

Architect carves niche in 'spiritual design'

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Let's begin with a disclaimer from Berkeley architect Helen Degenhardt about the design of "spiritual" buildings - defined, for the purposes of this story, as structures intended for Zen-like practices - meditation, spiritual lectures and sometimes yoga.

"Don't expect any grand architectural statements," says the co-principal of Berkeley's JSW/D Architects. "Zen design is more about simplicity and mindfulness."

While the elegant, efficient style - clear lines, honest materials and pure craftsmanship - is deeply rooted in the architecture of Japanese Buddhist temples, Degenhardt claims that her training in her native Germany instilled many of the same values - not surprising, given the country's Bauhaus design tradition.

Her first commission in spiritual design - a niche she has carved out for herself in the Bay Area over the past two decades - came in 1992 from the San Francisco Zen Center, whose meditation hall, or Zendo, at Green Gulch Farm was in dire need of an extreme makeover, Zen edition.

As a former cattle ranch purchased by the Zen Center in the late 1970s, Green Gulch came complete with an assortment of old farmstead buildings. A large barn had been haphazardly repurposed into a meditation hall, but in the wake of the damage left by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, it was closed to the public.

"We had to align the aesthetic values of Zen with what was already there," explains Robert Thomas, a Zen priest and former Zen Center president. "In this way, Zen design becomes an ecological statement as well."

Degenhardt's renovation was based on a simple rectangular structure - lofty and expansive, in the spirit of the former barn. As a matter of course for meditation halls, doors are placed on an axis that's anchored by a central altar - where a Buddha statue is happily perched - and narrow windows ring the upper perimeter of the room.

"The windows let in soft light, and only hint at a view - a sliver of sky or treetops - but not in a distracting way," says Degenhardt, who has also designed Spirit Rock in Woodacre and Abhayagiri in Redwood Valley, both not related to the San Francisco Zen Center. "These structures are calming and dignified." (Degenhardt also notes that mindfulness usually begins before entering the zendo, either while skirting along its deep perimeter walkway or at its *genkan*, the threshold where practitioners remove their shoes before entering the space - both of these are telltale signs of Japanese temples.)

The Tassajara vibe

At the San Francisco Zen Center's Tassajara Zen Center, located at the end of a 14-mile dirt road in the Ventana Wilderness (take heed, first-timers: it's treacherous enough to jump-start any spiritual undertaking), the new retreat hall - also in Degenhardt's portfolio - hosts more informal zazen sessions, yoga classes and some dharma talks. Here, the windows are larger and, naturally, the light is more abundant, making the space ideal for less monastic pursuits. Still, a strategically placed clerestory window channels the late-afternoon sunbeams upon a casual altar, a subtle reminder of the center's peaceful intention.

The retreat hall's mountain architecture, while not stylistically in step with the austere Japanese tradition, stays true to the resort's original early 20th century buildings. Before Tassajara was transformed into a Zen and meditation retreat in 1966, it was a hot springs resort with rustic buildings made of a local fieldstone and western red cedar, indigenous to the Pacific Coast. That said, Degenhardt's contributions to Tassajara are still uniquely Zen - harmonious integration, after all, doesn't stray too far from the practice.

The realism factor

"Authenticity, too, is an important Zen value," reminds Thomas, who first met Degenhardt while he was a student at Tassajara in the early 1990s. "Helen's work honors and preserves the history of our Zen centers."

Degenhardt, a self-professed "recreational Buddhist" and current S.F. Zen Center board member, takes authenticity a little deeper by showcasing the precious materials that tie the buildings to their history and natural environment.

In her renovation for the bathhouse at Tassajara, for instance, white-cedar roof rafters - salvaged from the original structure - are proudly exposed, like a survival badge (the original bathhouse was condemned due to heavy rockfall from the looming mountain). And in the zendo at Green Gulch, the original barn's wooden floors, rescued from the earthquake rubble, are left unconcealed by rugs for all to behold.

"Zen design doesn't try to be clever," says Degenhardt. "It strives to achieve clarity. And when it does, the mind more easily follows suit."

Design: Helen Degenhardt, JSW/D Architects. www.jswdarch.com.

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