Branch Street Ryokan
relaxation through reactivating human senses

By Keiko Sugeta

B. A. in Economics St. Michael's College Colchester, VT June 1991
B.F.A. in Interior Design Harrington Institute of Interior Design Chicago, IL June 1997

Submitted to the Department of Architecture
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Architecture
at the
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
February 2003

© 2003 Keiko Sugeta. All rights reserved.
The author hereby grants to M.I.T. permission to reproduce and to distribute
publicly paper and electronic copies of this thesis document in whole or in part

Signature of author: ________________________________
Keiko Sugeta
January 17, 2003

Certified by: ________________________________
Fernando Domeyko Perez
Senior Lecturer in Architecture

Accepted by: ________________________________
Bill Hubbard
Chairperson, Department Committee on Graduate Students
Thesis Advisor:
Fernando Domeyko, Senior Lecturer in Architecture

Readers:
Anne Spirn, Professor of Landscape Architecture
John Ochsendorf, Assistant Professor of Building Technology
Branch Street Ryokan
relaxation through reactivating human senses

By Keiko Sugeta

Submitted to the Department of Architecture on January 17, 2003 in partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Architecture

ABSTRACT:

My thesis is a Japanese traditional Inn, called Ryokan. The is open to anyone seeking refuge from the rapid pace of urban life, including local residents and tourists, yet is limited to adults in order to keep quietness within. It is similar to a Bed & Breakfast in terms of person-to-person service, yet its emphasis is on the idea of reactivating human senses by offering an intimate experience with the surrounding nature through materials.

The intention of my thesis is to explore an experience in Ryokan architecture. The thesis introduces Ryokan architecture as a typology. Incorporating ritualistic Japanese inn traditions, the architecture is designed with a sense of order, which encourages guests to settle their state of mind. The inn investigates the notion of ‘continuity of moments (in time)’ through a manipulation of light and water as well as through materiality, which is to lure forgotten human senses. Communal bathing experience within the inn enhances stimulation to human sanity.

Beacon Hill in Boston is selected as the site for the Ryokan. The site’s existing condition is a 6000sqft-vacant-lot. Although it is just one block-in from the very active and busy intersection of Charles and Beacon Street, the site offers quietness and tranquility. Given that I sensed the stark contrast between the very busy streets and the solitude of this site, I felt that there was an intriguing quality.

Thesis Advisor: Fernando Domeyko
Title: Senior Lecturer in Architecture
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank three people who had a great impact on my thinking towards my design:

**Fernando Domeyko**, who gave me a tremendous amount of sensible inspiration and taught me how to deepen architecture design by connecting human intuition to a discursive aspect of design. His passion toward architecture and teaching architecture is infinite. Without him I would never knew what the true essence of tectonics is about and how important to understand and respect material properties.

**Anne Spirn**, whose passion toward landscape made me realize how significant the dialogue between architecture and landscape, which is an essence of Japanese architecture. Her great appreciation and understanding of Japanese culture as well as Japanese architecture through her numerous visits to Japan helped to make this thesis a much more realistic experience for me, no just an academic one.

**John Ochsendorf**, who reminded me the beauty of tectonics, makes the authentic quality of Japanese architecture. His knowledge about Japanese architecture as well as Japanese culture was a tremendous help and made my project much more enjoyable.

I truly wish all of you a further success in your academic careers and wish you for continuous endeavor to make a difference in all students' lives that you come across.
Table of Contents

Abstract 3
Acknowledgement 5
Introduction 9
Site Photographs 11
Story 15
Process 27
Final Model 38
Final Floor Plans 49
Conclusion 53
Bibliography 55
Source of Illustrations 57
Introduction
As early as the Edo period (1603-1867), the Ryokan (旅館) has been popular throughout Japan as a place to stay during travels. The style and location of each Ryokan varies, yet over the years the core notion and tradition of each individual Ryokan, as a place to reactivate human senses instead of a place to simply spend the night, has remained constant. This has been achieved by architectural design, meals based on ingredients from the current season and communal bath experience along with other detail-oriented personal hospitality. The architectural design is done mainly to capture the beauty of the surrounding nature during each season and to integrate it as a part of a space, which would assist guests to evoke their human senses. For the Japanese gastronomic culture, the meals are carefully selected and prepared with seasonal ingredients and artfully presented. The communal bath experience would not only relax muscles but also enhance quiet reflection.

Until a notion of the Western Hotel was introduced in Japan in the 1800’s, a Ryokan was the main lodging style in the country. The intent of my thesis is to introduce Ryokan as architectural typology in the United States, where hotels and bed & breakfast dominate the lodging business. One of the traditional notions of architectural thinking, ‘Phenomenology’, is augmented as a base of my design throughout my thesis.

As mentioned in the Abstract, the site is located in Beacon Hill, Boston. The city being a sister city of my hometown Kyoto, Japan, there is a certain level of awareness about Japan throughout the city and its community. Beacon Hill is one of the premier neighborhoods in the city, where historical elements are well kept with respect. These qualities contribute to the idea that the area has a strong “sense of place”. There are unique small-scale boutiques along a main artery of Charles Street, which are popular among the local residents as well as tourists. In this respect, the area reminded me of downtown Kyoto, where several well-known Ryokans exit. The site for the thesis project is located along Branch Street off of Charles Street. A line of trees from the residences’ exclusive gardens cascades out along Branch Street. This contributes to the absorption of noise from the busy Charles street activities, and offers tranquility along Branch Street.

Within the 6000sqft site, the Ryokan consists of a lobby, five guest rooms with landscape views, two communal baths and service section for employees.

As a way to introduce the notion of a Ryokan and a possible experience in the Ryokan, which embed Japanese culture and ritual, I have written a story entitled ‘Diary of a guest at the Branch Street Ryokan’. Along with the story, there are several images of my watercolor drawings and photographs of the final model for my project along with some images from published references to support the content of the story.

Please sit back, relax and enjoy the story....
Site Photographs
Along Charles Street...
Branch Street & its Vicinity

The Site along Branch Street

Charles / Branch Street
Branch / Charles Street
Beacon Street / West side alley
West side alley
The Site on Branch Street
Story
Diary of a guest at the Branch Street Ryokan
September 22

I arrived at the entryway of the Branch Street Ryokan on Sunday afternoon. There is a line of bamboo trees and a concrete water basin with many of the flower of the season, Tweedier floating. Walking on the entrance path, I feel soft moss between the hard slate tile paving through the soles. A stream of water flows gently from the basin and continues down into a groove like path, which is parallel to my path. It guides my way.

As I walk to the entrance door, as if the host and the staff of the inn expected me on time, they welcome me with greetings. The staff takes my bag. I step in, take my shoes off and slip into a pair of slippers on the wood floor.

Sunlight penetrates into the lobby and shines on a large copper wall. The dark orange cooper-wall is oxidized and partially turning green.
There is a rock garden in front of the wall. Out of the corner of my eye I also glimpse another rock garden, further in the background. Grubbles in the garden are an expression of water and their whiteness is defined against the colors of the copper wall behind. Passing along the garden on my side my host leads my way.

I move onto thick tempered glass cantilevered over a reflecting pool, which is connected with the path of water I walked along earlier. Beyond the glass walk I hear a slight sound of water. The host informs me that what I hear is coming from the one of the communal baths downstairs, where he will take me after I settle in my guest room. I made a reservation to stay at the Branch street Ryokan for 6 days / 5 nights, so that I will be able to experience the entire inn, staying in a different guest room each day.

The host leads me to the only room on the second floor - ‘Bridge’. As we ascend the staircase behind the copper wall, a thin line of sunlight comes from above. As we enter the room, the host asks me to take off my slippers before I step up onto the wood floor of a small preparation space, which all the guest rooms have between the entrance foyer and the main room. Diffused sunlight penetrates through the sliding door of willow and gives me a sense of room beyond. There is simply a low table and a couple of floor cushions on a tatami floor, set between lines of green tempered glass. The glass reflects sunlight from above. This creates an effect of the floor bridging out to the landscape beyond by floating over artificial water. There must be some space underneath the floor since I feel it spring under my feet. Through a two and half foot tall window just above the floor, my eye catches the view of the outside moss garden disintegrating into a rock garden. Approaching the window, I step down to a small space where there are a couple of floor cushions. Sitting down, my view expands out to the entire rock garden, a water basin, and there appear to be other guest rooms surrounding the garden.
In a little while, there is a knock on the sliding door. A maid comes in with a cup of green tea and a tray with a guest sign-in book and a nicely pressed cotton kimono. She introduces herself as Yoko and says she will be taking care of me throughout my entire stay at this inn. She tells me about the two different communal baths: one for men and another for women. They are open anytime between 4pm and 7pm and 6am to 9am. Since each bath has different qualities, they are interchanged on each day. It is common in Japanese culture to share a communal bath with strangers of the same sex. As much as there is flexibility in the inns hospitality to meet guests’ requests and desires, their detail-oriented service implies a sense of organization, which gives my mind a comfortable sense of order. Guests can request when to have dinner and breakfast served in their guest rooms within a wide window of hours. What is common and recommended for healthy cycle of living in Japanese culture is to unwind your muscles and mind by taking a bath before you have meals. To fulfill my Ryokan experience, I decided to follow the inn tradition for the next five days.

Looking out on the rock garden, watching it change as the sun moves, I realize it is almost 4 o'clock. I change into the cotton kimono robe and go to the bath. Today, the women's bath is calm & static. Reaching the bottom of the stairs beyond my room, I follow the sound of water, which comes from the left through a translucent glass wall. It receives diffuse north light on the right, where there is a rice paper ('shoji') screen set up to give visual privacy to the guest room beyond. Descending down to the lower level, I feel the solidity of concrete steps. As I enter the bathhouse, I take off my slippers. Stepping up into the changing room, I leave my robe behind. Sliding a door into the bath, I sense the billowing steam. The bath is filled with the scent of moist Japanese cypress ('Hinoki'). There is also diffuse sunlight and the sound of gently flowing water.
As my eyes gradually adjust, I find this bathhouse faces a small moss garden in light and shadow. Before I step into the wooden bathtub I sit down on a wood stool to rinse off a layer of dirt and fatigue. Feeling the subtle bounce of the wet wood floor, I walk over to the tub. As I sink into the hot water, there is a sound of some water flowing out. Leaning against the wood wall in the tub, my eyes rest on the landscape. There is a stream of water from the reflecting pool flowing down to the moss garden. I am filled with the sense of peace the moss garden gives. The sliding door opens, and another female guest comes in; the thick steam gives only her silhouette. Our greetings and all the sound we make with water are absorbed by the wood interior throughout the bathhouse. This bathhouse is so serene.

On the way back to my room, I decide to sit out on the wood terrace above the bathhouse to cool off for a while and take a seat on a garden lounge chair. The southwest breeze touches my steaming skin, I see the surrounding residential buildings lit up in orange by the west sun.
At 5:30 pm, a short while after the bath experience, Yoko comes into my room with supper. The meal is beautifully displayed on several plates, and most of ingredients are from the fall season. This is a common feature of the Japanese culture, to register and appreciate each season of a year. Since the bath, my senses are more acute; I hear the very subtle sound of water. I ask her where the sound is coming from, and she answers that it is from the bath directly below my room. My room is on the second floor and the bath is in the basement, so a part of this bath has a two story high ceiling. She describes that this bath, unlike the one I experienced earlier, is very energetic, with sound reflective material and it is terrific to see steam rising up two stories high.

I requested 9:30 pm as my bedtime, and Yoko comes back around 9 pm to set a Futon mat on my tatami floor for me to sleep on. A nicely pressed cotton sheet over a puffy futon mat, a feather pillow and comforter. I am falling asleep, looking forward to the next 4 days of my stay at this Ryokan.
September 23rd

I wake up with a 6 am morning call and a smell of rush grass from the tatami mat. I stretch my arms and look out the rock garden, which mostly is in the shadows. A half hour later, Yoko knocks on the door and asks me if I want her to put futon away and get ready for breakfast. I tell her that I am going to take a walk in the Boston public garden for a while and that I will be back for breakfast in an hour. Both the public garden and the Branch street inn are peaceful places in the middle of the city. On my way out to the garden and back to the inn, the busy activities along Charles Street gives one more appreciation for the inn as a place for quiet relaxation. After breakfast and a stroll around town, I return back to the inn at 2pm. Yoko takes me to another guest room called ‘Moss’ for my second night stay.

Walking along the corridor, which shares the same axis with the staircase of the ‘Bridge’ room, I have a closer view of the rock garden in the afternoon sun. A glass corner of a guest unit beyond the garden catches direct sunlight from above and also sunlight reflected off of surface of water below.
Entering the guest room, I notice that the wall facing me consists of three layers. One side of the room opens out to a moss garden. Numerous bamboo trunks are laid out as the most outer floor in the room. My feet feel the smoothness of the bamboo floor and my eyes relax by observing the gently undulating moss. A stream of water is defining a boundary between the garden and the entry path to the inn. The water continues underneath the layers of walls. Going back into the room, I sense the subtle difference in sound. The layers of walls are creating acoustic privacy as I process my way to the end of the room.

Sunlight is compressed between the closest two layers of walls and projects onto the second wall. During the summer when the sun is higher, I can imagine that the water between the walls catches the sunlight and its reflection is even stronger.

Changing into a kimono robe, I get ready to take a bath. Today it will be the ‘Dynamic Bath’. At the bottom of the stairs at the bathhouse level, I pass the entrance of the first bathhouse and follow a hallway to another. Along the hallway I can see steam rising up in the bath through a clerestory window. Leaving my robe behind in a changing room, I open the sliding door and enter the bathhouse. Immediately I hear the sound of a waterfall. There is a tempered green glass bridge extending out from the entrance to the slate floor that leads to a large hot bathtub and a set of showers beyond. Walking on the glass bridge, I realize the sound of the waterfall is coming from the walls along the cold-water basin beside me. Moving toward the tub, I see the volume of steam rising — it looks fantastic. After the shower, I dip into the hot tub. My eyes follow the upward movement of the steam floating up to the high ceiling under the second floor.
September 24th

Yoko takes me to the guest room called ‘Gravity’. Feeling moisture from rain in the air, I follow her in the corridor toward the room. I see a concrete exterior of the room between lines of bamboo trees. This unit is set down at the ground level. Stepping down into the room, there are a couple of windows. One is a long vertical window looking out to the long slim bamboo trees. Another is a horizontal low window looking down at a lined cluster of grabbles, base of bamboo trees and leaves on ground. The next morning, I woke up to the sound of rain. Feeling lazy, I extend my arm from futon mat and opened the shoji screen. Rainwater is falling onto the line of the grabbles. As Yoko mentioned, over the years some of the grabbles have lost their sharp edges from rainfall and have become round. The continuous vertical movement of rain seems to be connecting the concrete wall and earth. This enhances the presence of the heavy concrete wall, and it appears to be compressing down the horizontal low window. (Wood panels set in the concrete ceiling and the north wall, and also the tatami floor help absorb some sound in this room.)

September 25th

Today is my fourth day at the inn. Walking in the corridor toward the room for today, besides relying on my visual senses, I realize my hearing also assists me to sense my surroundings: melodic sound of rain falling onto the skylight; striking sound of rain falling onto the rock garden on the side; combination of the sound and bamboo leaves touching each other from rain falling on the other side.
Entering the room called 'Basin', the corners of the room facing the rock garden are intruding into the interior space, and they are dematerialized with vertical rainfall from sky. Once rain drops on the glass plates, it continues flowing down to a reflective pool. The next morning, I am awakening by sensing a subtly moving soft warm light. I open my eyes, and see the morning sun is projected on the wall, reflected off the water basin. Water is gently flowing by releasing excess water to a path that continues down to a landscape facing the 'Static' communal bath.

September 26th

On the last day of my stay, I am taken to the guest room called 'Bamboo' which is set into the earth. I descend down to the tatami floor and faced a large floor to ceiling frosted glass wall in different shades of blue, green and brown. As I get closer to the wall, there is a clear slim window on the side of the glass wall which gives me a clear definition of the sources of the colors: a cluster of bamboo trees being rooted deeply in earth; the trees delicately extending out to the sky. Rainwater seeped through the earth; my eyes follow gradation of its dark to light brown. Yoko mentions that when it is a rainy day like yesterday, this wall activates and transforms as if it is moisture in the air is moving through bamboos.
After 5 days of staying at this inn, I have gained my appreciation of water and light by being more aware of not only their presence, but also how they react and affect the rest of the our surroundings. There is a notion of continuity of moments in time ... I left the inn feeling myself augmenting each of my steps in time.

The end
Process
water color paintings
sketches
models - Ryokan
models - guest rooms
Final Models
site model
model - Ryokan
aerial views of the Ryokan

entry path

entrance
lobby

hallway to bathhouses and guest rooms
overlooks at a rock garden on north

'Bridge' over a bath house

guest room: 'Bridge'
guest room: ‘Moss’

view out to a moss garden (north)

compressed morning sunlight
guest room: ‘Gravity’

view out to bamboo garden

north elevation

west elevation
guest room: ‘Basin’

view out to a rock garden

tectonic detail
guest room: 'Bamboo'

north elevation

east elevation

looks out to a bamboo garden (north)
Final Floor Plans
Basement Floor Plan

(3/32" = 1'-0'
Conclusion
An experience of going through architecture is what animates this project. Through this, the hierarchy of human senses is transformed by equally heightening all senses - hearing, smell, touch, taste, visual and imagination. I began this project depicting images of what one might experience at the inn in watercolors. I was intrigued to express the essence of several elements such as water, light, sky, wind and gravity through my architectural design. As I sat down with my thesis advisor, Fernando Domeyko, he informed me that my thesis was dealing with too many issues. To heighten an architectural experience throughout the Ryokan, he suggested limiting it to one or two elements, and executing a design by creating different experiences through discoveries of different aspects of these particular elements. A well-known Japanese chef of Japanese cuisine in Kyoto once mentioned to me that unlike many other cuisines in the world, Japanese is a cuisine of subtraction. This practice augments the essence of each ingredient’s flavor and enriches a meal as a whole. Selecting water and light as the elements to help reactivate human senses, I decided to focus on different aspects, states and qualities of these elements: water can be rain from the sky; the vertical movement of the rain is often neglected; why not celebrate and cherish it as a contribution to a relaxing landscape and to enhance the beauty of the upcoming spring season? Watching the moment that raindrop hits the earth or the beauty of the deeply rooted bamboo trees would give you a hint of self-discipline and help you feel more grounded in life.

Unlike other cultures, the Japanese tend to appreciate ‘a presence’ of things rather than things themselves. The sun is one example of this appreciation. Instead of confronting the sun directly, the different effects and qualities of sunlight that the sun provides are believed to give greater metaphysical impact on people: sensing compressed sharp yellow light between walls as a spatial accent in a morning; giving credit to autumn light enhancing the third dimensionality of a Japanese rock garden; enhancing one’s energy level looking at billowing steam lit by summer sunlight.

This Ryokan is a place for us to augment moments in time by being aware of an essence of our surrounding nature. It is also a place for us to recognize all of one’s senses and to appreciate our surroundings. My past three and half years of a hectic and demanding academic life style at MIT made designing this Ryokan project truly enjoyable.
Bibliography


List of Illustrations
All photographs taken by author unless otherwise noted below.

Figure 1  Japanese Cuisine. *Chiisana Ryokan.*

Figure 2  Futon. *Ryokan: A Japanese Tradition.*