



Portland Classical Chinese Garden The Five Elements: ARCHITECTURE

The Portland Classical Chinese Garden ~ At Home in Nature

People who enter the Portland Classical Chinese Garden—*Lan Su Yuan*—often express their surprise at the number of buildings they encounter within the Garden walls. Soon they understand that gardens such as this one were part of a home within a garden for the families of high-ranking officials in Suzhou, China during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). To create an ideal world of peace and harmony in the midst of a city such as Suzhou, garden designers would place architecture together with plants, rocks, water, and poetry.

The family's living quarters were actually not one large building but separate buildings each with a different function. The architecture was arranged in harmony with mountains of strange-shaped rocks, flowing and falling water, crooked paths, and trees that showed the ageing effects of wind and time. The buildings were not intended to dominate the landscape or to try to show-off the importance of the owner. Instead, the walls of his garden blocked out the demands of government and city life so that the scholar-official could paint, write and reflect inside his living landscape painting.

Making a Garden Grow: Zig-zag paths...Borrowed and Framed views... Leak Windows...Hidden courtyards...

To make the garden appear larger on the inside of the garden walls than could be imagined when standing outside, many different building features have traditionally been used. *Lan Su Yuan* is limited in space—occupying less than a one acre city block—yet the building designs act to create the feeling of wandering in a wilderness even in the midst of the city. Architecture both conceals and reveals nature's mysteries. In other words, the Chinese Garden must be explored in order to be fully experienced.

Building techniques of all Ming dynasty classical Chinese gardens—as well as in *Lan Su Yuan*—that make the garden seem bigger than it actually is include:

Zig-zag paths: Garden designers use these crooked paths to shift the viewer's gaze in new directions with each step. Whether used in a bridge over a garden lake or as a twisting-turning route under a covered walkway, the zig-zag design produces a slower meandering journey.

Borrowed views: In China, a distant hill or nearby pagoda are 'loaned' to the vistas inside the garden. Likewise, well-placed rocks inside the garden create scenic views of 'distant' mountains. In addition, clouds floating overhead are captured in the reflection of the garden lake 'borrowing' the endless sky as a new dimension of the garden.

Framed views: Nature enters every building through multiple windows outlined with beautiful and complex carved wooden frames. The columns of a pavilion or the hanging branches of a willow tree frame a moving painting for the viewer. In this way, each window or framed view becomes a living landscape painting. Gazing through different frames onto distinctive scenes is like entering the garden again and again.

Leak windows: Unique and graceful patterns of leak windows—formed with pieces of curved roof tiles set into a garden wall—add depth and dimension to the garden. Animal, flower and geometric shapes pierce through the solid architecture creating a kind of secret passageway. Glimpses of nature’s wonders ‘leaked’ through the wall are intended to spark a mental journey into what might be found on the path just beyond.

Courtyards: Secluded small sections create peaceful areas with different moods and atmospheres. Some are accessed only by peering in. Some are used to extend a building’s interior space as an ‘uncovered room.’ Some have white walls that become painted with light and shadows of natural and architectural shapes.

Chinese Garden Architecture Creates New Views of Nature

Inside *Lan Su Yuan*, views of nature change with the rhythm of the seasons. Likewise, garden architecture is also designed to highlight the artistic and poetic rhythms found in nature. Here are some examples of specific architectural features in the Portland Classical Chinese Garden:

Covered Walkway Bridge: Like a rainbow over the water, or perhaps the curving spine of a powerful dragon, this covered bridge stretches in harmony with the water below. The scene is called *Double Rainbows Resting in the Clouds*.

Mid-Lake Pavilion: A hexagon-shaped pavilion with a pointed top has two zig-zag bridges running in east and west directions. *Moon Locking Pavilion* is a perfect spot to view the full moon when its bright reflection appears held in the embrace of Zither Lake.

Land Boat: Shaped like a pleasure boat in ancient China, this pavilion is built with some of its foundation over the lake. The changing views from the boat’s terrace enhance the illusion of floating down the timeless canals around Suzhou. In fact, garden designers in Suzhou say that *The Painted Boat in Misty Rain* ‘sailed’ between the two cities in friendship.

Main Hall: The *Hall of Brocade Clouds* is the *han-ting* or ‘flower hall’—traditionally the site of family ceremonies and a formal greeting space for important guests. Known as the *Four-sided Hall* because the walls are entirely made up of framed windows, the garden’s landscape—water, mountains (rocks), and forest (plants) are visible a full 360°. A waterside terrace serves as a stage for entertainment during the Chinese Lunar New Year and other celebrations, while also providing perfect views of drifting clouds floating in the lake and ‘embroidered’ on the windows.

The Harmony of Nature is Both Planted and Built in the Chinese Garden

One of the underlying principles of a classical Chinese garden is to find ‘the large in the small.’ The concept of bringing opposites together in balance is often referred to as *Yin Yang*. In the Portland Classical Chinese Garden, a person could sit all day and observe this harmony in motion: light (yang) and shadow (yin) ‘painting’ designs across the garden walls; the hardness of Lake Tai rocks (yang) being softened by flowing water (yin); the outside (yang) and inside (yin) of buildings merging in covered terraces and pavilions. Uniting yin and yang elements of nature creates an oasis of tranquility within the city.

Throughout the garden, pathways are created out of small stones arranged in beautiful mosaic designs such as flower petals and seeds. In the Scholar’s Courtyard the stones underfoot create the winter scene of *Plum Blossoms Fallen on Cracked Ice*. Most of the walkway stones are set in place on their edge so that walking on them feels bumpy—actually providing a ‘foot massage.’ In this way, a person’s *Qi*, or vital life force energy, is stimulated and brought into further harmony and balance. Therefore, walking in peace is actually part of a classical Chinese garden design.