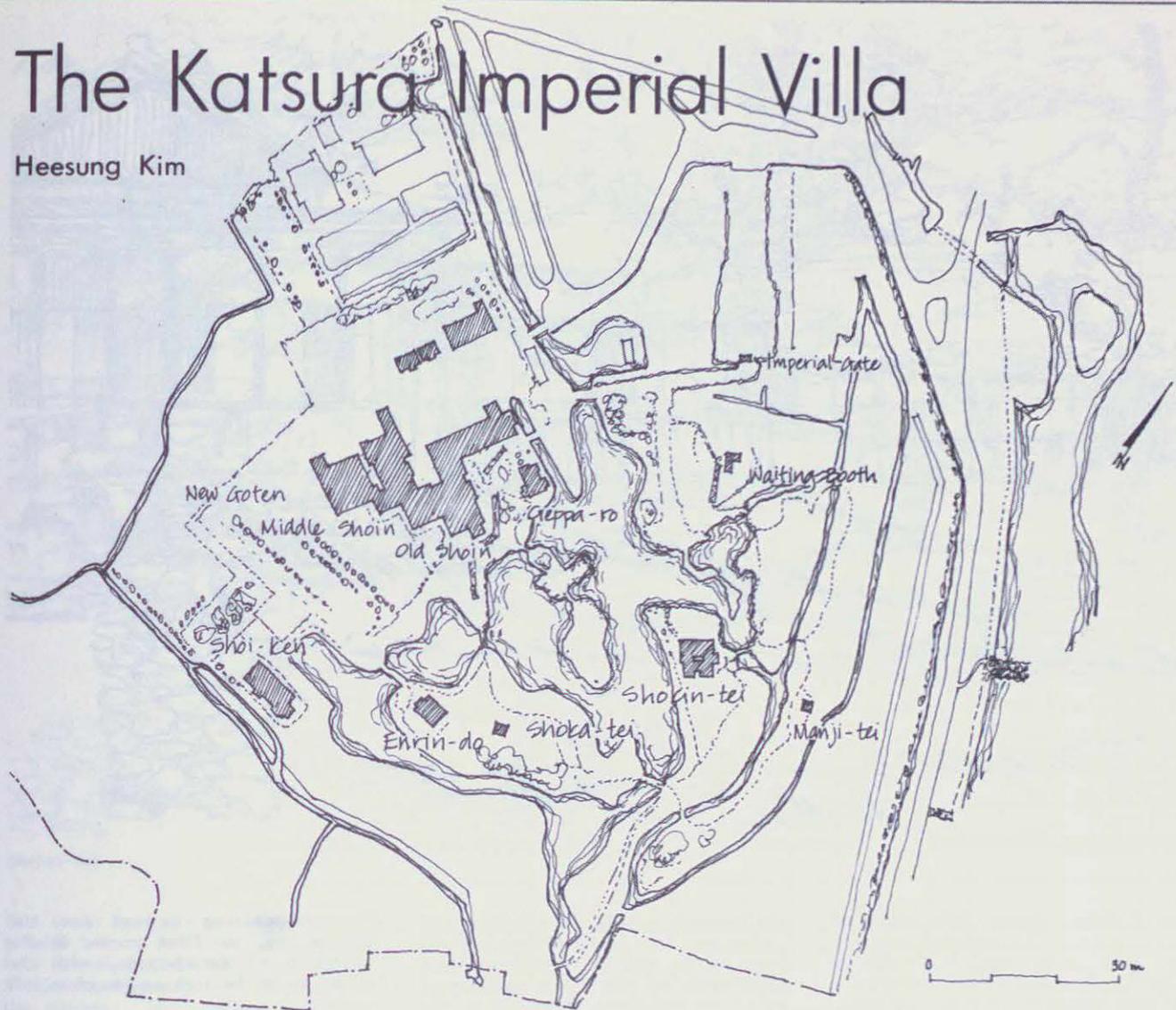


The Katsura Imperial Villa

Heesung Kim



ON THE BANKS of the Katsura River, south-west of Kyoto, is a cluster of buildings in a garden setting considered to be one of the finest examples of Japanese architecture. It was built in the early seventeenth century as a retreat for Prince Toshito, the younger brother of the Emperor as a collection of residential quarters, tea houses, and a temple amidst a man-made environment of hills and ponds covering almost fourteen acres.

Prince Toshito, whose poetic genius and aesthetic sensibility are well documented, is believed to have supervised the construction until his death in 1629. The second stage was begun in 1642 by his son, Prince Noritada, and completed in its present form.

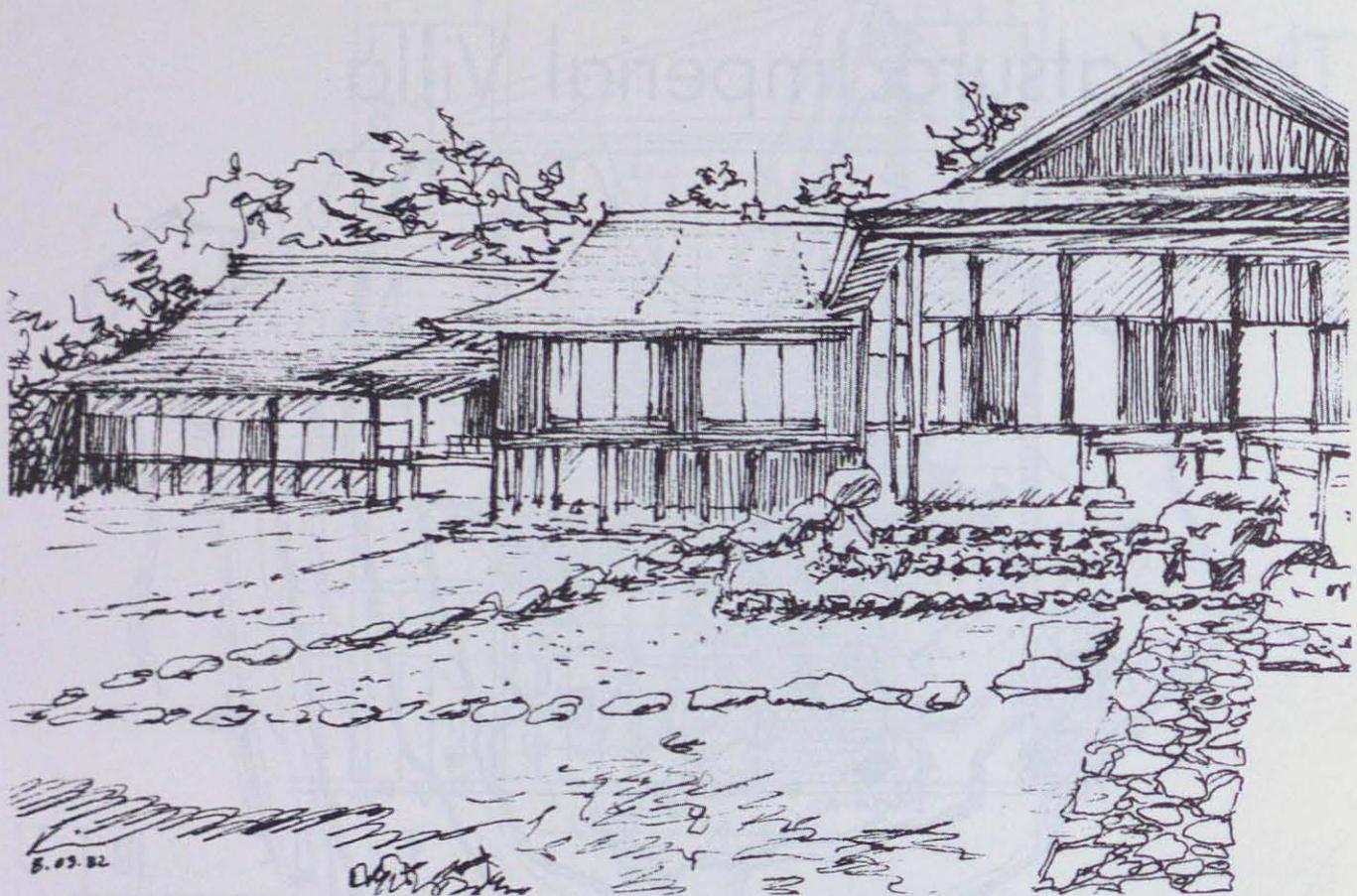
Katsura was chosen as the site for its beautiful view of the moon, often referred to in the poetry of the Imperial court, as well as its proximity to Kyoto, then the Imperial

capital. At that time, the tea ceremony had become an important ritual in Japan, in which one partook of tea and appreciated the aesthetic qualities or artistic merits of various objects of discussion. The tea ceremony itself originated in China and was brought with the Zen Buddhists, but eventually it developed into a social ritual with tea houses designed solely for that purpose. Architecturally, the austere *soan* style of the tea houses was incorporated into the residential *shoin* style to develop the *sukiya zukuri*, or teahouse style. It was characterized by flexible room arrangements and natural materials such as clay walls and bark-covered posts and beams, and was adopted from the seventeenth century on as the predominant style of Japanese domestic architecture. The Katsura Villa was one of the first examples of this, having been built when the *sukiya* style itself was being developed.

The grounds at Katsura are not vast,

but the pavilions and gardens create a diversity of impressions which together give a rich effect. Each pavilion, with its unique character, is placed around the pond and connecting paths of the garden in which various phases of landscape are developed on a miniature scale with changing views and surface textures: hills, rivers, fields, inlets, and beaches. There is diversity in the architecture and landscaping but the two are integrated - every detail down to the last stepping-stone was carefully chosen and placed in its proper position. The garden is considered to be the first *stroll* style executed in Japan, a culmination of the styles and techniques of previous gardens.

The river bank side of the Villa is fenced off by a unique hedge of dense bamboo trees, whose stems are bent downward and braided. At the west side, the hedge becomes a fence of large bamboo posts horizontally tied with twigs, and the doors of the front gate are of polished bamboo. The



Shoin Complex

second gate, Miyuki-mon (Imperial Gate), was a later addition, erected about 1633 for the visit of the retired Emperor. A square flat stone outside the gate served to rest the palaquins of the Emperors. The path to the third gate, Miyuki-michi (Imperial Path) is paved with cobblestones, with an arched earthen bridge at the end. Chu-mon, the third gate, leads into the complex. An ashlar pavement, the stepping stones of *shin*, which means rigidity, lead directly to the porch of the main house in a bed of moss.

The main house is composed of three parts: the Old and Middle Shoin, and the New Goten. These are arranged like a flight formation of wild geese and oriented to avoid summer sunshine, to face the full moon in autumn, and to catch the winter sun. The Old Shoin is simple, with large nine, ten, and fifteen-mat rooms. The number of *tatami* mats (measuring about three feet by six feet) signified the area of the room. The rooms are divided by sliding wood-lattice doors covered with *fusuma*, an opaque paper, with plain lintels and wooden slat ceilings. On the south side, facing the pond, is a veranda with a moon-viewing platform. The Old Shoin was probably meant to accommodate a

number of people in an informal gathering. The Middle Shoin is more ornamented, and is thought to have been the living quarters of the Prince. These are the oldest buildings in the complex. The New Goten was an addition built to accommodate the retired Emperor Gomizuno-o during his several visits to Katsura. It differs from the older parts in its palatial quality, with a three-mat raised floor section, or *jodan*, in one part of the *tatami*-floored rooms, the seat of honour. It is more decorated, possibly to suit the tastes of the ex-Emperor, and the veranda is enclosed with *shoji*, sliding wood lattice doors covered with translucent paper.

Beside the *shoin* complex is the Geppa-ro (Moon-Over-The-Waves Pavilion) which was intended for viewing the reflection of the moon on the pond, as compared to the Old Shoin, from which one viewed the rising moon. The rooms are arranged around the service corner for preparing food or tea, which has a hearth and shelving. Autumn is the theme, with a view of the maple hillock where the leaves turn red in the fall. The shingled roof of this pavilion gives it the air of a nobleman's retreat, while the interior

has no ceiling except for the *ichi-no-ma*, or first room, in the tradition of farmhouses, with the underside of the rush and bamboo left exposed.

The garden is dotted with several pavilions, accessible by stepping stones and bridges or by boat. The man-made landscape of the garden is designed as a backdrop for the architecture, and each element is an integral part of the overall theme while retaining its characteristic expression. The garden path goes clockwise from the Mikuki Lane to the cypress hillock, branching from a straight path to the pond. In front of the cypress mound is a roofed bench with a lavatory, the waiting booth for the tea ceremony at the Shokin-tei. The path goes around the pond past Ama-no-hashidate, a symbolic representation of a famous scenic seashore. The path branches into a large stone bridge and a series of stepping stones to the Manji-tei. This pavilion is on the top of a hill and was intended as a resting place during a stroll through the woods. There are four benches arranged in a *manji*, a swastika-like form, with a simple thatched roof without walls.



Shokin-tei

The stone bridge is a single slab of granite twenty feet long supported by four corner-stones. This leads to the Shokin-tei, the principal structure in the garden. The exterior is in the style of a *minka*, the rustic houses of the common people, with deep overhangs on the thatched roof over the earthen covered service area in the front. The interior on the other hand, has the decorum of the classic *shoin* style. This pavilion has the only authentic ceremonial tea-room in the villa. The tea ceremonies hosted by Prince Toshito were undoubtedly held here, and thus the Shokin-tei has a dual character: the grand space for the entertainment of nobility and the austere simplicity of the tea room. The *Ichino-ma* and the *Ninoma* (First Room and Second Room) are open and spacious, with unobstructed views of the garden. The straight path from Miyuki Lane to the path originally led to the foot of a vermilion-laquered bridge that crossed the pond directly to the front of the Shokin-tei, while the meandering garden path led to the ceremonial tea room.

On the west side is the boat landing, and the garden path winds alongside to an earthen bridge across the pond to

the large island on which the Shoka-tei and Enrin-do are located. The Shoka-tei is at the top, a small tea pavilion with views to the gardens of the villa and the mountains in the distance. It is modelled after a countryside rest-booth and was intended for visitors during garden tours. The Enrin-do is a small Buddhist temple, first dedicated to the soul of Prince Toshito by his son. It now enshrines mortuary tablets of the Hachijo princes. It has a tiled pyramidal roof with a Chinese-style front gable.

Across the pond from the island is the Shoi-ken. *Ken* is a pavilion larger than a *tei*. It is designed as a replica of a farm-house, with its simple thatched hipped roof and low projecting lean-tos. The Shoi-ken is only about twenty feet from the bamboo fence boundary, with cultivated fields on the other side. From the bamboo-mullioned veranda, one could savor the qualities of rural life.

The Katsura Imperial Villa is the most notable for the total integration of landscape and architecture. The environment and buildings were the product of the refined tastes of

nobility of that period, using natural materials and great care in composition. Designed to accommodate the genteel past-times of the court, much of which was associated with the contemplation of some aspect of nature, the pavilions and gardens are harmonious and complementary. Unlike most palatial architecture in Japan and throughout the Orient, it has a beauty that arises not from the embellishment of artisans but on the sensitive use of materials with attention to detail and careful design of the environment around. It is also appropriate as the country retreat of a princely family without real power; it has serenity and quiet dignity that no palatial villa could have matched.

Note: the Shoin complex is currently undergoing a complete reconstruction that is to take six years, projected to re-open May, 1982. The gardens and pavilions are open to the public by scheduled guided tours only. □

References

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