BERKELEY-KYOTO EXCHANGE:

LANDSCAPE, CULTURE AND THE ART OF MAINTENANCE

BY TIM MOLLETTE-PARKS (M.L.A. ’09)
The landscape design education that most students receive in the U.S. emphasizes the design and crafting of space. This education typically ends before the installation of a design, when dirt is moved, trees are planted, stones stacked. However, as six UC Berkeley students discovered while visiting a top Japanese design school, the end of construction can mean the beginning of a new phase of design. During a weeklong workshop hosted by the Kyoto University of Art and Design in May, six students and LAEP chair Linda Jewell were exposed to an approach to landscape design education that pushed students to value thoughtful and creative maintenance as a crucial component of the design process. During the workshop, we saw the elevation of maintenance to an art form, defining its role as a shaper of space and experience alongside conceptual, on-paper design.

This lesson in the value of maintenance emerged during visits to Kyoto gardens such as Katsura Rikyu, Kinkaku-ji, and Daisen-in and from doing hands-on maintenance with our Japanese counterparts. The UC Berkeley contingency was joined by two students from Rutgers University and their professor Seiko Goto, one of the organizers of the event. Two faculty members from the Kyoto University of Art and Design led our workshops: Ken Kawai (M.L.A. ‘93) and Takahiro Naka, one of the foremost experts on Japanese garden history and restoration. Our hands-on workshops included learning time-honored pine pruning techniques that consider the visual and experiential implications of each grouping of needles, which we were trained to trim and shape by hand. We learned from master gardens how pruning, when considered as a design process of its own, can adapt to the evolving characteristics of the tree and the conditions of the space it occupies. Other workshops utilized Prof. Naka’s expertise in garden restoration. Our Berkeley group, working along side students from Rutgers and Kyoto, helped excavate an ancient stone path as well as a pond garden on imperial palace grounds in Kyoto. The Kyoto students spend one day per week honing these creative maintenance and restoration skills to augment their conceptual design instruction.

Of course, the mode of professional practice in the U.S. limits the role of this type of maintenance in design thinking. Here, firms see projects through construction, sometimes providing guidelines for maintenance to the client, sometimes not. Budget cuts put maintenance of public landscapes at risk. Developer-driven private landscapes mean relatively rapid changes in ownership, leaving long-term maintenance unlikely. From viewing the results of maintenance in the Kyoto gardens, it became clear that many meaningful American landscapes built today will not receive the care that enables landscapes like Katsura and Daisen-in to abide.

The exchange of knowledge during our week in Kyoto did flow in both directions. The six Berkeley students,
along with Prof. Jewell and the Rutgers students, delivered presentations on the influence of Japanese gardens on U.S. design and designers. Topics ranged from the important role of Japanese immigrants in the residential gardening industry in California to the influence of traditional Japanese gardens on modernist landscape architects in the U.S. Through these presentations, we described for the Japanese students how their design heritage had affected our built landscapes, from the commercial-driven mimicry of the Tea Garden at Golden Gate Park to the profound inspiration for leading designers such as Rich Haag.

The weeklong exchange with the faculty and students at the Kyoto University of Art and Design cast Japanese and U.S. attitudes toward landscapes in an appropriately contrasting light. The notions of continuity and harmony and tradition that are so important in Japan are likewise critical in their manmade landscapes. The rapidity and temporariness inherent in U.S. culture no doubt play a role in our attitudes and actions toward designed landscapes. The experience in Kyoto added up to a crystallization of an idea we all grapple with on a consistent basis—that landscapes are inextricably linked to the culture that produced them.

Tim Mollette-Parks (M.L.A. ’09) is a current student in the Master of Landscape Architecture program. He worked previously as a print journalist and graphic designer in Chicago, Charlotte, N.C. and Kansas City. He was born and raised in Kentucky. This was the first of what he plans to be many journeys to Japan.