

books



THE JAPANESE GARDEN (by Sophie Walker; **Phaidon**, rrp £49.95) Contemplative, spiritual and rooted in Zen Buddhist and Shinto philosophy, Japanese gardens can be a challenge to Westerners. We are more accustomed to looking and judging, perhaps deciding one garden is beautiful and another not to our taste. Lacking the tradition of an animistic religion and the concept that all things have a soul, how readily do we open our minds to interpret plants, rocks, moss, water or moonlit gravel in an alternative way? A desire to engage more fully not just with Japanese but all gardens provides an excellent motive for immersion in this book.

In her introductory essay, garden designer Sophie Walker explains Chinese influences and the spiritual background that informed 1,200 years of Japanese garden making. Rock is important and in some gardens, there are cones of sand and gravel that might invoke mountains or other imagined possibilities. Amusingly, these cones are likely to have come about by happy accident. Piles of gravel delivered to temple courtyards as a surfacing material appealed symbolically to the monks and instead of raking them down, they began to incorporate them into their designs, as at the temple precinct of Daitoku-ji Hojo in Kyoto.

Lit by historic anecdotes, Walker guides us through Buddhist temple gardens, ones for tea, and contemporary designs in ten themed chapters, each with an introductory essay followed by well-captioned photographs, amounting to 92 gardens in total. In *The Way, Body and Mind*, we learn that some, such as the sublime garden of Tenju-an in Kyoto, invite us in but with mindfulness. 'Stepping into the Japanese garden is like entering a place of worship,' suggests Walker. Paths or stones for the feet dictate how and where to walk and there exists such a thing as garden slippers.

Carefully positioned gardens employ *shakkei*, or the art of borrowed scenery, and 'unenterable' ones are pathless and to be regarded or partly imagined from certain viewpoints. Dry landscape gardens (*karesansui*) like that at Ryoan-ji use no water, just rocks and raked gravel. Their emptiness is a significant absence known as *mu*, designed to encourage self-contemplation.

Injecting fresh and individual styles into the book are seven separate essays written by artists, architects and cultural experts. Japanese contemporary artist Tatsuo Miyajima reminds us that the concept of *mitate* originally meant 'looking with one's own eyes to make choices', and in art, 'the ability to see one thing as something different'. Both are excellent mantras for anyone making a garden. Take care though, for such apparently natural-looking gardens are bound to provoke an entirely unnatural amount of work ■ ANNE SWITHINBANK is a gardening writer and regular panellist on BBC Radio 4's 'Gardeners' Question Time' >

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BARBER OSGERBY: PROJECTS (by Jana Scholze and Edward Barber; **Phaidon**, rrp £59.95) It was on an Alitalia flight to the Milan furniture fair a few years ago that I found myself seated next to Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby. Curious about their current projects, I was sworn to secrecy before they revealed they'd been commissioned to design the 2012 Olympic torch. To this day it's a handy reference point; whenever I encounter people who do not know of Barber Osgerby, I always ask if they're not aware of the 2012 Olympic torch. It never fails to deliver a red face.

This **Phaidon** retrospective of their 20-plus-year career is not the first book chronicling their achievements, but so far the best one. Interwoven with rich photographic material are interviews with some key personalities who have helped propel their career – from Chris McCourt of Isokon Plus (who gave them their first break) to Rolf Fehlbaum of Vitra (that maestro of chairs). What is most apparent from the book is that Barber and Osgerby have a canny knack of working with the very best of today's progressive manufacturers and brands, delivering distinctive yet commercial products across a wide variety of fields – art glass, textiles, furniture, lighting, tableware – not to mention interior and exterior architecture, graphics and packaging.

There is always a mild nod to Mid-century Modern in their designs, but it's also always contemporary and never retrospective. It's as if they know the masters, deeply, and build from there; how many successful designers can claim that their first studio was in Ernő Goldfinger's Trellick Tower and their second in the mews of Isokon Plus, both holy Modernist grounds? They have even designed the large reception desk for the RIBA.

What remains my strongest impression from the book is that the duo's work (their names never shortened to B&O; that's a Danish hi-fi brand that would do well to look at why brands working with Barber Osgerby have passed them by) amounts to a 'greatest hits' design annual covering the last 20 years. Best new light? 'Tab' for Flos. Best new chair? 'Tipton' for Vitra. Best new coffee table? 'Loop' for Isokon Plus. Best new home accessory? 'Poppins' for Magis. The list just goes on and on.

Being a successful designer twosome (besides married couples like the Eameses or the Days) is highly unusual, not least coming straight out of the RCA and never looking back. Design requires a certain ego and perseverance, and teamwork is not typically high on the agenda. Only Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec spring to mind as equals, but they were forced together by birth and not just by choice. If you want to learn what design of the last 20 years looks like, this book is essential ■ MAGNUS ENGLUND is a co-founder of Skandium and director of Isokon Gallery Trust >