Abstract

The Japanese House, originally assembled in Southern California in 1903, was moved to its current location in 1911 and is the centerpiece of the Japanese Garden at the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens. The Japanese House is the only existing example of an early twentieth-century Japanese building that reflects the need and acceptance of the general public, for Japanese architecture and design, in Southern California during this era. As a result of an in-depth scientific/technical and philosophical evaluation of this resource, with its multi-cultural influences, the Japanese House is now based in a more fully realized historic context, offering the public an even richer educational experience. An evolutionary process of preservation planning was followed by implementation of treatments and ongoing maintenance tailored for programmatic needs. As a result of in-depth technical and philosophical evaluation of this resource, with its multifaceted history and multicultural influences, the Japanese House is now clearly understood in a more fully realized historical and cultural context, offering the public an even richer educational experience.

Peeling Away the Layers: The Huntington’s Japanese House Tells Its Story

Kelly Sutherlin McLeod*1, John Griswold2


*e-mail: ksm@ksmarchitecture.com

Introduction

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens was established in 1919 when magnate Henry Huntington left his 207 acre ranch in San Marino, California, to a nonprofit educational trust. Huntington erected the Japanese House and Garden on his property in 1912. Opened to the public in 1928, the institution now welcomes more than 600,000 visitors per year, with the Japanese House and Garden as one of its most popular attractions. (Figure 1)

Atop a knoll overlooking the celebrated pond, the Japanese House is the centerpiece of The Huntington’s Japanese Garden. Traditional sliding screens are retracted daily to open the house for public viewing to display Japanese artifacts in a traditional domestic context; the house itself is recognized as one of the most valuable parts of The Huntington’s collection.

An evolutionary process of preservation planning led to implementation of treatments tailored for the house to continue serving The Huntington’s programmatic needs. As a result of in-depth technical and philosophical evaluation of this resource, with its multifaceted history and multicultural influences, the Japanese House is now clearly understood in a more fully realized historical and cultural context, offering the public an even richer educational experience.
In 2009, Jim Folsom, director of The Huntington Botanical Gardens, provided the vision and leadership necessary to successfully execute The Huntington’s investment in the overall restoration of the historic Japanese Garden in preparation for its centennial anniversary. Landscape architects Takeo and Keiji Uesugi of Takeo Uesugi Associates, Inc. were hired for design of the landscape work. Kelly Sutherlin McLeod Architecture, Inc. (project architect) and Griswold Conservation Associates, LLC (principal conservator) worked closely with The Huntington to develop a customized work scope, based on conservation principles, to preserve the Japanese House.

Archival documents and research performed by scholar Kendall Brown record that a substantial portion of the Japanese House was imported from Japan in 1903 by George Turner Marsh, a dealer in Japanese fine art. The house was assembled in Pasadena as a feature in
the G.T. Marsh & Co.’s Japanese Tea Garden, an emporium for imported Japanese goods. (Figure 2) In 1911 Henry Huntington purchased the house and had it, along with most of the mature plant material and statuary from Marsh’s garden, disassembled and relocated to his San Marino property.

Following the death of Henry Huntington in 1927, the estate was opened to the public. It is not known for certain how the house was initially presented to visitors of the Japanese Garden. The house interiors were not on view to visitors during the 1950s when a local women’s group approached The Huntington and requested stewardship of the House for their ikebana studies. Limited documentation from this time reports a ‘redesign’ and ‘restoration’ without further specifics, documented with only a few photos.

After decades of limited resources for reactionary repairs of damage due to water infiltration, exposure, use, and age, the Japanese House required a comprehensive preservation and maintenance program. (Figure 3) The historical integrity of the house, whether existing conditions were original or altered, was not readily apparent. As a first step in establishing the structure’s historic significance, the project team searched for specific information about the Japanese House; however, the absence of original plans, building specifications, and alteration histories presented basic questions that needed to be answered: How closely did today’s building resemble the original house that G.T. Marsh commissioned for his Japanese Tea Garden in 1903? How closely did today’s building resemble the house Henry Huntington had re-assembled at his ranch in 1912? Had repairs and modifications diminished the building’s character and integrity? Which era in the house’s long history rose to the level of ‘historic significance’, in accordance with national, state, and local designation criteria?
Project Planning

During initial project phases, the property’s significance, existing conditions, and future use, as well as long term maintenance needs, were discussed. The merits of conserving all physical evidence of the original construction of the House, along with traces recording early modifications (in accordance with Western preservation ethics [1]) were weighed along with the client’s inquiries about enhancing the building’s ‘authenticity’ by commissioning replacement features from Japan or from artisans skilled in the techniques of traditional Japanese construction. From the preservationist’s perspective, historical context and significance are key. The Japanese House reflects a hybrid of American and Japanese architecture, and thus, it was decided to follow standard American preservation practices. The 100 year old Japanese House was determined to be relatively unaltered since it was reassembled at The Huntington site.

The preservation plan considered the ongoing use of the house, balancing concerns of team members and the needs of the institution. In addition to maintaining the historic integrity of the house, preservation treatments addressed practical maintenance strategies to prevent ongoing care from exceeding usefulness. The Japanese House will remain an unoccupied, open-air garden pavilion for public enjoyment and education, and its daily function and exposure were factored into the plan. All preservation treatments were accompanied with guidelines for future maintenance—short, mid, and long term—as well as training for staff members responsible for care of the house.

A property’s most historically noteworthy period, known as its ‘period of significance,’ provides the lens through which to identify features, materials, and finishes that reflect and convey its historic significance. Research pointed to a 16 year period of significance for the Japanese House: from 1911, when Henry Huntington purchased and transferred the house to his ranch, until his death in 1927. This period represents Huntington’s vision of the Japanese House in the context of his Japanese Garden. This decision helped to focus the restoration plan not only on physical features dating from this period but also on the historic
relationship of the building to its landscape setting.

Authenticity remained central to preservation of the house that, from the beginning, was a cultural hybrid. One key influence was an article by the Japanese architectural historian Atsuko Tanaka et al. [Tanaka et al. 2006] This comparative study identifies The Huntington’s Japanese House as a significant example of early twentieth century Japanese architecture in the United States. Published in Japan, the article surveys three Japanese houses built at the turn of the twentieth century to ‘consider the characteristics, differences and reception of Japanese architecture built in the United States.’ [Tanaka et al. 2006] Among the three examples, The Huntington’s Japanese House was considered ‘more authentic’ in its connection with the surrounding gardens. Ms. Tanaka explained in an e-mail to the authors on July 25, 2011 the significance of the Japanese House: ‘[The house] is important because it kept the original form built and reassembled by local Japanese-American carpenters, and because it is the only existing example of [a] Japanese structure that reflected the need and acceptance of the general public [for Japanese architecture and design] in Southern California during that era.’ [Tanaka, 2011] Ms. Tanaka provided a much-needed context as the issue of ‘authenticity’ was weighed against concerns of historic materials, integrity, and significance. Yet, the building itself proved to be the best source of information and details about its original form, which continued to be discovered through the final phases of the project.

**Peeling the Layers**

Gradual discovery and response is common in architectural preservation and each project presents unique issues. The team conducted noninvasive testing and exploration of finishes, materials, and building systems in order to identify significant features, to evaluate existing conditions, and to plan for repair and restoration. Historic buildings and sites have stories to tell, and these stories often reside in the intimate details of preservation work.

The Japanese House itself clarified the issue of period and regional style. Detailed site inspections with Japanese consultants confirmed that materials, design elements, and construction techniques used at the house were of Japanese origin, as claimed in early 1900 marketing materials for Marsh’s Japanese Tea Garden. Reportedly shipped from Yokohama, the house exhibits a mixture of shoin (formal) and sukiya (natural) styles. Designed to display Japanese art objects, it was intended primarily as an art object itself rather than a residence. The dimensions (sized for tatami mat format) and the sequencing of rooms reflect traditional Japanese ideas about space and function in domestic architecture. Japanese consultants clarified the significance of the primary interior spaces and advised on the appropriate placement and positioning of furnishings and decorative elements from The Huntington’s collection.

While little is known about the Japanese carpenters who constructed the house in 1903, archival records credit the disassembly and reassembly of the Japanese House in 1911 to Tôichirô Kawai, a local Japanese carpenter with a specialty in shipbuilding who was hired to carry out this work for Henry Huntington. Evidence of handiwork by Japanese carpenters is apparent in the many Japanese characters (kanji) painted on wood framing members throughout the house. (Figure 4) These characters reflect the traditional Japanese method for specifying locations of each piece of wood, providing instructions for reassembly. Historic documents report that Kawai made notations on the house before it was disassembled for relocation to The Huntington ranch. It has not been determined if multiple generations of the markings have been made on the structure. The Japanese characters are an older form of kanji, so it is possible that at least some of the markings were made before the house arrived in California.

American preservation guidelines for treatment of historic resources offer options based on the level of
significance and nature of the project. Of these options, ‘restoration’ was selected as the optimum treatment for the Japanese House. Nearly all exterior building features and materials, as well as those in the interior and visible from the garden, were determined to contribute to the building’s historic significance. The preservation plan maintained significant features by honoring the original design, restoring building elements and finishes along with missing or altered defining features wherever possible, allowing the Japanese House to reflect the cultural and historical narrative that Henry Huntington displayed to visitors, while contributing to the educational programs and mission of the current institution.

Structural strengthening and life safety improvements were installed in concealed areas. The preservation strategy included all of the existing original structure—both seen and unseen. The framing, finishes, and kanji markings are among the historic elements not visible to the visitor but meticulously documented and preserved.

**Surrounding Garden and Pond**

The historic setting and context represent important features of both the Japanese House and Garden, and thus views to and from the house remained strong considerations for preservation planning. As with the building, planning for treatments to the garden and pond focused on mediating between American preservation tendencies (in which features dating from the period of significance are to be retained) and Japanese landscape
aesthetics (in which original features not in keeping with an ‘authentic’ Japanese garden might be replaced).

**Restoration**

Correspondence between Henry Huntington and his property superintendent, William Hertrich, documents that the exterior wood of the Japanese House originally had a stain finish. Isolated areas of wood, found to be stained with a rich brown color, further confirmed this claim. In subsequent years, multiple layers of flat brown paint had been applied to nearly all of the house’s exterior wood.

The non-original flat paint was removed from all exterior wood features, including exposed rafter tails and decorative wood elements at the entry. This delicate process eliminated non-original paint and protected the wood from damage while ensuring that original finishes were retained. A penetrating sealer was then applied, providing the appearance of an appropriately aged finish. Decay at rafter tails was repaired while maintaining as much original material as possible.

Removal of paint from wood panels located at the exterior of the house revealed an early twentieth century three-ply laminated wood material, with a highly figured grain pattern, believed to have been deliberately selected for its resemblance to *sugi* wood, also known as Japanese cedar.

A non-original black paint was found on the floorboards of the veranda, which wraps the south and east sides of the house. Close study revealed a heavy-bodied, Asian-style lacquer with a rich brown color beneath the modern black enamel. In order to provide a practical treatment and prepare the veranda for continued exposure, only the black paint was removed and the veranda boards then treated with brown stain (to match remaining remnants of the lacquer), sealer, and wax.

A combination of material testing, archival documentation, and conversations with Huntington staff about ongoing maintenance, factored into the crafting of a treatment approach for the exterior plaster. Ultimately, the treatment selected restored the overall appearance of the plaster to the period of significance while providing a durable, cost-effective, and easy-to-maintain exterior finish. In a November 1911 letter to Henry Huntington, Hertrich described the original exterior finish as a ‘very fine Japanese plaster,’ further explaining that ‘[t]he whole House [had] to be plastered over.’ [Hertrich 1911] In 2010 the existing exterior plaster was found to be a patchwork of various colors and differing finishes. In addition to recently applied contemporary cementitious sand-float plaster, an epoxy-like coating had also been applied to most of the exterior plaster surfaces. This coating had spilled in many areas, exposing underlying layers of early plaster. Conservator John Griswold examined the underlying material and found it to be made with a high percentage of porous organic material, more consistent with traditional Japanese plaster than with sand-lime or cement-based plaster typical of Western construction. [2] Application of the contemporary nonporous coatings inadvertently trapped moisture in the original plaster, causing deterioration that undermined the stability of the plaster and led to the decision to remove and replace nearly all of it.

Investigations of the coating’s stratigraphy revealed an original Huntington-era smooth finish, dark charcoal gray in color, applied to most exterior plaster surfaces, and this scheme became the aesthetic target for treatment. (Figure 5) Finishing coats of naturally hydrated lime plaster and lime paint were applied over a modern reinforced cement-based plaster – reversing the order of permeable and impermeable layers, as the conservators found them. This approach maintained the equilibrium of the interior environment while eliminating the risk of trapping moisture within the wall structure. The lime mixture provides a sensual, soft texture, which emulates the organic quality of the original finish, while also being a practical material that is
simple and cost-effective to repair and maintain.

In the few areas where dark plaster dating back to Henry Huntington’s period had not been recoated, they were left intact and protected as accessible archival artifacts. Similarly, and in keeping with the overall preservation strategy, a reversible treatment of lime paint was used at panels adjacent to the entry door to protect the existing plaster, which was found to have an even more complex composition than that from other areas of the house. Samples contained only beige-colored finish layers without any traces of the dark finish layer found elsewhere. This led to a tentative working theory that original Marsh-era plaster may have been retained at the entry and relocated to The Huntington ranch intact. [3]

One of the most prominent features of the Japanese House is its distinctive hip-and-gable roof. The non-original wood shingles found on the house were installed four decades ago and were visibly worn and in disrepair. Given the importance of the roof in the overall design of the house, the treatment objective was to represent as closely as possible the original roof in material, shape, texture, and pattern. The roof’s complexity required team members to apply skills in unconventional ways in order to reproduce the original design while meeting contemporary needs and objectives.

Early photos show that the original wood roof shingles were relatively thick and unlike the thinner profile used in Japanese construction. The original shingles recorded in archival photos appear to have been installed in tight courses giving the roof a distinctive look. Fortunately, domestic cedar shingles, recut and resurfaced, met the specifications for thickness, smooth texture, and clean edges seen in the historical images. They also offered affordability, fire resistance, and a reasonable life expectancy. Precisely shaped shingles were installed to re-create the building’s challenging compound curves at the roof hips and eaves. The curved, flared-gable portico over the entry, the focal point of the main façade, was one of the most complicated areas of the roof to reconstruct. Numerous shingle mock-ups were closely scrutinized to replicate the original appearance of this important feature.

It is nearly impossible to know the conditions and history of an existing building unless layers are peeled away. The calculated removal process of the house’s roof materials revealed severe deterioration in some
areas and a history of repairs including replaced elements and modified configurations of the roof’s ridge boxes and gable vents—important character-defining features of the house. The complex layering between decorative and very delicate wood medallions, lattice screens, bargeboards, and roof framing required careful coordination as the original materials and features were treated and missing elements restored.

Four ceramic finials in the shape of a dog that once adorned the ends of the roof ridges had been vandalized years ago, but fortunately fragments from two of the finials had been recovered and stored. (Figure 6) Restoration-grade mortar was used to replicate the missing ceramic portions of the finials. These restored finials were used to make molds for concrete replicas of the two missing ones. All four finials, slipped over wood mounts and secured to the roof ridge boxes, crown the roof once again. (Figure 7)

The exterior sliding wood storm doors surrounding the perimeter of the house, which protect the paper shoji screens, had suffered considerable damage due to exposure and daily opening to allow interior spaces to be seen from the garden. The original second-floor redwood plank sliding storm doors were restored. First-floor sliding doors were reconstructed, as the existing non-original doors deviated from the sophisticated joinery, design, and materials of the original doors. Intricately crafted Japanese metal hardware, specifically designed for the sliding doors, was restored.

This fusion of conservation and practical construction approaches depended on the collaboration of a multidisciplined project team. The conservator bridged the gap between the initial assessment and the
implementation phases of the project; once conservation strategies were developed, the conservator took on a new role, working alongside the construction team and contributing hands-on expertise. The project architect balanced concerns of conservation and engineering team members, the contractor, artisan tradespeople, and the client. The teamwork attitude was pervasive among all who participated in the project, and the strong foundation of strict conservation and preservation guidelines clearly defined the intent of the project through all phases.

Prior to the start of this project, the historical integrity of the house was obscured; once identified by the project team, it was found relatively unaltered and constructed with traditional Japanese-style plaster, carpentry, building configuration, and architectural ornamentation. Budget constraints precluded the building’s interior from being addressed in this phase; however, the team looks forward to continuing a comprehensive rehabilitation of the interior, conserving original materials and restoring missing elements to complete the project. While interior documentation from the Henry Huntington era is scarce, the Marsh-era photos show period appropriate interior Japanese decor popular during the early twentieth century—‘[an] elegantly designed space in the somewhat florid style of the Meiji period (1868–1912)’ [Brown In press]—including some artifacts that remain in storage at The Huntington.

**Conclusion**

After 100 years in the setting of The Huntington Gardens, the Japanese House has attained significance not as an architectural import but as an important historic resource with a unique cultural story to tell about the adaptation of Japanese culture in Southern California. (Figure 8) The subtle process of conservation, architectural and scholarly research, discovery, and response revealed a cross-cultural masterwork. One of the
challenges of this project was to apply best practices in American preservation to a building that reflects many aesthetic traditions and building techniques of another culture.

Fig. 8. The Japanese House, 2012. © johnellisphoto.com

The balanced process developed for this restoration revealed the Japanese House’s true significance, providing an insight potentially applicable to other historic Japanese structures in North America. The Huntington’s Japanese House and Garden is a living connection with the yearning for Japanese gardens and architecture that existed in the United States during the early 1900s. Still standing today in its original form, as built and reassembled by local Japanese-American carpenters, the Japanese House is the only extant building in Southern California that conveys the widespread admiration for Japanese architecture and culture in the early twentieth century, and one of four from this era remaining in the United States.

Endnotes

1. As embodied in the US in the Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice of the American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC), and the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, National Park Service, Department of the Interior.

2. Visible light and UV fluorescence microscopy were used to examine cross sections of samples of scratch, brown and finish coats, as well as individual components separated in sediment settling tests. These were documented in an

3. In the black-and-white Marsh-era photos, the exterior plaster of the house appears to be one consistent color and lighter than The Huntington-era plaster.

References:


Tanaka, Atsuko. 2011. Email to the Authors, 1

Disclaimer:

These papers are published and distributed by the International Council of Museums – Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) and Committee for Historic House Museums (DEMHIST), with authorization from the copyright holders. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the policies, practices, or opinions of ICOM-CC or DEMHIST. Reference to methods, materials, products or companies, does not imply endorsement by ICOM-CC or DEMHIST.