www.youtube.com/ watch?v=Vc3XrskTgw
June Snow - The story of a woman unfairly accused of murder. In this scene she was led away to be executed, calling for snow to fall in the middle of summer to declare her innocence. The different regional operas, although appearing similar to people for the outside, are instantly recognized by insiders, from the use of colour, costumes and face paintings.

Opera performers in costume, transforming an older lady into a bearded male character and a matured lady into a young maiden.

References:
1 Teochew Actors by Aik Beng Chia, (date unknown). Retrieved from: www.aikbengchia.com/1681366-lao-sai-tao-yuan-teochew-opera-troupes#0
The early works that I will present here represents a period between 2000 and 2012. They were early forays into design, both architectural and landscape.

These early explorations in architecture tapped into the resources of traditional methods of construction. They used tried and tested methods in solving the problems of shelter in the tropical environment, such as keeping dry from the rain and damp, and escaping from the heat was the perennial challenge.

These two architectural works were produced without clients, and I managed to design-and-build them on properties which I had already owned.

I was fortunate to have this opportunity. That gave me the freedom to experiment without taking into account, the element of time, nor instructions from clients, which in turn, allowed me to learn about construction through firsthand experience. Living in my own work also provides the opportunity to learn to relate to all the details of my work.

An example of this was when I had built my first house with a high pitched roof sloping into a central deck. The steep pitch was built to expel rain water off the roof quickly to prevent leaks and the thatch rotting. However, during a Sumatra (a term for a rain laden squall originating from Sumatra) I discovered that timber deck had become saturated and begun to rot. I had to subsequently retro-fit giant gutters as a remedy, to remove the rain water swiftly and effectively. As I do not think that gutters are the best of all solutions, I developed different ways of dealing with rain water in my subsequent jobs.

These experiments were of course only possible because I had no need for a client and was able to find the financing for the project on my own. There was a lot I had to learn, before I was able to work commercially.
Round about the late 1980s, having acquired a small rural property, I decided to build a house there. It was the first house I had ever built and was based roughly on the typology of a Malayan Chinese rural vernacular house, which gave it a high pitch, hipped roof. It was built of timber sitting on tall brick column stumps or piers and was roofed with thatch made from Metroxylon sagu woven on Areca catechu battens. At that time I made a quick survey of the many types of leaves used for thatching, and having chosen the most suitable material available in southern Johore, I found that Metroxylon was the most readily available and the most durable.

My brief to myself was that the house must take advantage of the views available, have good spatial qualities and arrangement, be built from natural materials, must be able to relate to the surrounding nature, and be large enough to host guests and parties.

Cross Sections through the house showing the high pitched roofs dispersing hot air and enabling air flow while cutting out radiant heat.

Looking back I realise that I was already working with the equatorial climate creating intermediate spaces and bringing the garden adjacent to the house by creating an enclose courtyard.
The roof of the house being thatched before the installation of doors and windows to create a comfortable platform from which to survey the surrounding area.
This project was to be a learning experience, a journey of discovery of design, the qualities of material and structure. Since the structure was to be constructed from timber, the first thing I had to learn was the traditional method of timber construction. The joints, the way different members connect, the size and spacing of joists, the roof span, the roofing material, etc. learning all that gave me the ability to impose these limits as a discipline to explore design issues.

The exploration of traditional designs allowed me to look into their advantages and disadvantages. Could there be other ways to resolve the problem of the discomforts of hot humid tropical living, and yet to enhance the advantages of the same?

As this house was not meant to be an exact copy of a traditional house, I was able to have some room for experimentation within the confines of the traditional method. That gave me a clear direction for my first design.
The front view of the house when it was first completed. I was suddenly left with a stark empty plot of land with very few trees on it. Although I had always been interested in nature, this gave me an opportunity to build a collection of plants and later, it led to experiments in garden making.

Langkahsuka 1
The house dressed up for festivities.

Louvered sliding doors on wooden rails. These were not traditional to Malaysia but allowed me to have wide openings to get an unimpeded view, and also to facilitate air movement. The large gutters, a later addition prevented rainwater from rotting the timber deck.

Timber battens held the thatch from being blown away by strong winds.

A yearly visit by students from the National University of Singapore's (NUS) School of Architecture led by their tutor, the late Mr. Jack Tan.
The construction of Langkasuka 1 had left me slightly dissatisfied. I had built a house more or less along traditional lines but that has left me with a curiosity about and a desire to learn more about how an actual traditional house is constructed.

My opportunity arrived in 1993 with the rediscovery of a house that I had seen and photographed a decade earlier, which had fallen into a severe state of dilapidation.

It was a traditional timber structure of the Rumah Panjang (Long Roof) type found in the state of Malacca. The problem was caused by the old thatch that had begun to deteriorate allowing rain water to enter the house to accelerate the process of decay. Dampness is the worst enemy of timber structures in the tropics as it combines with mould and bacteria to soften the wood for insect attack.

By that time, the main house had been abandoned and the owner was living in the rumah dapur or the kitchen house. It was not many years after I had finished the previous house but I instantly saw it as an opportunity to learn all about traditional house construction in the context of the Malacca typology.

I acquired the house and began the process of numbering and disassembling the house from roof down, then moving it to site for rebuilding. Aside from deconstruction and reconstructing the house, I also decided to extend the house by building new units joined to the old, partially enclosing two courtyards in the process. In keeping with the original way the house would have been used, two entrances were retained, one for the casual and one which led through the kitchen for female and more intimate family members.

Because we had to work on new timber to replace the old rotten members and because we had to create new units to extend the house, I was able to learn about joinery and construction.

This gave me some space to experiment with the relationship between the outdoor spaces starting with completely enclosed and roofed over spaces to spaces open to the sky. Taking an idea from the traditional house, I also created a house with different levels of privacy.

I also made sure that the design allowed for a closed relationship between the house and garden by creating three sided courtyard gardens that brought the natural environment right into the house.

The project took three years to complete and living in the house I realised the importance of intermediate spaces, the spaces between the enclosed indoor and the completely outdoor where most of the day ends up being spent.
Disassembling: taking apart the house from roof down.

Taking down the walls.

Disassembled: the thousands of pieces of timber from the house awaiting careful assembly.
Reconstruction

The two Plans, one showing the original configuration and the other showing the new. The original house was totally enclosed. The new one had a series of intermediate spaces created so that some areas had no walls while some had floors but no roof. The spaces are integrated with courtyards bringing the outdoors in and the reverse.
These two plans show the entrances. The new configuration preserves the double entrances and the concept of the different levels of privacy.
Repairing: repairing and replacing timber provides an opportunity to learn about joints.

Reassembly of the old timbers.
Completed – Front elevation.

View from loft of the newly constructed unit showing how the gaps on the roof allows air flow and heat dissipation.

Courtyard – Water feature designed to capture roof runoff from all sides.
Cantilevered balcony seat with decorative fretwork.

Interior of the newly reconstructed and renovated rumah ibu which became the main living room. I added long windows to allow more light to reach the centre of the room.

Newly carved Master bedroom doors also functions as a translucent screen for privacy.

The three sided courtyard designed to bring nature from the hill into the house.

Guest bedroom.
‘Serambi’ entrance Foyer of the restored house which in the original house functioned as the living, this was also a place where male guests were welcome to dinner. A long mat would have been rolled out and the guest would have sat on either side of the mat.

Open living. I discovered living here that this sort roofed over open spaces allow free airflow and an open vista to the outside became the most lived in spaces.
On completion of the houses I found it imperative to start designing and building the gardens around them. This entails acquiring and growing plants from the tropical world, experimenting and learning about their habits, growth rates, diseases, pests and their specific requirements. Looking back to my observation of nature I experimented with colours, shapes and plant associations. I also discovered that hard landscape is import to impose discipline and also allow access to different parts of the garden.

Curvilinear paved garden pathway with grass edges.

Aerial view showing how the different units were connected.

Courtyard capture the rain. Lessons learnt from my last house where the torrential rain poured onto the deck creating a necessity for giant gutters. This house has no gutters and the rain water falls and gets into a courtyard and the overflow drained out.

Secondary family room. Wooden carvings and louvres were used on the fenestrations. These traditional elements enables me to control the amount of sunlight and heat entering the house at different parts of the day.

Aerial view – the house enveloped by green.
On an eight acre plot of land in Penang, the new tropical Spice Garden was then my biggest project, which became one of my turning points. It was in the year 2003 and that was really very early on in my design career.

The site was part of an abandoned rubber estate across the road from the beach, backing onto a primary rainforest. The rubber trees had not been tapped for some time and had grown enormous while the secondary forest had started to grow around them.

It was a valley with fairly steep sides and some flatland at the front of the site.

The brief was simple. To build a naturalistic garden to be a receptacle for an interesting botanical collection from the tropical world, and to establish a garden for spices and herbs. To build this within a time frame and a budget.

I was then a very small firm of one as I was at the start of my design career. I was able to devote quite a lot of energy into laying out the paths, building waterfalls, establishing vistas, building a large natural pool edged with swamp plants, and help the project build up a large collection of plants. Apart from the main paths and the buggy track, everything else was designed in situ that is, on the spot. Paths were marked out on foot with the steep parts breached by using antique granite slabs. All building materials being sourced within the vicinity.

It took me two years of constant attendance at the site. However, it entailed practically no drawings. As all design decisions had to be made on the spot in the absence of drawings, I found that I could never be away from the construction for any period of time. Hence the number of commissions I could take on was limited.

The garden was opened in 2005 and has become a popular destination. It receives over one hundred thousand visitors a year.

While creating the garden, I was able to try out and learn different gardening techniques in both hard and softscapes but it represented a type of job that I will probably never be able to do again, at least not in the way it was done.
This is a sketch on the contour plan with additional spot levels, showing how the paths were to be laid out. This also shows the pond on the only available area of flat land. The sketch on the right which is not drawn to any particular scale, shows a cross-section through the constructed water feature on one side, and the drain on the other. These were the quality of the drawings I did in the early days but this project required my constant presence on site.

A simple sketch section of The Spice Garden showing construction detail. There is no measurable scale to this sketch but it conveyed enough details of what I expected of the contractor and gave just enough information, provided I was on site when the construction took place. Unfortunately, as my design firm grew, I was no longer able to maintain such an intimate relationship with my work. Later, I found out that only in show gardens was I able to restore that level of intimacy with my work.
Local antique granite slabs were used as floor slabs and steps, in front of the entrance pavilion that is covered with old roof tiles. All hardscape elements were sourced from the vicinity to give the garden a local flavour.
In this, my Tropical Spice Garden (TSG) design, I put together a collection of marginal and aquatic plants for the pond and planted them. They are some of my favourite plants and most of them grow in the inter-tidal zones of the tropical world. The diagram above shows the complexity of the ecosystem which I collated.
The main advantage with working in the tropics is the enormous interesting leaves and the absence of mass flowering plants. This is mainly due to the lack of seasonal catalysts near the Equator to induce mass flowering, and the fact that undergrowth plants need to develop large leaves to capture available sunlight for photosynthesis.

This split circular leaf of a Licuala, held stiffly on its petiole, provides architectural shapes in the garden. The main ingredients for design is therefore the different shades of green, some yellow and the different interesting leaf shapes and textures.
I made this narrow walkway only two feet wide. Visitors are forced to walk very close to the walls thus making the path a little bit of a challenge. This is to engender a minor sense of achievement after negotiating the walkway.

A simple concrete electric buggy path with a decorated centre strip bisects the garden and allows easy access to the top of the garden.
This is an artificial spring fed from the main water feature which, in turn, feeds the waterfall that flows into the constructed stream and back to the pond.
Doorways were created to enclose and define spaces, thereby creating different rooms for various botanical collections.

Gravel paths connect the different terraces.
To me one of the most important elements in the design of gardens are places to rest and sit comfortably to enjoy the views and atmosphere.

The various shapes and sizes of the seats make up the architectural furnishings within the garden. Sometimes the mere sight of them is sufficient to inspire a sense of rest. These examples added splashes of colour into the mostly green backdrop.
The silhouette of the Pandanus helicopus against the sky makes an interesting pattern. As plants are the most important element in this garden, a lot of effort was expended in choosing the species and placing the specimens in a way that provides interest.

This palm, a Pholidocarpus was planted at the point of the walkway to provide an arch, a translucent roof overhead that protects from the sun yet still allows a view of the sky.
Marginal planting at the edge of the water feature to give the water margin a natural look. The water feature is lined with a butyl liner. I worked out all the details based on available literature and was surprised at how well it actually turned out. The black colour of the liner resulted in well-defined reflections.

The constructed stream made to look as natural as possible. Huge boulders the size of small cars were sunk into the soil and ferns and plants installed. The moss which quickly colonised the rocks completed the illusion.
An enormous rain tree (Samanea samans) was just outside the site. I placed the main vista such that it could be included visually, ending it with a bang.

This bridge was built before the stream so that I could stand on it to orchestrate the placing of rocks and boulders for the stream.

The giant swing because of its slow movements inspires a leisurely slow pace. This swing was placed so as to take advantage of the long vista looking out to sea. I always look for devices to slow the pace down when I create gardens. This is in order that an intimate relationship can be formed with the landscape as time is stretched.
Chapter 2
WORKS

SHOW GARDENS

What is a show garden

Arguably, one of the most famous garden shows in the world that has been running every year since 1912 is the Chelsea Flower Show that runs for five days in the month of May, on the grounds of the Chelsea Hospital.

Garden designers can apply to build gardens for the show and these gardens are divided into three categories. These gardens are usually built over a period of about 10 days. Of course, the design and planning could take several months. These gardens are typically taken down immediately after the show and the show ground returns to its original condition as though nothing had taken place.

The largest and most prestigious are the show gardens, followed by fresh gardens and then artisan gardens. Garden shows also typically have areas where gardening products are sold to the public, and where new plants and cultivars are introduced and where lectures on gardening take place.

About 150,000 visitors arrive at the Chelsea show each year, and even larger numbers visit other shows like the Philadelphia Flower Show. The Singapore show for example attracted over 400,000 visitors last year for the two week show.

Show Gardens as laboratories

Given the short term nature of the flower shows where gardens are built over a short time, and the fact that they are viewed by a large number of people within a few days, makes them great places for experimentation.

In my practice in Malaysia, I find that most jobs take many months to mature. Some, particularly new property developments and condominiums may even take many years from concept to certificate of completion. This makes it too long to repeat the learning process. If it takes four years for example before a particular detail that you have developed is finally constructed, and if you need to repeat the process a number of times in different contexts, then it would take many years before a conclusion can be drawn.

Garden shows allows you to try out different things in quick succession, so that lessons can be drawn and conclusions arrived at. In most of the garden shows I have participated in, the organisers have provided a budget for the build, plus a small stipend, travelling expenses, and room and board for the designers.

I find that, among other things, I am able to experiment with design concepts, spatial arrangement, material use, construction details, planting palette and design.

A great advantage of this sort of garden is that one is not limited by the fact that it is indeed not possible to keep the garden in its final constructed state, for a little more than a few days.

Since no garden can ever stay in that state and would change given even a short passage of time, one can derive a certain satisfaction and instruction from bringing it to, and seeing it, at its highest possible state of perfection.

I have been very fortunate in the last decade to have participated in nine shows. This has enabled me to hone my design skills through experimentation and observation of the results of these experiments.
Early participation

Chelsea Flower Show, London 2007

In my first participation to date at the Chelsea Flower Show of London in 2007, I was asked to help build a small garden sponsored by Malaysian Airlines.

At that time, I had very little knowledge of what a garden show was about, but was nevertheless up for the adventure. The garden had to do with food and ornamental plants from Malaysia. Some of the plants I sourced and shipped from Malaysia, while others came from nurseries in Holland.

I was in charge of the planting plan and soft landscape and had no part in the planning of the hard landscape, but nevertheless, it was a good experience and helped me develop an understanding of show gardens. An important point that I did discover was that garden shows often serve as spring boards to garden design careers.
Singapore Garden Festival, 2009

One of the advantages of participating in gardens shows is that it gives you an opportunity to observe what other designers do and how they design and build their gardens. Because they are international participants, they inform you of gardening trends around the world.

The Singapore show was the first show that I participated in where I was listed as the designer and was responsible for the garden. I had a free hand to design what I wished, as long as I kept within a certain size and within the budget.

For this garden, I tried to draw inspiration for the design by looking to a historical period. Again, this was not meant to be a direct copy. I was using an idiom that I had assumed many Singaporeans would be familiar with, to try to facilitate an emotional link.

The neo-colonial mock Tudor pavilion that I designed was surrounded with plants that had been used as ornaments in the late colonial period and that was still used in modern Singaporean gardens, albeit with new free flowering cultivars. I used loose laterite for the pathway, which is vibrant red, to set off the green leaves and the colourful flowers. This laterite was a material used for paving estate roads and road shoulders.

Judging from the visitor reaction, I realised that I was only partially successful. Most Singaporeans now lived in high-rise buildings far removed from any vestiges of the old Singapore, and although the remaining tropical mock Tudor houses are carefully preserved, most modern people had little attachment to these historical buildings. The people that I found who had appreciation for the garden were people who grew up in the late colonial or early post-colonial period, before rapid modernisation changed the terms of reference for most of the population.

I concluded that my future design would have to be relevant and sensitive to the specific population group that I was to design gardens for, which could be cultural or age related.
Background

In 2011, I was invited by the organisers of the Japanese Gardening World Cup to design and build a garden for their garden show to be held in the autumn of that same year. They were looking specifically for an Asian designer and had seen the work I did in Singapore the year before.

At that time I did not realise the enormous impact it was going to have on my future work and the many times I would subsequently be invited back to Japan.

The theme of the show was Peace. Apart from the stated theme, we were given a free hand to design the gardens by developing our own brief.

Earlier that year in the month of March, an earthquake that registered 9 on the Richter scale had struck off the coast of Tohoku in northeast Japan, which caused 30 foot tsunami waves that devastated the town of Fukushima, killing approximately 20,000 people and damaging the nuclear power plant.

Given the fact that the people of Japan were still mourning from the tragedy, I decided that the only garden that I was ever to build in Japan would have to be a response to that terrible tragedy.

I resolved that the garden would not be just a pretty garden, a term which I would use to describe most gardens in garden shows. This garden had to mean something more. To speak to people about death and suffering, about the ephemeral, but also, about hope and resurrection. About a journey through adversity.

It had to speak in a garden language that the audience would understand, a language that would touch their emotions using a cultural idiom which they were familiar with. What I was trying to do was to reach into the subjective and emotive with the physical arrangement and manipulation of spaces and placing of objects, an experience that will be cemented in their memory. I would do that by using the building blocks of a Japanese garden and using my interpretation, create a hybrid which would be still be recognisable, if only partially, of a Japanese typology.

My task was made slightly easier, by my frequent early exposure to Chinese ideas and images, from which also came early Japanese gardening ideas, and Buddhism which also formed the basis of the many shared ideals of Japanese and Chinese aesthetics.

The resulting work was well received by the visiting public, my peers and the judges.

I felt that that was the best garden I had ever designed and built to date, and was stunned by the result of winning three awards, including the Best Design.
Design

Three in one:

The main focus of the design was going to be the idea of a journey, a journey from security through despair to hope, to mirror the actual events in Tohoku.

The key ideas employed were: Journey, Metaphor, Magic, Miracle and Peace.

Having taken into consideration the above, the main design ideas appeared fairly quickly in swift logical progression. Three sub-gardens were to be built and joined together to form a whole. These were to represent Peace, Faith and Hope. In Japanese Wa, Shin, Bou and tei for garden.

Wabisabi, Yugen - The Japanese garden aesthetics. And Mirei Shigamori.

Early pencil sketches of details.
The Peace Garden

This ordered area, representing Japan before the tsunami, was designed to contain different Japanese garden elements reconstituted in a non-traditional way. Moss and gravel areas were divided by thin steel edgings. A large solitary rock was carefully chosen and placed amidst towering bamboos in front of the strip of unraked white gravel. The 40 feet tall bamboos were planted in a trapezoidal grid, gave shelter, a sense of security, order and discipline. This rock which acted as a resting seat from which to survey the garden from this end, also provided the image simultaneously of strength, age and the passage of time. The juxtaposition of the different elements created an atmosphere of tranquil repose.

The final sketch before digital drawings were produced. This show all the elements that were finally built.

Some changes were made when we got to site, like changing the position of the tall bamboos. Plants were finally selected based on availability.

The bamboo canopy gives a sense of security acting as a tall roof in the garden.
The disaster had struck with the tsunami wreaking havoc and destruction in its path. This second sub-garden was initially designed to have a floor made from the debris, the flotsam and jetsam left over from the tsunami, like shoes and old photographs arranged in swirling patterns. Instead, it became a dark and perfectly still pool of water, pulling the reflections of everything into its murky depth, from which a weeping plum tree emerged. This pool of dark water was planted with deep purple flowers and plants, imparting a sombre atmosphere and a melancholic mood. The red bloodied wall with a jagged profile depicted the fury of the tidal wave with a painted black moon to contrast against the red sun of the Japanese flag.

In order to create this mood, this part of the whole garden had to be contained, otherwise it would be contaminated by the general sanguine and peaceful environment that pervaded the garden in particular, and the site in general. The tall wall backing the pool and the bamboo on the side served to enclose and protect the feeling of the space from bleeding out, and from infection from other moods.

The Faith Garden

Deep reflections double the height of the garden.

Evening shadows.

The very sharp edge of the water feature was built as a stylised crack. This gives it a very interesting effect as well as emphasising the tree popping out of it.

The weeping plum.
Hope Garden

As a contrast to the Faith Garden, a cacophony of colours and fountains of grass greeted the visitor to this space. This third sub-garden was planted with grasses like Miscanthus sinensis, Carex and annuals made up of autumnal flowering plants like Dianthus, Cyclamen and Cosmos. This space, having no canopy, was designed to allow the autumnal sun to stream in and pick up the colours, thus creating a riot of youthful vitality. Hope sprang in the air.

The Roji

Garden paths known as Roji in Zen gardens, are not merely functional, they are philosophical paths that separate the mundane world with those of the garden. The viewer enters deep into the world of contemplation as he ventures deeper into the garden.

I had designed a path to overlay the three spaces. It threaded through and acted as the glue cleaving the three disparate zones into one. This path was meant to take you on a metaphorical journey from peace to despair, then faith and onwards to hope.

This path made of expanded metal and painted red, hovered over the moss and pebbles on one end, and over the grasses and flowers at the other. In the middle of the whole garden, it disappeared into the pool where it sat just a few millimetres below the water surface, invisible and waiting.

People who walked the ‘drowned’ bridge looked as though they were performing a miracle of walking on the water. They expressed apprehension at the edge of the water and were surprised that there was a hidden bridge to step on. They slowly and gingerly walked across the bridge and felt a sense of elation and achievement when they arrived at the other side. This heightened sense of delight was exactly the sensation I wanted to achieve for the Hope garden. Joy, hope, exuberance, rejuvenation and delight were other emotions to be evinced.
Colours
I used colours commonly used in Japanese utensils like this lacquered bento box. These colours are in this combination help make the garden recognizably Japanese.

Materials
Steel was used as the main material for the construction of this garden. I chose steel because it was thin, relatively light and strong enough for the function of bearing human load, separating spaces, holding back soil and also, standing on its own weight. In humid environments, unprotected steel objects readily rusts and degrades. Thus, what appears strong is weak and what appears indestructible is ephemeral. The russet colour exuded by rusting steel was the constant reminder of the fleeting nature of things.

Reference:
1 Bento Box, (date unknown). Retrieved from: otakumode.com
Those same qualities of the material also allowed me to extend the garden to its furthest reaches (given that the site we were given was not at all enormous for the expression of the design ideas).

At the front of the site, steel enabled me to quickly impose a near perfect curve, lifting the garden off the floor, thereby creating a feeling of lightness and delicacy.
Diary of Garden Construction

It is often hard to remember the sheer volume of work it takes to create a show garden and even to predict exactly how long it will take to get the whole thing up and completed.

Day 1

Arrival at site. Site recce. Met other show designers. This was not the official start of the build-up, therefore no work could yet start on site.

The untouched site.

Arrival of the competitors.
A Shinto ceremony was held to bless the event, taking place in a large room. The priest, dressed in a black skirt with a white translucent linen robe over the top, wore a tall hat. He chanted and waved a wand and poured libation. This ceremony set a Japanese tone to the starting day of the build-up.

After the ceremony we were introduced to our contractor and translator, and the garden was laid out. We had all previously been sent a long list of plants available for our gardens that we could use, but upon enquiry we were told that those plants were generally unavailable.

We ended up having to do long nursery visits and also, visits to plant auctions to acquire what we needed. This was a disadvantage as we could not do any research on the plants that were finally available. In the end this proved to be an advantage, as I could inspect every specimen and check the height, spread, texture and colour before they were delivered.

In fact, I was to discover that in a show like this one, for a person with fairly little knowledge of temperate plants, this could actually be beneficial as it gave me the ability to combine matured plants in a new composition, without knowing much about say, their rate of growth. It was all about composition.

Some notes on temperate flowering plants.
Day 3

Foundation work started and we went off on another plant hunting expedition. We viewed the first lot of bamboos and had to reject them as they were scratched and the willow too as it had been root balled too late and had lost all its leaves.

Show regulations generally insists that all plants are to be at their horticultural peak and therefore, anything that does not meet the required standard was rejected. We had to look for a new tree that had a weeping willow shape but not a willow, as a willow would take too long to recover from the shock of being dug up.
Day 4

The steel panels arrived. The panels were built off-site, painted with antirust and delivered to site. The jagged wall was hoisted into place. A lot of the success of building a garden in a foreign country depends on identifying specific local building skills.

In this case of Japan, the builders were very skillful in handling steel and produced very well made panels which were duly hoisted in place. The low wall at the front of the garden was welded into place. On the softscape front, the new bunch of bamboos arrived on site.
Day 5

With the walls of the garden finished on all four sides, the water feature formed in plywood was ready to receive the plastic membrane. Earth was then filled up to the edges.

Space was left for the waterproofing to be done on the outside edge. We went out and found the feature tree. It turned out to be a Weeping Plum with a twisted shape. Just the tree for the job.
Day 6

Waterproofing of the low wall. Commencement of bamboo planting. A horizontal grid constructed from bamboo was placed below ground to hold the tall bamboos down.

This was typhoon country. The height of the bamboo made it imperative for them to be firmly rooted. The weeping plum arrived and was duly planted.

Arrival and rejection of the large rock. We then explained through the interpreter the type and size of rock required. This was the halfway point. A lot had yet to be done. We were behind time at this point.
Day 7

The new rock arrived and was exactly what I wanted. It had the evidence of age and strength and was planted into the ground. Work commenced on the split in the water feature using plywood to be covered by waterproofing sheets. Some flowering plants arrived, including Miscanthus.

I experimented by painting the wall to give it a distressed look. However, I realised it would take too long and would not be finished in time so I had to give it up. Hedges arrived and were planted at both ends of the garden.
Day 8

Continuation of unfinished work from day seven.
Time was getting critically short.
Day 9
An enormous amount of work was done on this day. Gravel arrived and was laid. Waterproofing membrane for the water feature was laid. Divided steel strips were installed. The base of the floating path was laid. The rusted bench was put in place. Planting started as we could not wait anymore.
Day 10

Moss planting commenced. White Cyclamen arrives but the amount was enough only to cover one and a half rectangular squares. The contractor had ordered far too few plants. We made a quick decision to swap the Cyclamen for round black pebbles. Commenced planting of ornamental plants.

We ran out of plants and desperately looked for more to cover large gaps. Eventually we were saved by a fellow competitor who had leftovers. Waterproof liner was tested and failed. Too many people had been walking around on it.
Day 11

Last day. We finished planting the flowers and grasses by sunset and touched up the mosses using chopsticks. Started cleaning up by nightfall but the water feature was still leaking. If it wasn’t fixed, the important walking-on-the-water trick would surely fail. Had to leave the site by midnight.
Day 12

6 a.m. Back at site with last minute cleaning. The contractor on site was attempting to fix the leak. We had until 7 a.m. to do so. Before being asked to leave the site, the leak was finally fixed at 6.40 a.m. Grabbed the hose and filled the pool exactly to the brim.

7 a.m. With not a minute to spare, we left the site feeling apprehensive. I was sure the leak had not been fixed. Later however, I found out that all was well.

Conclusion

Building this garden, I came to realise that within its relatively small confines, enormous amount can be achieved. Many complex layers can sit one on top of the other resulting in a garden that simultaneously provided a sense of peace and tranquility, a sense of mystery, a feeling of achievement, and elation. I was afraid that the installation of the drowned bridge might have been too extravagant but it turned out to be a very effective feature which brought delight to both the person traversing it and the people who enjoyed watching it vicariously.
I was invited back to Japan to do another show garden at the same flower show the following year. The theme was still World Peace. I needed to express a very big concept in very simple terms that I could personify in a garden.

The concept: I went about it by designing two contrasting gardens juxtaposed against each other but nevertheless joined together into one. One was a garden to express the idea of War, this garden had no plants or other life forms and is made only of hard landscape. It was made of hard and sometimes sharp materials to indicate the discomfort of a war zone. The other was to express the concept of Peace, to signify exuberant life. This contained a pavilion with comfortable cushions looking onto soft, green and scented plants, complete with a bubbling fountain with water flowing out in four directions. You can see the peace garden only when the two large eyes painted on the walls are aligned hence the title eye to eye.

There were a number of ideas that I wished to try out with this garden. Some of the important ones are listed below.

1. **Contrast:** This formed as the main thrust of the experiment.

2. **Surprise:** One of the two "eyes" was fixed with a sliding reflective door. Only when the door is opened is one able to see the other garden. The surprise is made more acute by the contrasting garden.

3. **Lighting:** I experimented using only candles to light the garden at night. The candle animated the garden by casting moving shadows and also redefined the boundaries of the garden to only the furthest reaches of its light.

4. **Shadows:** Learning from what I saw in the Washinboutei garden, I placed the walls in the position to capture the low autumn sun shining through naked branches casting interesting moving shadows.

5. **Using the familiar to introduce the exotic:** Here I used large rocks and antique stone lanterns, elements familiar with the Japanese to create an immediate affinity between the garden and the visitors, and using this to introduce the Middle Eastern garden.

6. **Slowing the pace:** The sharp steel plates that formed the walkway in one of the gardens was designed to be difficult to walk on. One could fall and get hurt if one was not careful. This forced the visitor to pay attention to the material that the hard landscape was made of, and also provided a sense of relief when the path ended and a smooth walkway appeared at the second garden.

The whole idea of this and other gardens was to develop and choreograph an envelope for the visitor experience to happen within. This involved manipulating material and non-material elements and ideas. These experiments helped me channel, cajole, and manipulate the visitors with the result that they will be encouraged to develop a deeper relationship with the garden.
Introduction

Introspection was the name I gave to this garden that was to me a complex little puzzle. It was little because the site allocated was only 225 square foot. Complex because I had to figure out how to effectively utilise such a small space to create a garden that appeals to the audience. The design went through a number of metamorphoses before I was satisfied.

The final garden involved a close intertwining of architecture and landscape. The structure with split bamboo walls divided into rooms designed for sitting and meditation which simultaneously housed a small tree, shrubs, a water feature and a bamboo rill. Entering through the bamboo screen was akin to going in into the outdoor.

I wanted to employ a natural material familiar to the local craftsmen to create walls that were at once translucent but also embracing; one that had the ability to catch shadows but also allowed visual transparency and airflow. In a way I was looking for a material to replace the carved fenestrations of my Malay houses.

The small size also made it imperative that construction must be perfectly executed as any imperfection will be immediately noticed and magnified.

Introspection, 2013
Several Stages of Design Development

Stage 1. First design.

This is a sketch of the initial design with a water course running through the centre. The protruding “arms” allowed the visitor to approach the water while simultaneously accessing the plants at eye level. The advantage was that the circulation would not be taken as square footage in the calculation for size. This design however, called for fairly large steel members to support the cantilevered arms which then had to be disguised. Calculations showed that this would have exceeded the allocated budget.

Stage 2. Economical.

This design simplified the previous one by introducing a bamboo screen to define the garden, and an elevated stream built on a raised trough. This fitted the budget but I did not find it particularly exciting.
Stage 3. Different tack.

I took a different approach at stage three of the design development. The bamboo screen had become four walls enclosing a space. This garden would only have allowed standing space and was divided into four parts with a central water feature. There were four points of entry and four sub-gardens, each planted in a different way to create interest.

Stage 4. Almost there.

In further refining stage three, I divided the garden into two rather than four parts to provide a more comfortable experience. The two doorways led to two platforms on which visitors could sit. In fact, it encourages them to sit down to have a closer experience of the garden from a low position. The larger space also allowed for a more complex planting scheme.

The wall separating the two gardens were staggered so that there could be direct visual contact between the two. This and the bamboo screen created a slightly obstructed view, just enough to draw visitors to take an interest in the other part of the garden. I tested it out in white and natural colour, finally settling on natural.
The final design included the bamboo rill being placed diagonally across the rectangle, tying the two gardens together. This enhanced the complexity of the garden, enlarged its perceived size and gave it a different perspective. The diagonally placed bamboo rill was also dynamic in placement, cutting across the box dramatically.
Hakoniwa and Other Miniatures

When I was a child I used to visit a grand aunt who had a position as a matron in an institute of tertiary education in Singapore. She had sailed as a young girl in the early 1900s from Swatow to the USA for her tertiary education which was at the time most women in China were not given the benefit of an education. That was in itself a remarkable thing.

Outside the foyer of her apartment sat a large trough where a miniature garden had been constructed and complete with miniature mountains and valleys, pagodas and people. From my memory, the miniature mountains must have been no more than two feet high, yet, it attempted to imitate the idealised landscape of the mountain retreats of the Chinese imagination.

I later discovered that the Japanese had something called a Hakoniwa which literally translated as a garden in a box. Although the examples I saw of both the Japanese and Chinese versions of the miniature gardens were slightly kitsch, I could see how they could potentially be used as wonderful new expressions in the art of gardening.

Further on, I discovered that a Jungian psychotherapist, Dora Klaff, from Switzerland had developed in the 1950s a Japanese action oriented sandplay psychotherapy based on the Hakoniwa, a healing miniature garden.

References:
Apart from and perhaps as a part of experimenting with techniques to make the garden feel significantly larger than its prescribed size, I also had in my mind the making of an intimate relationship between the inside and the outside; to introduce a certain ambiguity between the external open space and the interior.

A flexibility of where one ends and the other starts. This is all in the interest of creating a quiet meditative space, sensitive to the passage of time, enjoying the last warmth of the season.
The final design involved erecting four fine split bamboo, four metre high walls to define a rectangular space. The interior of which formed the garden which was further bisected into two sub-gardens. Each had a door opening straight onto a platform.

One side had a tall, narrow doorway framing a small, smooth-barked tree underplanted with ornamental flowering plants. On its platform sat an ikebana in a rustic curved bowl with a rough surface.

The other sub-garden was entered through a ‘nigiri guchi’, a low doorway, usually found in teahouses and used in tea ceremonies; where to enter it one had to virtually crawl on all fours. This had the effect of making the visitor view the water feature, the water rill and the plants from a low angle, bringing one’s face close to all three. This part of the garden was furnished with an obi and tea-making paraphernalia.
Openings were created at two corners to facilitate a bamboo rill to pass diagonally through both gardens reversing the dichotomy of what had become effectively two separate gardens and stitching them back into one.
The Introspection Garden with its bamboo screen glowed like a lantern when the garden was lit at night. One of the images I had in my mind when I was designing this garden was that of a Japanese bamboo lantern which had repeated vertical lines made either of timber or bamboo.

Assembling and arranging various elements together to form a composition is an important art in garden making.

In this particular case, I planted the Varisnarea Gigantea, natural to fresh water streams such that their long leaves float gracefully on top of the water. I then planted bog plants, to accentuate the water. This worked well together with the reflection of the screen, the deck, the sunlight, and the tea utensils to form a picture of harmony.
Utensils used in the Japanese tea ceremony include among other things, a chasen (tea whisk), a chashaku (hooked tea bamboo scoop) and a matcha tea bowl. I carefully arranged the items on a woven obi to give them a sense of importance.

Tea Ceremony

Ikebana

The Japanese art of flower arranging which is associated with Buddhism and held in great reverence. Many practitioners require absolute silence while practicing the art.

I was very fortunate to meet a practitioner while plant hunting who agreed to do an ikebana for my garden. He came one day during the construction together with his cuttings, tools and bowl to create an exquisite arrangement.

Both these items instantly imparted a Japanese flavour to the garden.
Ripples formed by little raindrops. Whenever I am sitting still and looking at a pond of water, ripples never fail to move me. It is all about the movement and the ephemerality of this movement. The water is disturbed, the round ripples formed and moved outwards in an expanding manner slowly working down its energy, and then is subsumed again, merging back into the water. It is at once mesmerising and reminds us that everything is temporal. That being one good reason for having a water feature in the garden.
An important reason for using the fine split bamboo was that the screen was allowed to cast shadows on the lawn.

I had observed from previous gardens that the low autumnal sun cast long shadows. By allowing the sunlight through the gaps between the split bamboo to fall on the lawn I was able to extend the garden and also, to provide animation as the sun moved from the southeast to the southwest. To be sure, this was a slow process but the whole idea was to create a basis for change so that with every visit, the garden would appear as though something had changed.
Screens gave privacy but it was not claustrophobic.

Timber platform captured the shadow cast by the autumnal sun.
Introducing complexity to this tiny scale.
I had not expected the bamboo rill to play such an important role in the garden when I placed it there, but it ended up playing a major role in the design.

The rill physically divided the space but, ironically, united it visually by providing a focal point. It also provided a different perspective through the garden, a refreshing sound, and fun for visiting children.
'Kiss Me Over the Garden Gate', otherwise known as Polygonum Orientale with pendulous pink catkins displayed against the bamboo wall.

A view up the bamboo wall that could appear opaque from this angle but was translucent from another, thus provided the feeling of security without inducing claustrophobia.
Reflections are an important element of design. It presents us with another way of looking at the garden and creates depth. I learnt this while creating the ‘Washinboutei’ Garden where the dark water reflected the towering bamboos doubling their height and making them as deep as they were tall.

A fallen leaf carefully arranged but randomly placed to mimic nature and to inform of the autumn season.
By building a platform inside a doorway and not roofing it over, then furnishing it with interior objects, I attempted to bring a sense of comfort and security associated with the inside into the outdoors. Simultaneously allowing the autumnal sun to warm up the seating area and the breeze to blow through the fine split bamboo walls, I was able to bring a sense of the outdoors into the design, resulting in the blurring of the lines between the inside and the outside.

An invitation to come out into the inside.

Entering a Japanese home requires one to remove one’s shoes and to take a step up. This is the point where the outside is left behind and one enters the interior world and leaves the vagaries of the outside to be embraced by the warm security of the home.

Portals between inside and outside.

Sacred and profane. Stepping in and up.

By building a platform inside a doorway and not roofing it over, then furnishing it with interior objects, I attempted to bring a sense of comfort and security associated with the inside into the outdoors. Simultaneously allowing the autumnal sun to warm up the seating area and the breeze to blow through the fine split bamboo walls, I was able to bring a sense of the outdoors into the design, resulting in the blurring of the lines between the inside and the outside.

An invitation to come out into the inside.

The act of removing shoes seems to have a symbolic nature in far eastern cultures. In Chinese operas, characters remove their shoes before jumping into a river, in an act of suicide when life becomes unbearable. This has a parallel in the Japanese culture where people who commit suicide by jumping off cliffs remove their shoes before jumping to their death. Perhaps this act is symbolic of leaving one world and entering into the next.

Reference:
The open sky tied the outside of the garden and enlarged the interior space.
The deconstruction of a show garden is always the saddest part. I am glad that I am never there when this happens. A dream emerges, blossoms, finally dies, and is buried. The impermanence of it all.

In the world of theatre, when the set is struck immediately after the last evening show to accommodate the incoming new production the very next morning, the lament heard from the set designer is “But the body is still warm.”
Simultaneous to building show gardens, I was also building permanent gardens which unlike the former take much longer to build and are expected to have a longevity which means that the gardens cannot always remain at its absolute peak. It will grow and deteriorate, therefore needing constant renewal. Many of the experiments I embarked on in the gardens built at shows were designed to be repeated over and over so that the result can be finally applied to permanent gardens. This is by no means only a one way flow. Sometimes features of permanent gardens are introduced into show gardens and experimented on, and later reintroduced to permanent gardens or vice versa.

The main lessons that I was able to bring to the permanent gardens from the experiments fall into three major categories. The first being an attitude change. In respect of that, the many successful experimentation done in show gardens have given me the confidence to trust in my own design capabilities, along with that came the courage to attempt novel solutions to problem solving.

The second is the understanding of the make-up of hard and soft landscapes and the material involved. Thirdly, the realization that emotional connectivity of the visitor with the garden should be the main focus of any design.

Here I will describe three of the permanent gardens completed during that period I was participating in the show gardens.

1. Sri Lanka
2. Journey of Life
3. Casa Rock
Chronology of Gardens

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<td>Prince of Persia</td>
<td>2013</td>
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<td>The Treasure Box</td>
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<td>The Womb</td>
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Kandoola, Sri Lanka

On a sloping site over the sea in the village of Kamburugamua in southern Sri Lanka, I was involved in designing and developing a group of eight villas, seven of which overlooked the sea. The architecture was tropical modern, constructed of reinforced concrete with column and beam structure, and flat roofs. Since the houses were built on two terraces, the flat roofs allowed the back houses an unimpeded view of the sea. Gardens built on the roof serve to soften and disguise the front houses. I divided the house into four quadrants so that courtyards were created into which gardens were inserted. These courtyards provided shelter from the salt laden sea winds so that tender tropical plants were able to flourish.
The architecture was devoid from any reference to Sri Lanka, so I utilized the landscape to give it a sense of place.

Learning from my show gardens in Japan, I utilised old local handmade bricks for walls, antique tea factory stone blocks for floors and old carved timber columns and doors to emphasise a Sri Lankan ambience.

A surprise water feature was designed for the entrance where I set one foot thick rectilinear stone blocks as stepping stones. These were set to look as though they were floating and partly submerged.

The roof provided a panoramic view of the sea. Plants and timber planks were used in the landscape. They provided insulation to the floor below. I created a water barrier to prevent visitors from falling off the edge. Vertical gardens were also created to provide privacy between the various rooms.

Sketches for vertical concrete planters built as dividing walls within courtyards.
The Journey of Life in Hokkaido was the first and only permanent garden I have ever built in Japan. This garden was built on the edges of the Daisetsuzan forest reserve. The climate in Hokkaido is very much colder than Kyushu in the south where I have hitherto done most of my work, hence the plant palette was very different. It bore a familiar resemblance to Canada where I spent five years of my life. I was pleased to find that the climate was suitable for the silver birch that grew in abundance.

The garden was to represent a journey through life, from birth to old age, and the planting plan was designed to reflect that.

Responding to the location I opened up vistas as well as enclosed views opening them up at salient moments to introduce an element of surprise.

Three concentric circles were created. The innermost was surrounded with a circular round wall made of birch sticks. This provided both a feeling of security and translucency as per the bamboo wall in Introspection built two years before. The intermediate circle had a wall made of an earth berm topped with a stone wall. This wall opened in strategic places to facilitate vistas. The third and outermost circle consisted of a path around the outside of the garden proper and allows a circumambulation of the site.

One of the most important features is a stream running down to the water feature with a sunken seat round the edge, to capture the reflection of the snow capped mountain.
Casa Rock

The Sultan of Selangor's new house was a modern black cube, designed by the renowned green architect Ken Yeang. It was an important job for us as the Sultan had given us a freehand and apportioned a fairly generous budget for the garden. Landscape design was to be developed simultaneously with the architecture of the house.

A number of elements gave some design direction to this design to the garden:

Firstly, in response to the very hard stone clad exterior I wanted to create a soft green interior.

Secondly, I wanted to create a feeling of peace and tranquility within the courtyard.

Thirdly, I wanted this garden to have at least one special feature.

Fourthly, there was a potential problem with flooding at the basement. In fact, during a torrential rainfall that occurred while the house was under construction, the basement was flooded with two feet of water.

The final result included a large water feature that took up almost all the courtyard with water cascading over a large feature wall constructed of stone skin, into a pond below. Creepers were grown along the inner edge of the courtyard going all the way up to the roof.

We also designed an interesting hybrid floor that expelled water efficiently using granite strips to support cars infilled with porous concrete that allowed water to pass through. By using this method we were able to do away with large surface drain and achieve a fine floor finish.

Trees and tall reeds were planted in this water feature and the flat water surface when ruffled by the breezes created a bucolic ambience with the Acorus calamus reeds swaying.
I shall list several elements where the show gardens had their influence on permanent gardens and vice versa.

Enclosures

Enclosures are important elements. Undefined, the garden is just part of a wider landscape. My work in the shows allow me to work on different types of walls and different kinds of finishes to create different effects on these walled enclosures. Sometimes the influence runs the other way bringing work from my permanent garden into shows; like the case of the vertical garden that made its appearance in One Merchu, which finally morphed into the rice wall in the Treasure Box, Singapore 2016.
The Ephemeral

Catching the ephemeral has been particularly important in my show garden work. It sometimes starts with a stroke of serendipity. A shadow cast on a wall, a pool of light in a corner, the ripple on the surface of the water. I find that the poignancy of the ephemeral touches people. Of course the very show garden itself is ephemeral. Later, I tried to capture that feeling of poignancy in my permanent gardens by placing parts of the garden to capture the light, or placing the water-feature to catch the falling rain, or a light breeze to create ripples as in Casa Rock.
Cultural Artefacts

I found while working in Japan that cultural artefacts instantly created a bond between the gardens and their many visitors. This has reinforced the ability of my gardens to cross cultural barriers. I later introduced these type of artefacts into my other gardens, and my interior design work.
Pavilions

Ever since I built both Lankasuka One and Two, I have realised the relevance of the intermediate space between the indoor and the outdoor. Pavilions serve the function of providing this sort of space, which is often used in garden shows.
Reflection is a tool that I often used for extending the garden and also creating different moods. In Washinboutei which I will illustrate with the first three images that represent the same water feature, you can see that in even in one body of water three different moods can be created. Reflection can also be projected on other surfaces besides water. These experiments proved over and over again that reflection can be a very good tool, which I used to capture the inverted mountain in Journey of Life, Hokkaido, and in a small domestic garden in Kuala Lumpur.
An important element in the creation of gardens is the notion of rest. I often place different types of seating, so that visitors can view the garden at a leisurely pace. It is not necessary that the seats are actually used. The mere sight of them is sometime enough to induce a restful attitude.
Surprises tend to leave impressions. Whenever I create a surprise in a show garden, for example hiding a view then revealing it at the last moment, I notice that it creates a reaction for the visitor. I think we like surprise because it takes us out of the monotony of the reality of daily existence.

I created a floating planter on the green wall of a condominium in downtown Kuala Lumpur, and planted them with trees. The size, shape and height that they were hung created an element of surprise. The entrance of the Sri Lankan villa turned two sharp corners before you are suddenly confronted with the view down the stairs to the sea.

Sri Lanka.

Giant planters, 6 Ceylon, Kuala Lumpur.

Eye to Eye.
Drama

My childhood love for Chinese opera and later my participation in show gardens taught me the importance of ‘drama’ for catching attention and leaving deep impressions. The red wall of Washinboutei dramatically lit up at night, the giant palms framed the pavilion in Eye to Eye, and the lanterns that cast pools of light introduced their own drama to a garden. In my permanent work, Sri Lanka, I was able to create drama by designing a set of wide stairs that tumbled down to the swimming pool. Likewise, I built a roof garden with a dramatic open view of the crashing ocean. A different kind of drama was achieved by building a circular stone wall on top of an earth berm.
Having participated in a total of eight show gardens and analysed the results, I have learnt certain lessons from the experimentations and arrived at certain conclusions.

Gardens are obviously not built for their own sake, but built for their relationships with the visitor and mainly for their enjoyment. However, gardens can also have other effects on people such as giving joy and happiness, inducing sadness and melancholy, creating tranquillity and peace, excitement, mystery and magic, and imparting a sense of beauty and wonder.

The main job of the garden designer is to communicate and to arouse those emotions in the visitor – to make the gardens come alive, creating shifts in perception and thus, inducing memories. This is what give the gardens meaning and what some would call ‘soul’.

The many times that I have participated in garden shows was like a wheel turning over and over again, round and round in rapid succession, allowing me to try things out over and over again. Some ideas were explored in a few gardens while others were expressed in virtually all the gardens. That allowed me to gauge the success and failure of each experiment of an idea. Using the results, I was able to adjust the elements in order to achieve better results the next time. This has in turn allowed me to sharpen my use of design tools in creating memorable gardens.
For me, the hard means what landscape architects generally refer to as the materials used in building hard landscapes. This refers to the inanimate materials used to create the landscape.

In the nine gardens I have created, I was able to use materials as diverse as steel plates, steel gratings, laterite, ceramic tiles, marble, roof tiles, timber, and gravel for flooring and walkways, etc.

They were used in different ways for different effects both in two and three dimensions. Some are used to provide a floating walkway over plants, some to slow down the steps and create awareness of the particular moment, making magic and surprise, and others used vertically to create architectural features like physical rooms.

Yet, others provided a cultural reference for the visitors or to relate one element to another or to contextualise the garden.
Enclosing walls differed one from another. They ranged from solid to various stages of translucency. From minimalist to ornate, they were made of different materials including stucco, timber fretwork, rockwork, large rocks, boulders, steel plates, bamboo, sticks and even rice padi. These walls were used for different effects and often integrate architecture with landscape.
Again, the materials were chosen to convey different meanings and form different narratives. In the ‘Washinboutei’ Garden, the steel wall was meant not only to enclose but also to narrate the story of the tsunami waves. A painted black moon represented the opposite to the rising sun on the Japanese flag. The translucent fret work on the fenestration of the ‘Eye-to-Eye’ Garden were designed to convey a Middle Eastern idiom, yet at the same time, convey the similarities between human cultures, as the pattern is actually Japanese. The bamboo screen in the ‘Introspection’ garden gave a cultural reference to the ubiquitous natural material used all over Japan where most of the visitors would have come from. This allowed the visitors to quickly establish a relationship with the garden through cultural association.

Because we were given a very short time to build show gardens and there being a lot to do to get the gardens to a high standard, hardscape had become for me by default, the predominant sector. Mainly because it can be prefabricated off-site before actual construction begins, then brought in and assembled quickly to become the receptacle for the soft landscape.

Of course, there were instances where that was impossible to do.

My practice until then had been more focused mainly on soft landscape. What the show gardens taught me was not so much how to produce the details for hardscapes although I had a lot of opportunity to practice that as well, but rather how important it is to weave the hard landscape together with the softscape to realise the entire narrative of the garden.
The Soft

The soft refers to the soft landscape that typically includes all the plants and design issues related to plants and planting. I approached my first Japanese garden with trepidation, for even though I had been involved more with soft rather than hardscape before I started doing show gardens, I was totally unfamiliar with temperate plants.

I had long admired English gardens from afar for their herbaceous and mixed borders, and for the cottage gardens of Gertrude Jekyll. Owing to the lack of time and opportunity I had been unable to acquire sufficient ability to regurgitate one.

In a way, this was learning about planting in reverse. It was beginning at the end of the completed garden, with fully grown plants at their very peak of growth. In a way this provided an advantage as I was able to manipulate colours, size, shapes, textures and forms without having to wait for the long months, or even years it takes to grow the plants. It enabled me to experiment instantly with plant association, painting a picture with whatever available materials.

The fact that I did not acquire an ability to build a classical English garden actually became an advantage, as I was not restrained by any one tradition but instead was able to experiment at will.

I sometimes find that people who are deeply involved in one idiom and are very good at it, somehow find it hard to depart from it and strike out in a new direction. Many of my Japanese designer friends who are very good at creating classical Japanese gardens are unable to stray from the confines of that typology. I find that my lack of formal training and design education, has never impeded my design, this was partly due to my cultural heritage.

I had set out to use plants for more than creating just a pretty garden, as I always tried to search for a deeper meaning in my show gardens beyond mere physical appeal.

In the ‘Washinboutei’ Garden, the plants helped to tell the story about tranquillity, disaster and hope. In my ‘Eye-to-Eye’ garden, the predominant use of roses referred to a paradise in a Middle Eastern gardening language. In the ‘Journey of Life’ Garden, it told the story from birth to old age. In the ‘Prince of Persia’ Garden, an Orientalist fantasy was created. And in the ‘Womb’ Garden, a blanket of security was offered.

With planting design, except for particular circumstances, I attempted to arrange the plants such that they conformed to what I called an ‘enhanced natural’. The gardens must look as natural as possible, while colours and textures are added to enhance the effect. In this regard, I considered the planting for the ‘Womb’ Garden to be the most successful in its combination of bamboo, grasses and flowering plants.

The towering bamboos provided a background for the tall flowering Miscanthus and other grasses, and the flowering plants mixed in among them provided an illusion of a wild landscape.
The first ‘Washinboutei’ Garden did not fall into this category as I had used the very tall bamboos planted in a grid formation. This novel way of combining bamboo grown in a regimented way in box-patterned moss allowed me to extend the traditional idiom by adding to it a modern and contemporary discipline.

The peculiarity of the monopodial Moso Bamboo was a success in an experiment that allowed me both to extend the garden fifteen metres up into the air, thereby acquiring and taking ownership of the air space, while simultaneously working on the floor space.

The second garden that did not fall into the pattern was the ‘Eye-to-Eye’ Garden, where the bubbling fountain divided the garden into the four sections, creating a chahabagh. As this garden was meant to be influenced by the Middle East, I used roses to establish a grid before planting out the rest of the garden.

The third garden was the ‘Prince of Persia’ Garden where I decided to plant a tropical garden taking on board the basic principles of the English cottage garden.

The gardening shows have really given me a platform to practice on my softscape planning abilities in a variety of different garden typologies, by providing a venue to experiment with those typologies, and to develop a different and novel approach to planting.
The Fluid

I generally noticed in the practice of Landscape Architecture, work is divided into two sections – namely Softscape and Hardscape. Unfortunately, this does not take into account another element, which I shall call Fluidscape. These are generally elements that are either formless and only given form by the materials and hard elements. These include reflections, shadows, movement, colour, shade, light, scent, space, and sound. They work together with the hard elements in unity to enhance the experience of the garden; like the translucent bamboo screen that blocks light and creates shadows on the floor, or the breeze that enables the grass to nod their heads, dispersing their seeds, or the space that is held together by two walls, or the flickering pool of light that is cast by a lit candle in a lantern, or ripples created by water flowing down a channel. The fluidscape helps to enhance the experiential, thereby encouraging visitors to participate in the garden in a meaningful way.

Quite often, it is the hard that accurately controls and defines or confines the fluid elements, but it is possible to attempt to capture and channel their behaviour. These fluid elements are often mobile and therefore in a constant state of flux.

I started engaging with fluidscapes early on in my show gardens. In the ‘Washinboutei’ Garden, I put up a maroon coloured steel wall as a way of orientating the garden, to provide a backdrop for a feature tree and also provide an enclosure. I noticed to my delight that the low autumnal sun cast the shadow of the tree against the wall which acted as a screen to catch it. This directed attention to the wall and animated the wall as the shadow moved on and changed throughout the day. Having lived in the tropics, shadows are short as the sun is almost always overhead. Even though I lived in Canada for a number of years, I had not until then noticed the way that the shadow behaves in the low autumnal sun in the northern latitudes.

Light is an element of the fluidscape that can manifest itself in many forms apart from creating shadows when blocked. In my gardens, I try to orientate the gardens so as to capture light throughout the day, and then to manipulate the harvested light to create bright and dark areas, throw shadows on walls, and create reflections.

After that I began to place screens and walls deliberately in the way of the failing sun to collect, or block sunlight, and to create shadows as a design tool. Reflections imparts mystery to a garden. Their non-material reflection of a physical reality seems to inform us of a world inaccessible to us in our normal state of existence.

In C.S. Lewis’ children’s fantasy story The Magicians’ Nephew the two children Polly and Digory jumped into a pool in the forest to emerge in the desolate city of Charn. In my gardens I created dark pools from my memories of similar pools from my childhood, to capture the long reflection of bamboos, effectively doubling their height and extending my space, and giving the garden an added dimension.
I later cleared trees in the ‘Journey of Life’ Garden to build a water feature to capture the view of the snow capped mountain of Daisetsuzan. After that I began to look to creating reflections on other surfaces like small bodies of water, wet metal sheets and polished marble. Water is one of the elements that I inevitably use in almost all my projects, for it brings with it a sense of tranquility and is the base for many forms of fluidscape. Reflections as described above are many different types of sounds, ripples, waves and flows, to name but a few.

I tried different ways to produce various results by using water and sounds to remind one of the passing of time; a bubbling spring as an euphemism for plenty, still water to ascribe a sense of tranquility, clear water planted with underwater plants for nature and diversity, dark water to describe mystery and even loss or fear as in the waters of ‘Washinboutei’.
Perhaps the most important feature of the elements of fluidscape is that they are dynamic. Through their dynamism we strive to capture something static. A photograph as it were, for our minds.

The dynamic is necessarily ephemeral and transient.

In his remarkably transient art, the work of the artist Andy Goldsworthy, who works with media like icicles, sticks and leaves, stays in the state of equilibrium for a very short period of time before they are removed by the wind, a river, the sea, or in the case of ice, returned to its previous state.

The beauty of his work is enhanced by the fact that it only exists in a particular state for a very short time before it is lost. Andy Goldsworthy records and preserves his transient work in photographs and videos.

In some ways, show gardens are exactly like that. The work is finished, and is in the most perfect state it will ever be. It would stay like that for a few days, or even a few weeks for the duration for the show. And then it is gone forever, preserved in most cases, only in what can be.

But because memories are selective, I tried to photograph every aspect of each garden, from different angles and all of its details, to record and preserve as much as possible of the work that will disappear forever; since every work is unique and in all probability never to be repeated.

I find that the ephemerality of the gardens is enhanced by the use of fluidscape, the element that we quite often ignore because they are so much part of our everyday experience. However, given focus in the context of gardens they introduce an added dimension and reconnect us to those elements.

As most of us have a deep seated need for stability and we interpret security in terms of stability, we feel a sense of loss when confronted with change and finality. We feel loss at someone’s death or when someone we have affections for leaves. Sometimes it is when the day is over, or when the red leaves of autumn drop and turn the trees bare in preparation for winter. We feel a sense of loss when our living circumstances change – when we change jobs or move house. This sense of loss is sometimes exacerbated by the feeling of anxiety. Anxiety at change or confronting the new.

The transient nature of the fluidscape can be introduced and worked to enhance the intensity we feel for a garden. Therefore, it deepens our relationship with it and imparts an emotional dimension. These aroused emotions will further enhance the memory of, and give meaning to the garden; thereby extending its longevity in the mind of the visitor.

Directed by the design, which is informed by experience and curated memory, I was able to craft the physical experience by manipulating and choreographing the three sets of tools. These tools help me arouse emotional sensations like surprise and delight in the visitor. Those sensations are what, in the final analysis, give true meaning to the gardens.
Having arrived at Design relatively late in my life, at a time when my children had to be schooled and my family fed, meant I did not have the opportunity to get a tertiary education in the design field.

I had to find some quick and efficient way of learning the ropes. In developing a sense of design, my childhood spent in the embrace of nature determined that my trajectory of learning was to include nature in some form.

Furthermore, my interest in local architecture led to my initial learning experiences of designing and building houses as well as learning from traditional craftsmen about structure and joinery.

My interest in Architecture led me to be involved in Gardening and Landscape. I worked at creating a closeness between landscape and architecture in my work, and integrating the two in some of the work. I noticed that even in my early architectural works, I was already to create courtyards within buildings and bring nature into the core of the buildings. Later in many of my gardens, I succeeded in exploring and integrating architectural elements.

After I started taking an interest in gardening, designing the Penang Spice Garden led me to be invited to build a garden in Chelsea, which eventually led to the many gardening shows in Japan and elsewhere, for which I won a total of fifteen awards, including two Best In Shows and two Best Designs.

Show gardens have been an important catalyst in my development as a designer. I was able to try out different ways of doing things and different design principles because of their rapid construction and turn over.

I discovered that what I call Fluidscape is an important element in design, which can be captured and manipulated to enhance the relationship between the garden and the visitor.

In fact, the best gardens consist of a fine balance between the hard, soft and fluidscapes. All three being equally important and therefore, should coexist in a balance.

Simultaneous to the years that I participated in shows, I was running my own design practice which has been progressively influenced by the shows in profound ways.

For one, the shows have given me legitimacy in the eyes of my clients who, given confidence by my regular appearance in the print media, started to ignore my lack of professional qualifications. There began to be a shift in the client base and I increasingly acquired clients who are willing to apportion larger budgets for well designed and well constructed gardens. This meant that I was able to experiment with more and different types of materials and structures to achieve a design goal. Clients became respectful of my opinions and more receptive to new ideas, which therefore became possible to implement. The practice acquired more of both the private and the commercial developer type of clients.
Community of Practitioners

In the last three decades Malaysia has gone through a property boom which brought about the need for landscape architects and designers. Out of the many landscape architects that have appeared on the scene, a number have become quite prominent in the local context.

Most of them have, perhaps because of the ease of procuring sizeable jobs, been involved in designing gardens that are less than optimal, and have somehow failed to explore the rich Asian cultural milieu and the materials available. Nor have they explored the use of the innumerable species of plants that thrive in the rainforest.

The possible exception being Ng Sek San who experimented over and over with the use of a palette of brick, mortar and wrought iron to arrive at his distinctive style which have become quite popular.

The two times that I have collaborated with Sek San has made me aware that our approach to design is very different. It was not until I arrived at the garden shows and began meeting designers that are involved with both their daily design practice and building show gardens, that I came upon a community that in some ways shared my own design perspectives.

Jihae Hwang

I met Jihae Hwang in Japan at the World Cup in 2012. She had created a very poignant garden - one about poverty. She used very effectively props, like tiny old children's shoes lined up under a bench and on the bench the mother's sewing kit and an oil lamp, helping to narrate a story of a seamstress working late into the night by the light of the Pickering lamp, to provide for her children. There were two arching roofs covered with rusted corrugated steel sheets to enhance the effect.

Over the ten days of the build-up period I watched her as she planted her buckwheat, specially prepared in northern Kyushu, to represent the rural garden of the Korea she knew when growing up.

Talking to her I found that she is an artist turned garden designer and that she had just built an artisan's garden in 2011, followed by a show garden in 2012.

Both of those gardens were calculated to tug at the end of heart strings. Her show garden was particularly effective, her garden being designed to highlight the tensions and the effects of the the Korean War.

She created a tall sentry post surrounded by barb wires, trenches and defensive walls. The fence was hung with cans and bottles containing letters from separated friends and families. A chair covered in ID tags commemorates the veterans. A stream flows through the site.

Jihae, in creating her gardens, reached into her past retrieving memories of emotions of her early experience that informs her spatial intelligence, to give her gardens an emotional intensity that resonates with visitors.
I first met James Basson in Japan when I was building the Eye-to-Eye garden and he was building his ‘Dulce et Decorum’. James is an English garden designer that works out of France and, like me, works both in shows and as a practising garden designer.

World Peace was the theme for the garden show, and I was very interested in the way that he was using his garden to give flesh to Wilfred Owen’s poem with the same name. The poem is in reference to the Roman poet Horace’s “dulce et decorum set pro patria mori” - “how sweet and fitting it is to die for one’s country” - that describes a young man asphyxiated by chlorine gas in the trenches in the First World War. The poem end with the lines:

“My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory.
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.”

James built thick concrete walls, which he then cored through to make representations of holes made by mortars; then placed furniture in the intermediate spaces and planted the garden with grasses. There was no roof.

In building this garden, James, like Jihae, was departing from the classical concept of the garden, with pretty borders. They were seeking to impress upon the audience something deeper.

Another garden that James designed was a fantasy garden for the Singapore garden festival. In this garden, he incorporated the Gods of the Greek mythology. Of tantalus ever eluded by the fruits hanging on low hanging branches and Sisyphus rolling the boulder up a hill.

He later designed gardens that featured wild flowers from the south of France and Malta, planted carefully to appear haphazardly arranged. James’ daring experiments have resulted in some rather unusual gardens.

Reference:
Dulce et Decorum Est, by Wilfred Owen.
Poems, (Viking Press, 1921).
**Yuske Yamaguchi**

Yuske comes from Hasami on Kyushu island, a place famous for pottery making. Yuske’s father was a garden designer and builder, and to this day the family firm creates gardens for temples, private homes and schools. I met Yuske for the first time when he built my Eye-to-Eye garden for the Gardening World Cup.

We engaged in a struggle, as the garden I designed was very different from the type of garden that he had been trained to build. However, the end result was a good one where he was able to contribute his skills, particularly in the rock garden which uses materials familiar in the Japanese context.

The subsequent year Yuske attempted, not so successfully, to create a hybrid European and Japanese garden, after which he returned to the Japanese typology that he was familiar with.

In 2014, Yuske became my contractor once again. This time the relationship had become easier. I had by then realised what were his strengths and his weaknesses, and we built a very good Woodland style garden together.

It is interesting that Yuske, living in a mono cultural world which has given rise to such an important gardening typology, finds it useful to experiment on building gardens that are so different. It is perhaps his way of transcending his training to learn about other idioms.

**Spencer Byles**

In addition to garden designers I find affinity with artists who work with ephemeral materials, using such as in the case of Andy Goldsworthy materials as wide ranging as pebbles, sticks and icicles.

I came across the work of Spencer Byles while researching the work of Andy Goldsworthy and was struck the ephemeral nature of his work. Spencer worked in a forest in France and created structures of found materials, including sticks and paper.

I met him in Kuching, Borneo, where he had then been living for the last two years. He described to me his attitude towards his sculptures which he leave in the forest to decay, and how that decay forms part of the experience of his art.
Diagram

Through the many years of practice I have come to realise that there is a close and intimate relationship between Landscape and Architecture, other art forms like sculpture, and even animation and artisans that physically construct those pieces of work.

The diagram (right page) shows some of them, and how closely they relate to my current practice. The darker the colour and closer to the centre of the circle, the closer the relationship.

Conclusion

I find my community of practitioners within particularly, but not exclusively, the designers who design and build show gardens but also run commercial practices.

I also find it within other disciplines, especially those dealing with visual art of some sort. I am particularly attracted to those whose designs are able to elicit emotional responses, that resonates with their emotional and spatial intelligence. That, to me, is more important than the dedicated medium used to express their design.

Jihae Hwang’s delicately installed garden, that elicit an emotional response and Spencer Byles’ sculptures decaying in the Bornean jungle, overtaken by fungi and seedlings, both sear an indelible memory in the mind. This is what I consider to be of utmost importance for a design to be successful, and the reason why I consider them important members of my community of practitioners.
Andy Goldsworthy British Sculptor, photographer and environments. Uses elements like pebbles, icicles and leaves in achieving his designs.

Partrick Dougherty American stick sculpture artist. Creates giant impermanent sculptures from sticks.

Spencer Byles British sculptor, currently living in Sarawak, Borneo. Works with paper and materials like stick that he find in the forest. His sculptures are deliberately left to decay in the open as part of his expression.

Fumiaki Takano Founder and Chairman of Takano Landscape and President of the International Federation of Landscape Architects.

Midori Shintani Head gardener of the millennium forest in Hokkaido.

Chang Huai Yan Principal of a landscape Architect firm base in Singapore. Studied under the late Made Widjaja in Bali.

Vo Trong Nghia Vietnamese Architect works with bamboo in many of his designs. Deep interest in environmental concern.

Geoffrey Bawa Sri Lankan architect, one of the most influential in tropical Asia and is the principal force behind what is known as Tropical Modernism.

Jihae Hwang Korean artist and garden designer. Creates sensitive and emotionally touching gardens.

Inch Lim Traditional gardener, designer and builder. Participates in garden competitions.

Anthony Howe American Kinetic Sculpture designer who designed the sculpture for the Olympic flame in Brazil.

Shaun Tan Australian animation and 3D artist. Directed a short film call "The Lost Thing" that won the Oscar.

Takaharu Tezuka Japanese architect. Designed the Fuji Kindergarten, with an oval roof that allows children to run free in endless laps.

Harjianto Setiawan Indonesian Singaporean Flower designer. Designs flower arrangements professionally and in competitions.

Lisa Foo Multitalented Architect and installation artist practicing from Kuala Lumpur. Curated 'Konstuk', an installation by fifteen ASEAN artists to promote bamboo as an alternative, sustainable building material.


Settaiwai English landscape gardener practising in France. Participates in Garden shows including Chelsea.

Spencer Byles British sculptor, currently living in Sarawak, Borneo. Works with paper and materials like stick that he find in the forest. His sculptures are deliberately left to decay in the open as part of his expression.

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Vo Trong Nghia Vietnamese Architect works with bamboo in many of his designs. Deep interest in environmental concern.

Geoffrey Bawa Sri Lankan architect, one of the most influential in tropical Asia and is the principal force behind what is known as Tropical Modernism.

Jihae Hwang Korean artist and garden designer. Creates sensitive and emotionally touching gardens.

Inch Lim Traditional gardener, designer and builder. Participates in garden competitions.

Anthony Howe American Kinetic Sculpture designer who designed the sculpture for the Olympic flame in Brazil.

Shaun Tan Australian animation and 3D artist. Directed a short film call "The Lost Thing" that won the Oscar.

Takaharu Tezuka Japanese architect. Designed the Fuji Kindergarten, with an oval roof that allows children to run free in endless laps.
My pointers for good landscape design based on my personal experience are:

1. The importance of blurred boundaries between elements of the design.
2. Being open to all kinds of influences by not clinging too tightly to adopted design concepts or typologies.
3. Allow some room for change. Good design allows for improvements right up to the end at the site.
5. Experiment, explore and develop fine detailing so that your practice grows with field experience.
6. Connect with the context by employing local artisans, materials, plant species, cultural artefacts, etc, which immediately connects with the visitors and engages them in a dialogue.
7. Strive for perfection and establish a standard and reputation for fine work. This will surely lead to bigger and better projects to explore your ideas.
8. Gardens are for people. Do not create details as ends in themselves. Successful gardens appeal to people’s emotions and touches them.
9. The concept(s) are the backbone of the design. Flesh out the skeleton with substance, not gimmicky effects.
10. The whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts. Therefore, it is vital that every element of the design comes together like a symphony. Each and every little detail coalesces into a unity. One sound.
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