

Welcome to Urakuen

This garden was created for a single purpose: to serve as the setting for Jo-an, a priceless seventeenth-century tea house. Jo-an is a masterwork of tea house architecture and one of only three tea houses recognized as National Treasures. In 1971, Jo-an was acquired by the Nagoya Railroad Company, Ltd. (also called “Meitetsu”), which moved the tea house from Ōiso, Kanagawa Prefecture, to the city of Inuyama, Aichi Prefecture, where the garden was built. In building Urakuen, Meitetsu planners sought to create a garden that would embody the tastes of Jo-an’s architect, the tea master Oda Uraku (1547–1621). Even the name “Urakuen” literally means “Uraku’s garden.”

Jo-an, the Historic National Treasure at the Core of Urakuen

Oda Uraku was born in Owari Province (now western Aichi Prefecture) to the powerful Oda family, the samurai who built nearby Inuyama Castle. In 1618, Uraku withdrew from public life and constructed a residence, called the Shōdenin, on the grounds of Kenninji Temple in Kyoto. Uraku enjoyed holding tea gatherings, and he designed and built a tea house that adjoined his residence. The name he chose for this tea house was “Jo-an.”

Jo-an and its surrounding structures remained in Kyoto until the Meiji era (1868–1912). Thereafter, the buildings changed ownership and were relocated several times. Jo-an and part of the Shōdenin were eventually acquired by the Mitsui family, who had the structures moved to their private residence in Ōiso, Kanagawa.

In 1969, the Mitsui family sold these buildings to Meitetsu, along with objects from Jo-an’s tea garden (*roji*) and many other historical artifacts. Purchasing the buildings was the first step of Meitetsu’s plan to create a garden where the historic structures could be preserved and their cultural legacy could be made available to the public.

Renowned architect and architectural historian Horiguchi Sutemi (1895–1984) was chosen to spearhead the garden project. Horiguchi had painstakingly collected old sketches, diagrams, and historical accounts related to Jo-an and other tea houses for decades prior to his appointment, and he had also authored several books on the topic. The chance to oversee the restoration of Jo-an and create a visionary garden to showcase it was the culmination of Horiguchi’s life’s work.

Construction of the Garden

Meitetsu chose to build Urakuen on the grounds of a former amusement park close to Inuyama Castle. Construction got off to a rocky start: on May 18, 1971, the day

Horiguchi arrived in Nagoya, Meitetsu workers were on strike, and buses and trains had all stopped running. The trouble continued after Horiguchi arrived in Inuyama. On the morning of May 19, Horiguchi arrived to assess the site in the midst of a downpour. Workers had spent the past week laying string lines to mark the building locations based on plans Horiguchi had sent from Tokyo. After one look at the results, he flew into a rage, shouting that the lines were completely different from his design, and that the location for Jo-an was wrong. The next day, after some revisions, construction work began. Over the next year, a legion of restorers, masons, and carpenters under Horiguchi's direction reassembled and repaired the historic structures of Uraku, while gardeners crafted an intricate living landscape.

Despite being in his 70s, Horiguchi was a dedicated and tireless participant, often standing in the rain in a borrowed Meitetsu raincoat to oversee construction. He made a total of 21 trips to Inuyama, each time leaving a set of detailed instructions.

Achieving a Vision

Horiguchi Sutemi has been praised for his ability to incorporate the characteristics of natural materials into his designs. Rather than being bound by his initial vision of a garden, Horiguchi adapted his design to incorporate the individual qualities of each rock and tree.

In developing his plan for the restoration of Jo-an and the creation of the garden, Horiguchi used historical descriptions and a drawing of Uraku's residence from 1799. Everything was determined through careful scrutiny of these sources—not just the building positions, but the styles of the fences, the arrangements of the stepping stones, the locations of the pine trees, and the types of bamboo were all selected to evoke Jo-an's original setting.

The 1799 drawing shows a low hill with a stone pagoda, and beside it, a pond spanned by a simple stone bridge. Instead of digging a pond, Horiguchi replicated the scene using a dry landscape garden (*karesansui*), in which water is represented by fine white gravel. He also recreated Uraku's square moon-viewing platform, called the Shōgetsudai. Throughout the garden, Horiguchi incorporated centuries-old gates, stone lanterns, and washbasins (*tsukubai*) and transplanted dozens of large trees and stones to imbue the garden with a sense of history.

Although Urakuen began as a simple relocation and restoration project, the garden as a whole grew into something much greater. Its design embodies the aesthetic sensibilities of a seventeenth-century tea master, the dedication and vision of a master architect, and the unflagging efforts of caretakers who preserve the garden's cultural

heritage for generations to come.