

The Japanese Garden as an Interactive Green Amenity for the City of Binghamton

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A Catalysts for Intellectual Capital Project

Why Green Space?

As beautiful as urban architecture may be, few people would be content living and working in a place where they are surrounded only by concrete and stone all the time. An office overlooking trees is preferred to one overlooking a parking lot, and an apartment near a park is preferable to one sandwiched between others. One needs to look no further than real estate ads to see that the demand for greenery is strong. It is common for ads to reference proximity to parks, and the value of greenery is often reflected in the price of properties close to green spaces. The affinity of city dwellers toward greener areas is no secret, and cities have long incorporated parks and other green space into their comprehensive plans to fill the demand. Central Park in New York City for example was designed in 1858, and Golden Gate Park in San Francisco was established in 1870.^{1,2} In the Binghamton area, the Endicott-Johnson company recognized the importance of green space in drawing employees and improving the quality of life when the company sponsored construction of a number of parks.

Touted by some as the 9th greenest city in the country, it is apparent that Binghamton has an abundance of greenery. This greenery facilitates the reputation of Binghamton as a great place to live. Yet, tree lined streets and parks, while aesthetically pleasing and a relief from the stresses of daily life, are no barrier to the departure of large manufacturing firms. Green space can however, be a vector for the attraction and retention of contributing residents, the kind that business will follow into the area. The focus of green space as a mechanism of urban revitalization then is to maximize the appeal of an area to workers and residents. One might argue that Binghamton, being the 9th greenest city in the country ought to have more than enough green space to serve this purpose, but the ability to attract workers and residents is contingent upon certain features

of green space. Though beautiful, a park might not have the draw necessary to entice outsiders to relocate. Where much green space falls short is in how it is used. The renowned urban studies theorist Richard Florida noted a characteristic of urban green space that is particularly attractive to today's mobile populace. Florida cites the ability of a green amenity to be utilized interactively as a critical feature of its success in retaining and attracting residents and workers. Green space is too often an observation point, rather than a place of activity.

With interaction being key, road side plantings and a park with a monument and a collection of trees might not be enough to drive revitalization. Though the existing green space is critical to the aesthetics and character of the area, additional interactive green space is needed. Efforts to increase the interactive outdoor amenity base in Binghamton are already underway. The ever extending urban green-way along the Chenango River and the Susquehanna River, as well as the proposed whitewater kayak park at Rock Bottom Dam are just two examples. These recent efforts to make Binghamton a leader in outdoor amenities have drawn noticeable favor from residents, and more than likely have contributed to Binghamton's continued growth in property value despite the down turn in housing markets across much of the rest of the state.

Where is green space most needed, and who are we trying to attract and retain?

One area of the City of Binghamton for which urban revitalization is of particular concern is the Southside. Urban planners have expressed a desire to orient projects in this area toward seniors, while still serving the greater community. As the generation of baby boomers ages, the proportion of seniors in the community is going to increase, and business that caters to their needs will likely develop. These aging members of the community will also likely remain a valuable component of the workforce. If these

residents are going to remain in the area, it is necessary for the City to take steps now to ensure that they have the resources available to them that are necessary to remain contributing members of the community. Included in these resources is senior friendly green space. In particular, more green space will be needed and shorter distances between spaces will be required to meet the mobility challenges of older residents. The tendency of interactive amenities to be too strenuous for the elderly, and the moderate distance between much of the Southside and the water front restricts project options to those that are more relaxing, ease focused and centrally located.

In order to fulfill the criteria of providing a green space that is both interactive, and senior friendly, I propose the construction of a contemplation garden. This prescription comes for a number of reasons including its conduciveness to the attitudes and abilities of an elder baby boomer generation, its lasting utility, and its attributes specifically suiting to the Binghamton area. The visitation of Japanese exhibits in botanical gardens shows that a contemplation garden can, simply for its aesthetic value be a destination. Being one of few examples of Asian culture and an expression of art, the garden will likely draw visitors for the same reasons that the Japanese exhibit in the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens does. Given the local appreciation of art, a contemplation garden will incur considerable value for its artistic contribution to the city. Unlike the examples seen in botanic gardens however, where visitors come primarily to see the garden and its architecture, the cardinal purpose of the community garden would be to provide a place for residents to relax and to provide a thought provoking peaceful setting conducive to a community of creative and experienced citizens. In this sense, the garden would differentiate itself from a display piece seen only for its artistic nature, by

providing an interactive amenity with applications indicative of the original intent of contemplation gardens at their inception in the 11th century.

A place for seniors

Stone and rock is used in contemplation gardens to create impressions of mountain and water. These images of enduring landscapes embody a sense of longevity and arouse feelings of serenity and tranquility that leave the mind at peace. This



Fig. 1: Visual of contemplation garden displaying the various scenic

atmosphere is suggestive of wisdom; a higher state of understanding that develops when the mind is at ease. The seemingly timeless scenery invokes an appreciation of the “rocks” of our society; those members that have so long served and set an example for those that came later. In this respect, a contemplation garden would be a tribute to our elders who are living examples of the wisdom and the weathering that has so sculpted our societal landscape.

In addition to being a suiting theme for a senior friendly green amenity, the fit of a contemplation garden extends to its utility. The rising numbers of seniors enrolled in academic programs and engaged in intellectual endeavors showcases the value that the elderly population puts on thought and strength of mind. The recent popularity of coffee table Zen gardens, yoga, and meditation also displays a willingness to embrace Asian ideals of mind and body. Together, these two traits establish today’s aging populous as a strong user base for an engaging cultural amenity such as a contemplation garden. This is not surprising, given that the aging baby boomer population is also that which crafted the green, and peace movements. In addition to catering to the attitudes and beliefs of the

aging population, the easy pace and relaxed physical nature of the contemplation garden satisfies the condition that the green space require no strenuous activity. Use of the contemplation garden can be deemed physically suiting for patrons of all ages, and as such will likely bear a low burden of liability for the City with regard to injury.

Lasting utility beyond the baby boomers

In regard to contemplation gardens in the United States, the most comparable example is in Portland, Oregon. Portland, like Binghamton, has developed a pattern of employing green space as a weapon of urban revitalization. The City of Portland has constructed many “block parks” that are attributed with the presence of a vibrant atmosphere, and a resurgence of private investment.³ While in a somewhat differing setting, being about a block in size and within the city’s Chinatown district, the Portland contemplation garden was employed with an intent similar to that in which a contemplation garden in Binghamton would be; namely that of urban revitalization.³ Though similar to the Portland example in this regard, it appears as if Binghamton would be a pioneer in constructing such an amenity outside of a botanical garden or an area that has an established Asian culture.

Though a rather novel approach to American contemplation gardens, it is likely that such a feature will find frequenters from all walks of life. The gardening community and the Asian community may still prove to be a valuable user base as is seen in botanical gardens, and areas of high Asian density. Still, the appeal of a contemplation garden in Binghamton extends outward to the other members of the community. The draw for senior members of the community has already been described, but some of the same reasons for the draw among seniors can be applied to the Binghamton University student body. While more activity demanding amenities may have the preference of this

younger group, a contemplation garden will still have the same appeal as a quiet and relaxing place that it would for seniors. The demands of a college curriculum can bring great stress and anxiety, with seemingly no escape. The atmosphere created by a contemplation garden can be an invaluable resource to the Binghamton University student body. Serving as a temporary relief from the social and academic pressures of college life, the garden may be frequented by students. The draw, simply in providing stress relief, might be enough for students to reside near by, and could ultimately contribute to student retention in the area post graduation.

The peaceful setting may serve students in performing their academics as well as providing an escape. A common complaint among students is that there is a shortage of areas that are conducive to studying. The availability of a place as nurturing of thought as a contemplation garden will likely be a destination for students seeking an effective study environment. The nature preserve at Binghamton University provides an example of the use of green space in serving both of these functions. Students can often be found studying and relaxing among the trees. With the new University Downtown Center and proposed law school to bring students downtown, a contemplation garden may become the downtown equivalent of the nature preserve in this respect. As students begin to spend more time downtown, they may begin to identify with various features of the area which will contribute to student retention post graduation. A feature bearing such student utility as the contemplation garden for studying and relaxing will facilitate this occurrence.

Being a cultural amenity in addition to a being green space, a contemplation garden begs the attention of student groups. It is apparent that the student body is culturally minded, and in staunch support of a diversity of experiences. Consequently, the

presence of a contemplation garden provides an opportunity to accrue student activities, from those held by the Asian student union, to general health and wellness classes. Yoga instructors or student religious groups for example, might hold activities in the garden. The potential application of such an artistic, cultural, and outdoor amenity for activities is near limitless.

Exploiting demand in the Binghamton area

As described earlier, for a green amenity to have attractive and retentive properties among today's mobile populace, it must be interactive. While Binghamton's green spaces are mostly interactive in some way, there is a break down in their utility. During a large portion of the year the weather can be restrictive. Athletic areas may be rendered unusable and the aesthetic qualities of most green spaces are considerably less appealing. Snow covering in particular may make some sports impossible, and others potentially dangerous. With few places for outdoor winter activities, and unreliable conditions, winter athletics within city limits are often limited. As a result, interactive amenities such as a contemplation garden that do not require specific weather conditions for safe execution are ideal. In addition, the aesthetic character of a contemplation garden changes little between seasons, and is even accented by snow cover. This follows from the emphasis on stone and conifers in the crafting the elements of the garden. This consistency in appearance and artistic quality throughout the seasons makes such an amenity suitable to the Binghamton area. In maintaining its interactive utility throughout the year, a contemplation garden



Fig. 2: Visual of rockery accented by snow

is an ideal amenity for attraction and retention of residents.

Particulars of location

Binghamton's Southside is one of the sections of the City most beseeching of revitalization efforts. In particular there is a small section of Mary Street that can benefit greatly from the refitting of dilapidated housing lots with new vigor inciting alternatives. Within this section of Mary Street, there is a region consisting of three abutting lots that are currently, or will soon be, possessions of the City government through the Restore New York Grant. Together, these three lots constitute an area of half an acre. This is a sizable portion of land to become available to city planners. It is not often that three abutting lots should pass from private ownership to public ownership without invoking eminent domain, or purchasing the properties outright. Given that one of these lots is already vacant and that the remaining structures on the other two are slated for demolition, these three lots are essentially a clean slate. Considering this allotment of space and the areas current condition, this location is primed for development.

This area is particularly suited to development as green space, especially green space with the intent of promoting a senior friendly community. The location of the lots is near central to the Southside as a whole, and centrally located between other existing green space (Kent Playground, South Side Park, MacArthur Park, South Mountain Park, & Ross Park Zoo), which implies that residents of the Mary street area are

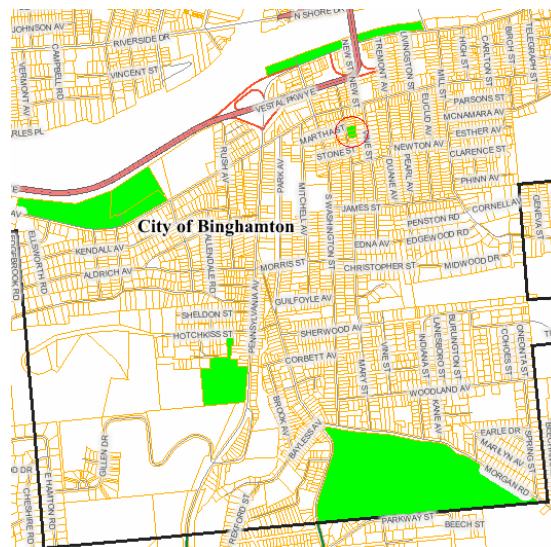


Fig. 3 Map displaying location of proposed garden and surrounding green spaces

nearly as far from any existing green space in the Southside as they could possibly be. The presence of a green space in this particular area would cater to the needs of limited mobility residents (of which many are elderly citizens) who may not be able to make the trek to the other green spaces. While near central, the three lots are slightly off center between the existing green spaces, and are somewhat closer to South Side Park which is adjoined to the location of the future greenway between Downtown and Binghamton University. The proximity to the greenway provides the potential for a contemplation garden at this location to become a stopping point for users of the greenway, furthering the potential for students to become users of the garden as well. In addition to the supporting features of the location, the terrain is itself suited to the construction of a contemplation garden at that spot. The slight slope to the grade alleviates problems relating to standing water and simplifies drainage solutions. This slope also supports the water symbolism of the garden, as the slope will strengthen any implied flow of water. It is important to remember that though this area bears particular features in support of the construction of a contemplation garden, such a garden can be constructed in nearly any setting and is not restricted to Mary Street or the Southside. The garden also need not be half an acre in size. The contemplation garden constructed in Portland was a full city block in size.³ The garden may also be rather small as well. A garden the size of even a single city lot can greatly improve the quality of life in the surrounding neighborhood.

Personal Suggestions

Should the idea of a contemplation garden take hold, it is my recommendation that a designer properly versed in the art of contemplation gardens be employed to correctly regard the nuances of the traditional design. It is also my opinion that the garden should be a reflection of Binghamton in as many ways as the specifics of the art allows.

For example, the water symbolism created by the stone beds could model the waters of the confluence. Attached is a top view of a rough design for such a garden as I envision it. This is intended to serve as an aid in visualizing a contemplation garden at the discussed location.

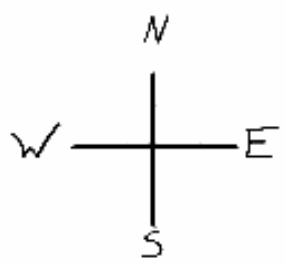
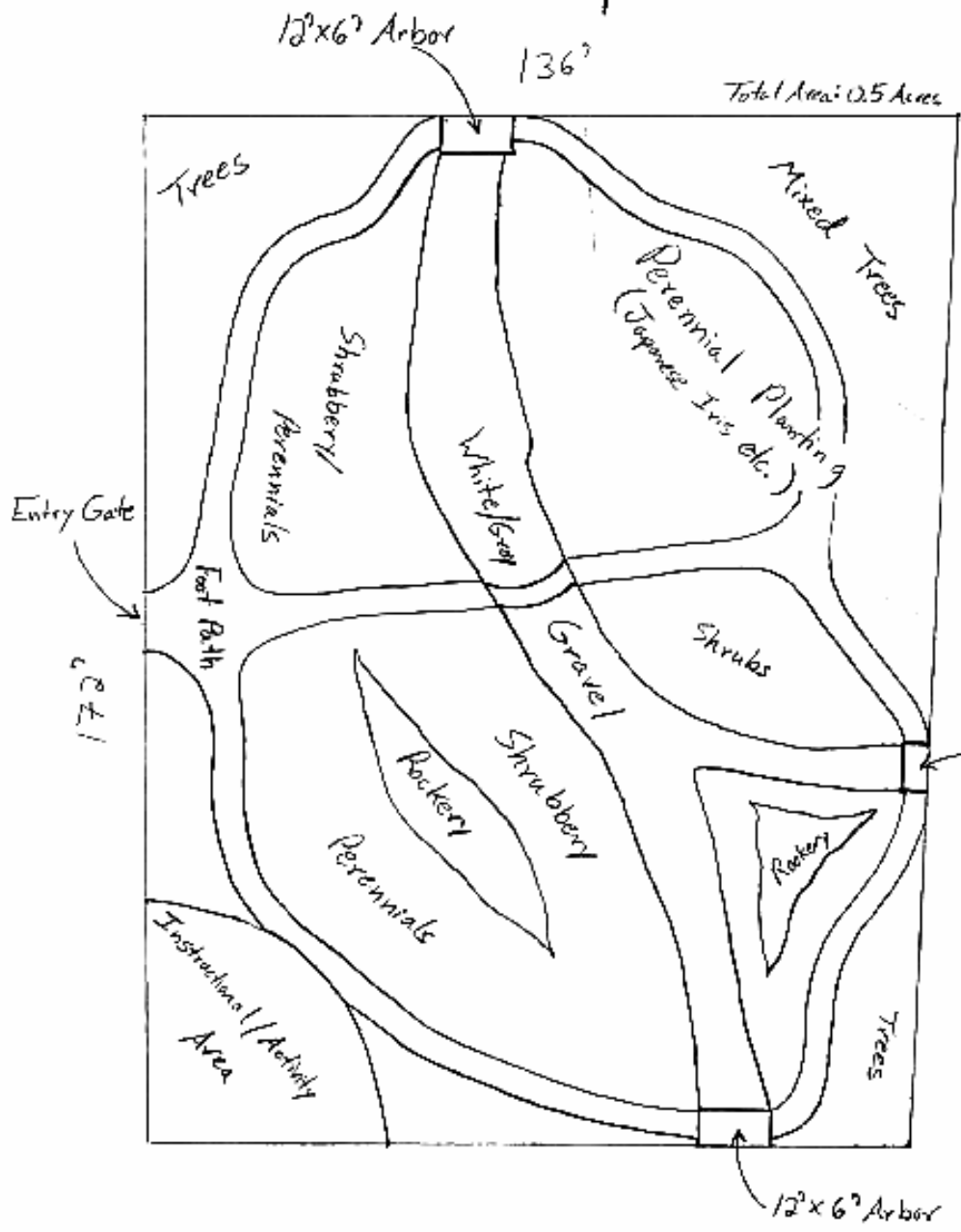
Sources Cited

1. Hinshaw, Mark. "Secret Garden in the City." *Landscape Architecture* Jan. 2003. 26 Feb. 2008 <<https://www.asla.org/lamag/lam03/january/feature3.html>>. 1³
2. MCSM Crew. "History of Central Park." MCSM. Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics. 22 Apr. 2008 <<http://www.tqnyc.org/NYC041147/history.html>>. 1¹
3. "The History of Golden Gate Park." Sfpix. 22 Apr. 2008 <<http://www.sfpix.com/park/history/>>. 1²

Figures

1. Visual of contemplation garden displaying the various scenic elements.
Source:
<http://picasaweb.google.com/muzzeroon/JPN07KYOTO/photo#5129747859482221554>
2. Visual of rockery accented by snow.
Source: <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/japan/kyoto-ryoanji.htm>
3. Map displaying location of proposed garden and surrounding green spaces.
Source: <http://broomegis.co.broome.ny.us/website/gisweb/portal.htm>
Note: Green Spaces entered in manually

Envisioned Confluence Design for Contemplation Garden



Note: Trees are for the most part smaller species