



Zen

My wife and I have an ongoing discussion about how “perfect” things need to be around the home. She likes to have everything “just right.” I keep telling her to consider instead the Zen concept of “wabi-sabi,” which appeals more to me. Wabi-sabi acknowledges three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished and nothing is perfect.¹⁶⁹ It implies that how one chooses to look at things is the most important determinant of how satisfied one is with the world. To quote a well-known phrase from yoga philosophy, “The world is as you see it.”

Zen is about being satisfied with little things, finding reflections of the cosmos in a bed of sand and gravel, a few well-placed boulders and a sprinkling of natural elements such as grasses. As William Blake wrote in “Auguries of Innocence” more than two centuries ago, you approach the sacred when you manage “to see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour.”

What does this have to do with green buildings? It is this: we need to celebrate what we have achieved, even while we remain insistent on getting better in the future. We need to be aware that each green building is going to have imperfections: things attempted but not achieved, things not attempted that in retrospect could have been accomplished, but didn’t fit with the design team’s vision or the owner’s conception of the project. A Zen approach to green buildings would celebrate also what’s special about the place, its particular location on the planet. Perhaps to further this approach, each building could be gifted with a simple haiku, an epigraph at the entrance.

As for a Zen-inspired building, a good example might be the Green Gulch Zen Center Guest House, in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in Muir Beach, north of San Francisco. According to the project designer, architect Sim van der Ryn:

The guest house serving the Green Gulch Zen Center is sensitively designed to minimize its visibility and physical impact on site. The octagonal plan and simple elegance of the 12-room guest house reflect the Asian origins of Zen Buddhism. The building’s centering geometry is further articulated by a two-story central core, used as a gathering and meeting space.

The design of the guest house supports and respects the



Green Gulch Farm

Green Gulch Zen Center Guest House.

human search for beauty. Handcrafted Japanese joinery is used throughout the house with strict attention to detail. The building incorporates recycled timbers and a passive solar heating system designed to meet human needs without destroying the fabric of the living world. [This] is a truly peaceful place.¹⁷⁰



Zero-net-energy Buildings

The concept of zero-net-energy buildings and zero-net-energy neighborhoods is quickly capturing the attention of many green building designers and even some developers. A zero-net-energy building would provide all of its own energy on an annual basis from onsite renewable resources or offsite renewable energy purchases. In this way it would still be connected