



Yeshwant Ramamurthy goes gaga over Zen minimalism

## Redefining style the Japanese way

**R**enunciation of worldly attachments propounded by Buddhism has directly shaped the art forms of Japan. Scroll painting, ikebana, Bonsai and landscape design share the common roots of Zen minimalism. Japanese architecture evolves from the notion of sustainability, the need to achieve equilibrium with the natural world. What characteristically differentiates Japanese domestic architecture from our own is that the roof is first built on a supporting frame of lightweight wood or steel as opposed to our thick load bearing brick walls. This frees the interior space of permanent vertical elements. Movable lightweight wood partitions and sliding paper screens make it possible at any time to merge interiors with the outside while allowing maximum flexibility to what is often a diminutive multifunctional space. Both features are a direct outcome of having to build a home on restricted space in a seismic zone.

Japanese art seemingly originates from the chaotic world of the forest and perhaps, the pantheism that led to an appreciation of the unbalanced harmony of asymmetry. We also perceive in their aesthetic sensibilities, the concept of wabi (simple quietude) and sabi (natural elegance). Both display aspects of the philosophy of less is more as advocated by Mies van der Rohe in the modern architectural



movement. Owing to the paucity of land many Japanese homes are built around a courtyard, which gives continuity to the living space while drawing nature into the heart of the dwelling to provide solitary relaxation. These introverted gardens are therefore designed in concert with the room interiors, giving full consideration to sightlines from various vantage points in the house.

Rooms are loosely defined. Since space is so severely limited, areas of the house are not strictly designated for specific purposes. Here, shoji screens are used to create temporary zones according to the activity to be performed and the time of the day. These are mostly fabricated from wood with woven bamboo or rice paper skins. Tones are quiet and colour is restricted to reticent natural shades. These translucent screens provide filtered light, which bathes the interior with a calm shadow-less softness. The custom of sitting on the floor to perform most activities and the resultant use of the tatami (floor mats) leads to an economy of furniture. What little there is, fits away into large wall closets in

every room. Futons, pillows and blankets; low tables and cushions are taken out by rotation and the rooms rearranged speedily for flexible functioning. The tatami mat is an essential element of an interior and forms the basic unit of space, multiples of which define the size of a room. This is woven out of natural bamboo, rice straw and soft reed, bordered with fabric strips. An upright person occupies half a mat and when supine, a full mat.

Drawing parallels with our own customs and factors it would appear that many of these Japanese features are applicable to Indian urban lifestyles. Considering the shrinking area of the average city apartment, the immense benefits achieved by using the Japanese principles of austerity and elements of simplicity can be effectively adapted to create a qualitative improvement of our own built forms.



**Yeshwant Ramamurthy** is a consulting architect. Please send your queries with detailed drawings to [property\\_times@indiatimes.com](mailto:property_times@indiatimes.com)

# Leading you up the garden path

Stepping off last week's verandah onto the garden, we now focus on what's taking place underfoot. No matter how small a garden space or in what shape, a pathway of some nature is an inevitable feature. Pathways serve many purposes. Other than the basic function of connecting various parts of the garden, they may be used as a means to define space or to subdivide a garden in terms of planting materials, species, colour or function. Pathways are often widened to merely create a hard surface on which to place a garden bench. In the history of landscape design pathways have been of various shapes and materials. The formal gardens of Western Europe and Mughal India used straight, sym-

metrical lines, which were the outcome of conscious design parameters. In contrast tropical Asian gardens and those in the Japanese style adopt nature's free forms in meandering profiles.

Garden paths should ideally be 5'-0" wide and sufficiently comfortable for two persons to cross each other in opposite directions. The width may increase in direct proportion to the number of simultaneous users or if any form of vehicular traffic has to traverse the pathway. Different paving materials should be used to indicate different usage of areas and as direction indicators. Paving surfaces should not be slippery, be resistant to erosion and have a reasonable life expectancy. To ensure that pathways retain their laid level despite



constantly damp subsoil and their vulnerability to get uprooted by adjacent vegetation, the sub-grade should be compacted and the paving materials laid on a sub-base of concrete. Tight, unfilled joints are only possible with units of regular size and shape such as interlocking paves. Joints between brick and natural stone are best filled with 1:3 cement or lime mortar. If grass or ground cover between joints is to be encouraged, then 2" wide joints must be filled with a mixture of topsoil, sand and natural fertilisers. All pathways should be laid to a slight gradient to prevent water stagnation and the edges finished permanently to prevent erosion.

The most inexpensive pathways are lined with rough Shahbad or Cuddapah slabs. To make them appear less severe, grass grown in the joints makes an attractive pattern. Wire cut bricks, refractory blocks and terra-cotta tiles make attractive durable surfaces that look better when weathered. Mosaic made of waste ceramic tiles or marble chips laid in white cement are other options for treating the surface. Newly introduced in the local market are cement paves and tiles of various patterns, colour and textures. The

cost may vary from Rs.10 to Rs.70 per square feet.

Garden paths illuminated by low-level lighting bollards look attractive at night. Rather than wiring them through a conduit, an underground-insulated cable is more expensive but is a long lasting investment. Lights are ideally mounted 2'-0" higher than the surface of the pathway to cast even illumination that is not hurtful to the eye.

Various garden features can also punctuate pathways. A pergola for a creeper, a gazebo or a small pavilion made out of cast iron and wood make attractive centres of focus in a pathway. Garden sculptures, birdbaths, sundials and fountains are other ways of punctuating a garden path. So lay out your garden with care and let the pathway lead the eyes to every part of this naturally blissful corner of your home.



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