What happens when you bring together three renowned artists from the realm of bonsai, give them each complete artistic control, and ask them to innovate, independently, with only one constraint: they must each individually respond to each other and to a particular, iconic, architectural work? This is what Pacific Bonsai Museum has asked as the crux of their multi-year long experiment, the LAB (Living Art of Bonsai); setting the goal of advancing innovation and artistic expression in bonsai.

Pacific Bonsai Museum’s Executive Director Kathy McCabe said the LAB emerged as a way for the Museum to make a contribution to advancing the art of bonsai. Tracing the evolution of the idea, she explained, “We were thinking of doing an artist in residence program, but we knew that the process of creating bonsai art has unique requirements.” For example, it can take several months for a styled tree to recover before it can be potted. Plus, they knew collaboration among bonsai, ceramic, and wood artists would be crucial to pushing bonsai art in new directions.

It became clear that it would be essential to challenge the hierarchy and dissect the process by which a bonsai is typically created in order to fully explore bonsai as an art. With ideas sparked by LAB patrons Millie and Craig Russell, the planned experiments multiplied. What started as one experiment to resequence the standard (tree->pot->stand) approach, morphed into a complicated series of concurrent experiments, each testing a different starting point. The question became, ‘What happens when we resequence the process of how bonsai is made?’ leading to a design team-led series of investigations.

The inaugural LAB team includes standmaker Austin Heitzman (Austin Heitzman Furniture, Portland, OR),...
ceramic artist Ron Lang (Lang Bonsai Containers, Southport, NC), bonsai artist Ryan Neil (Bonsai Mirai, St. Helens, OR) and facilitator Aarin Packard, (Curator, Pacific Bonsai Museum, Federal Way, WA). These artists will collaborate on multiple, concurrent bonsai displays with all three each taking a turn ‘starting’ one of them. The team will come together for four presentation sessions in total—all before an audience, some live, some virtual—which will take them into early 2020.

Bringing three fireball artists together was bound to be combustible; but the Museum further set the stage for a deeper questioning about art, architecture, the home, and the reverential nature of bonsai display by centering the project around the exploration of bonsai display in residential architectural environments. (Figure 1)

Bonsai is a living art, in that the medium of the art is alive. It is also a living art in that the intense daily ritual of care for bonsai requires that we live with them. For those who practice the art, bonsai become enmeshed in their living spaces, their homes, their lives. They are most prized companions and they compel us to revere them in special places.

The history of bonsai has been marked by a persistent impetus to bring bonsai out of the garden into special reverential architectural places. The practice of miniaturizing trees in shallow trays travelled from China to Japan with the spread of Buddhism. In the Kamakura period (1185 -1333 AD), Japanese Zen Buddhist priests maintained special alcoves in their monasteries as spaces of prayer and meditation. There would have hung a special scroll or painting, and likely a statue for contemplation.

Special spaces in the home endured into the Muromachi Period (1336 – 1573 AD) evolving into seasonal sites of fine art appreciation known as the ‘tokonoma.’ A small alcove, slightly elevated from the surrounding level of the home--and thus signaling it as a special space not for humans but for objects--the tokonoma became the focal point of a reception room created for the purpose of displaying significant, cherished, artistic objects. Contemporary Japanese tokonoma displays are typically comprised of bonsai displayed with accent plants (‘kusamono’) in front of a hanging scroll depicting a particular familiar, natural scene.

Figure 2: Left, a Tucker Oak, Quercus john-Tuckeri, with ‘Tucker Oak’ skatedeck painted by Merlot for "Decked Out."

Figure 3: Below, Alaska’s Aleutian Range represented by Subalpine Fir (Abies lasiocarpa) forest planting, accent planting by Young Choe, kusamono container by Victoria Chamberlain, and ‘Alaska’ painting by Iuna Tinta.
The subject of the ever-evolving tokonoma as a context for bonsai display has interested Pacific Bonsai Museum’s Curator, Aarin Packard, for years. For his debut exhibition Decked Out: From Scroll to Skateboard, Packard conceived a modern American tokonoma, hanging custom-painted skate decks beside bonsai in place of scrolls. (Figure 2) The following year, he continued his exploration with Natives, creating American tokonoma displays with ‘our own stuff’: that is, bonsai species botanically endemic to the U.S., paired with accent plants in native plant material of that bonsai species’ environment, displayed with paintings depicting that species’ landscape. (Figure 3) Having adapted the bonsai, accents, and scrolls, now, with the LAB, Packard has turned to the architectural space: the tokonoma itself. What might an American tokonoma look like and how might bonsai be displayed there?

The iconic American architect Frank Lloyd Wright was too fascinated by the idea of an American tokonoma. Packard had this in mind when he and McCabe selected a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home as the site of the first LAB experiment set for August 4, 2018: the Chauncey L. and Johanna Griggs House in Lakewood, WA.

In the Griggs House, next to a clerestory-topped, soaring wall of windows with views through vines to maple trees, sun-dappled lawn and creek, University of Oregon Professor Kevin Nute kicked off the LAB Session One with a presentation on the influence of Japanese culture on Frank Lloyd Wright’s designs. (Figure 4) Nute walked the audience through Wright’s journey, starting with Wright as collector of Ukiyo-e woodblock prints, then as admirer of the writings of art historian Ernest Fenollosa, as close reader of Edward Morse’s 1886 book Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings; and as traveler. Wright made his first trip to Japan in 1905 visiting Japanese homes gaining inspiration from their focal points and overall organization.

Back in America, developing his practice, Wright exhibited a preference for open, divider-less rooms with overlapping functions. The dominant organizing principle of his Usonian style became the transgression of the boundary. His architecture—metaphorically and literally—punctured building envelopes, blurring the division between inside and outside. He was referring to this wholeness—a sense of interconnected, overlapping parts—when he began to describe his designs as ‘organic architecture.’

In Wright’s residential designs, certain parts of the home gained potency, particularly the hearth. His freestanding masonry fireplaces were his translation of the tokonoma. For Wright, the tokonoma and the hearth performed the same
function in the home: that of a familial unification through a shared experience of ritual, reverence, warmth, and display. Many American homes retain this symbolic gesture, treating the mantle as a special place for reverential display.

The presence of the 5,000-square foot Griggs House is weighty. Concrete blocks (bonded as a stack rather than staggered) and long, cedar trusses hold up a massive, cantilevering roof extending fourteen feet past a glass wall over a terrace towards Chambers Creek. After Ryan Neil live-styled a limber pine, Pinus flexilis, under that roof, he told the LAB Session One audience, "I felt the space the whole time. I wasn’t trying to reference the house, but it came out.” He added, “If I were working on this tree under the canopy of a limber pine forest, it would be a completely different bonsai. This environment definitely shaped how I styled this tree.” Interestingly, what emerged from the first round of styling—in which Neil expressed “the abstract concept” of the bonsai, as he called it—was a more traditional Japanese form, in contrast to the unbridled American style he is known for. At the beginning of the process, he stated an inclination towards asymmetry—to be in keeping with Frank Lloyd Wright’s proclivities—but ended up with a more symmetrical silhouette and central apex. Later he reflected that the space actually made him feel uncomfortable. He wasn’t happy with how the tree came out, and wants to restyle it. (Figure 5)

Heitzman and Lang also responded to the Griggs House, but had the advantage of being able to produce their work in the safe comfort of their familiar studios. (Figure 6) They were asked to keep the results of their work secret and show up with them at the Griggs House for a big reveal. Delighted
gasps and “ooohs!” accompanied Heitzman’s unveiling of a tall, rough-edged, walnut stand created from a milled street tree. The stand appeared as a vertical plane with small, angular pedestal-like spaced perch on top. Heitzman described the source of his inspiration: “The first time I saw this house it was winter, with beckoning light flooding in the home” and I wanted to capture that sense of beckoning.

Lang’s container, a geometric pot in reddish clay, was probably unlike any bonsai container the audience had ever seen before. This unique vessel responded to the Griggs house roof line, as well as to Wright’s idea of the core of the home, which he expressed in masonry fireplaces, from which he conceived the home would spring. “I couldn’t help but be inspired by Wright” Lang said, confessing, “Perhaps, I was too literal; too ‘architectural.’” Looking at Neil’s styled tree he added, “I see opportunities now. This tree opens me up.”

How might the creation of bonsai be affected by different architectural spaces? As the LAB experiments roll out, the architectural settings will track the evolution of modernism in America. Wright set the precedent for the translation of Japanese aesthetics and culture in American architecture, and mid-twentieth century ‘Japonisme 2.0’ continued to inspire and inform the work of architects and landscape architects as the international style of modernism flourished in post-war America. Spatial traditions of Japanese buildings and gardens with flowing interior-exterior rooms were employed, along with traditions of incorporating borrowed views to create a sense of visual Endlessness, permanent patterns, paths encouraging zig-zagging motion through space, and even the use of miniaturized trees.

For modernist designers, the axonometric projection—rediscovered by western artists and architects through the Dutch art movement De Stijl—became the preferred view to express modern design. (Figure 7) Axonometric drawings depict objects from multiple sides; and unlike perspective drawings, they do not distort the scale of objects depending on where those objects sit on any particular axis. Axonometry, like bonsai, originated in China with scroll painting, as a way to depict a moving viewpoint, as if impossibly floating above the ground while traversing it. This idealized space of the mind represented the meshing of space and time as an inseparable continuum: a kind of organicity based on wholeness and the blurring of categorical divisions, as Wright had also embraced.

An organicity born of blurred categories makes sense to artists involved with bonsai. At the LAB Session One, Lang...
elaborated on a crucial blurring that takes place in the art: "Bonsai are human-made. Bonsai is the opposite of natural. The human-made component is what says, ‘this is not a tree in nature any longer.’ It’s been lifted out of nature, tweaked, altered, and aestheticized.” It’s our job to “make bonsai look as good as humanly possible,” added Heitzman.

Bonsai artists can take their cues from the environment; traditionally, from the environment of the natural world. But with the LAB, bonsai artists are asked to respond directly to the built environment. Professor Nute, offering his post-event insights, described bonsai as a kind of “tectonics with natural materials,” referring to the architectural concept of the art of material construction. Lang made the connection to architecture even more direct: “The container is the site of bonsai, as the site is to architecture.” Continuing, he added, “The stand and pot are the ‘environment’ in which we must situate the tree.”

The former Weyerhaeuser Company headquarters—on the campus of which the Pacific Bonsai Museum is situated—is a striking example of modernist architecture employing the concept of disappearing boundaries. (Figure 8) When viewed from the nearby freeway, or across its human-made lake foreground, and even from within the building looking out, the building and landscape merge as one entity. The pattern repeats everywhere: concrete terraces, glass, sky, water, land; save for the west entry, where sits one enormous rough-hewn boulder; its restraint signaling that nature-as-art-object shall be the subject of reverence. (Figure 9)

At the conclusion of the LAB Session One, the design team agreed that true collaboration was happening there. No one knows what will emerge next, or how this will change the way bonsai is created. Neil wondered out loud, “Do other bonsai artists want ceramists and standmakers to take the lead more?”, speculating, “This could be the better way; this could be the best way.” The team’s reflections had members of the audience wondering what kind of architecture might have been produced if Frank Lloyd Wright had collaborated with talented individuals. “There is a bravery to learn from other people,” said Neil. Audience member / ceramist Jonathan Cross suggested collaboration is key: “The Museum has a role in bringing people together.”

The LAB challenged the artists and the Museum in ways no one could have anticipated. Packard noted, “These artists had been very comfortable in each of their roles within the unchallenged process. Having entered the LAB, they are now in a position they have not been in before, and it is uncom-
comfortable.” As Session One drew to a close, we realized that the artistic process—full of questioning and struggle—is profoundly what the LAB is all about.

You could say that art has its greatest potency, and is perhaps the most challenging to create, when it blurs the line between it and ‘real’ life; when the ‘stuff’ the artists uses to create the work is drawn from everyday life. There is a great sense of awareness that an artist can express by approaching life--and bonsai--this way, with reverence.

Video and audio from the August 4, 2018 LAB Session 1 were recorded. When available, information about how to watch and listen, as well as information about future LAB sessions, will be posted at www.pacificbonsaimuseum.org. The venue for Session 2 (March 2019) has been announced as the Wollochet House in Gig Harbor, designed by Mary Lund Davis, a pioneering Pacific Northwest modernist architect and the first woman to graduate from the Architecture Department at the University of Washington. For Session 2, Lang will bring a container for Neil’s limber pine and a container for Heitzman’s walnut stand, and Neil will style a tree for Lang’s Wright-inspired, architectural container; Session 3, August 2019 (Date and location TBA); and Session 4, Reveal and Artists’ Reflections (Date and location TBA).

References:


