

THE MATTRESS FACTORY GARDEN: THE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WINIFRED  
LUTZ'S GARDEN INSTALLATION AND THE CHINESE-JAPANESE GARDEN TRADITION

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## **The Mattress Factory Garden: the Cultural Differences between Winifred Lutz's Garden Installation and the Chinese-Japanese Garden Tradition**

One may say that the best way to incorporate nature into social life is to create a park or garden. During the late 1960s, nature became a significant element in contemporary art. The landscape designs of artists such as Isamu Noguchi and Elyn Zimmerman, were inspired by the aesthetics of Asian art, especially the Japanese garden tradition. Because of my Chinese background, I intend to raise issues about the cultural differences between the concepts of garden designs.

With specific interests in the history of the Mattress Factory, Winifred Lutz created a site of inner nature in a concept of material identity and space rearrangement of local history and culture. Based on her inspiration from the Chinese and Japanese garden tradition, it seems that the translation of these concepts of garden design is based on how the artist adapted the form or the content out of another cultural context. However, each culture perceives nature and culture differently. Is Lutz's idea of garden design visually or conceptually inspired by the Chinese and Japanese garden tradition? Could Lutz successfully convey the concepts of the Chinese and Japanese garden traditions? In order to identify the clues of Lutz's perception of cultural translation, it is important to understand how she modified raw materials into artistic forms, and why she intended to reconstruct the historical site in certain ways.

Artist Winifred Lutz has created major sculpture installations since 1975. The aesthetics of Lutz's art focuses on the issues of natural setting and social life. She is well known for transforming ordinary elements and space into a fantastic new world. In The Mattress Factory Garden, Lutz paid equal attention to both the natural processes and

historical background of the site. Formally she divided the garden into different levels, like an archaeologist might do for archaeological research. When you walk into the garden, you will experience the different levels of the site (Figure 1). Each level represents different layers of natural and architectural history. She said, “I was interested in uncovering the urban and natural history here to reveal the physical memory in the site”(Lutz n.p.). In this project, Lutz spent several years studying both historical and physical information from the site, and documented the excavations carefully. She wanted the process of modifying the old project to become part of the artwork.

Unlike real archaeological research, recording and rearranging objects here is to recreate the natural and cultural environment. In order to reveal the physical memory of the site, Lutz rearranged the space of the Mattress Factory site with the information perceived from the context of building’s history. The concept of reconstructing the reality of the previous natural setting and social life is based on the relationship between the past and present. Therefore, the form and content of this garden not only present the physical memory of a tradition but also convey a sense of inner feeling and thought about the site. In terms of the concept of garden design, Harriet F. Senie noted:

A rich history of garden design provides any number of evocative precedents for artists appropriating a domain traditionally allocated to architects or landscape architects. Some sculptors have followed a formal approach, largely based on well-established traditions; others have sought a solution that combines elements of contemporary sculpture with landscape design. (156)

For Lutz, the materials she used in her garden design came from a well-established tradition and she intended to use them to rearrange a space filled with historical vocabularies and sculptural elements. It is very important for viewers to perceive that rock, water, trees, shrubs, vines, and grasses are not only the symbols of the natural environment but the elements of space landmarks. In addition, she created the water trough as a dividing line that guided viewers' vision into the different memories of the site (Figure 2). "The water trough in the garden divides the natural history and the urban history of the space, and connects the upper and lower levels," said Lutz (Lutz n.p.). Undoubtedly the concept of Lutz's space rearrangement has become an important guideline for viewers' movement when visiting.

Besides the choice of materials and the space rearrangement of this historical site, Lutz also presented a unique form of garden, which is inspired by the Chinese and Japanese garden tradition (Figure 3). Recent studies mentioned that:

In the spirit of this tradition, she feels involved in a process of collaboration, not so much with "nature," as with a whole complex of natural-human interfaces, a history going a long, long way back, what she calls "the physical memory of the site." (Grauer 2)

I am not aware of whether Lutz has visited some of the Chinese or Japanese traditional gardens or not. Obviously her garden design is not a typical garden pattern of the Western art world, and apparently it does not look like an Asian garden. Based on information I have received, I do not agree with the opinion that The Mattress Factory Garden looks like a Zen-style rock garden (Grauer 2). In my opinion, besides the fact that the form of this site is inspired by the Chinese and Japanese garden tradition, I still can see how

Lutz tried to convey the philosophy of the Chinese garden tradition: the harmony of nature and culture. Like language translation, the most important part of artistic translation is not the characters themselves but the meanings beyond the characters. If Westerners were not aware of the philosophy of the Chinese garden tradition, they may perceive things in a wrong way by the misunderstanding of cultural differences.

A better illustration of the concepts of Lutz's cultural translation is A Reclamation Garden (1992-1995) at the Abington Art Center (Figure 4). She stated, "The growth patterns I follow are the patterns of nature"(Griswold B45). In order to stimulate a new awareness of the site, she built a human-made environment by using the resources and materials from the natural environment. She intended to raise the issues of time and space through the metaphor of a garden. She thus gathered and arranged materials such as trunks, branches, and stones to present the ongoing processes of the site. Lutz has good sense about the natural world, and she tried to convey how she feels about it. Indeed, she intended to depict a picture of natural and cultural interfaces, and this is similar to the philosophy of the Chinese garden tradition.

At the Mattress Factory, Lutz's installation focuses on social life as well as natural history. It seems that the problems and tensions faced by the community play an important role in her reconstruction. She not only worked on the social aspects of the site but also threw light on the profound issues of nature. However, in the Western art world, the aesthetics of contemporary public art are based on the realities of community's tradition and people's social life. When Western artists' ideas are inspired by another culture, are they aware of the different social climate and the possibility of cultural translation? Because the concepts of Chinese and Japanese garden tradition are very

foreign to the Western art world, it is no wonder that most of the analysis of Lutz's garden installation is focused on Western approaches of garden design. In fact, Westerners seldom have chances to understand the concepts of the Chinese and Japanese garden tradition. Therefore, they might ignore the profound issues of the philosophy and aesthetics of these art forms. Unquestionably, it is much easier for Westerners to just depict the appearance of these art forms than appreciate the wonders of cultural translation presented by Lutz.

Like archeological sites in Ancient Europe, everything in The Mattress Factory Garden came from urban and natural history. In order to reconstruct the reality of this brick building's history, it is very important for Lutz to identify the meanings and uses of materials and the context of objects and events from the past. Recent studies about archaeology mentioned that:

Archaeologists have long been aware of the importance of physical context in their study of excavated artifacts. The exact location of an object is carefully noted and its relationship to other objects recorded. This careful attention to situational context allows ongoing analysis of the specimens and contributes to the reconstruction of aspects of the material culture, as well as the broader cultural and social life of the former occupants of archaeological sites. The physical context of an ethnological specimen might include the other kinds of objects to which it is related, both in the process of manufacture and in use, as well as aspects of the natural and cultural environment to which the object is related. (Stott 18)

When Italian immigrants settled in the Mattress Factory's surrounding neighborhood in the late 1800s and early 1900s, many of them worked in agriculture-related jobs such as food production and cooking. The history of the Mattress Factory building is based on this fact and reflects the cultural and social life at that time. From this viewpoint, we can understand how Lutz attempted to identify and recreate objects for the new physical context of this site as a whole. For instance, the garden wall is built in the same fashion as the original basement walls built from the variety of local stone (Figure 5). In terms of the color and texture, these bricks are old and weathered, and have been assembled by Lutz with great care to recreate their original appearance. The physical context of the walls thus is presented to viewers by its new presence to recall the memory of its original appearance.

With every element precisely in place such as a pile of stones and concrete blocks, Grauer mentioned that this site apparently looks like a Zen-style "rock garden" (Grauer 2). However, compared to Noguchi's sculpture gardens, Lutz's garden design seems to have fewer specific traditional elements of a Japanese garden. In Noguchi's Gardens for UNESCO in Paris (1956-58) (Figure 6), he applied fountains, paths, bridges, trees, shrubs, and stones as the important elements of this garden. It is the Zen concept of a garden. Indeed, different cultures convey the concept of garden design differently. One may ask "Is Lutz's translation more about appearance or concept?" and "Did she do a good job here?" In my opinion, Lutz not only depicts the appearance of the Chinese and Japanese garden tradition but also successfully translates the aesthetics of these traditions.

The concept of Chinese gardens represents an ideal place where people can live as well as be involved with nature (Figure 7). The garden is a specific space like a room

indoors, which is filled with rocks, plants, water, paths, bridges, and even furniture. If we look closely at Lutz's arrangement, we can see that she intended to arrange the water trough, the plants, and the rocks as the symbols of the natural world within a complex of natural and cultural settings. Instead of just constructing materials into a form of garden, Lutz's perception of nature is beyond the scientific views of nature. The way she modified and rearranged objects is more related to the Chinese views of nature: the concept of balancing nature and culture. By modifying raw materials into artistic forms, Lutz presents a sense of inner feeling about time and space. In the interfaces of natural and cultural settings, she creates a space that allows us to experience the physical memory of the site as well as a feeling of the interfaces of nature and culture.

The concept of modifying natural resources into cultural objects is an important aspect of Lutz's reconstruction in The Mattress Factory Garden. As a result, Lutz's perception of garden design is based on the mystery and realities of the site within the interfaces of the natural and cultural worlds. Furthermore, it is important to know that she intended to modify raw materials into artistic objects to convey a feeling of nature-culture interfaces. Unlike a real gardener, Lutz worked on the reality of local history and culture. Obviously, the concept of creating a physical memory of the site is quite different from the concept of enjoying the harmony of nature and culture. One may say Lutz conduits cultural differences and creates a site of inner nature, which allows viewers to perceive the wonders of garden design differently. No doubt, she is good at transforming ordinary elements and space into a fantastic new world, and this is similar to the aesthetics of the Chinese garden tradition. At the Mattress Factory site, I believe that viewers not only see



the mystery and realities of the site but also involve with a sense of humanity from the interfaces of natural and cultural history.



Figure 1. Winifred Lutz, *The Mattress Factory Garden*, 1997. A view of the garden. Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

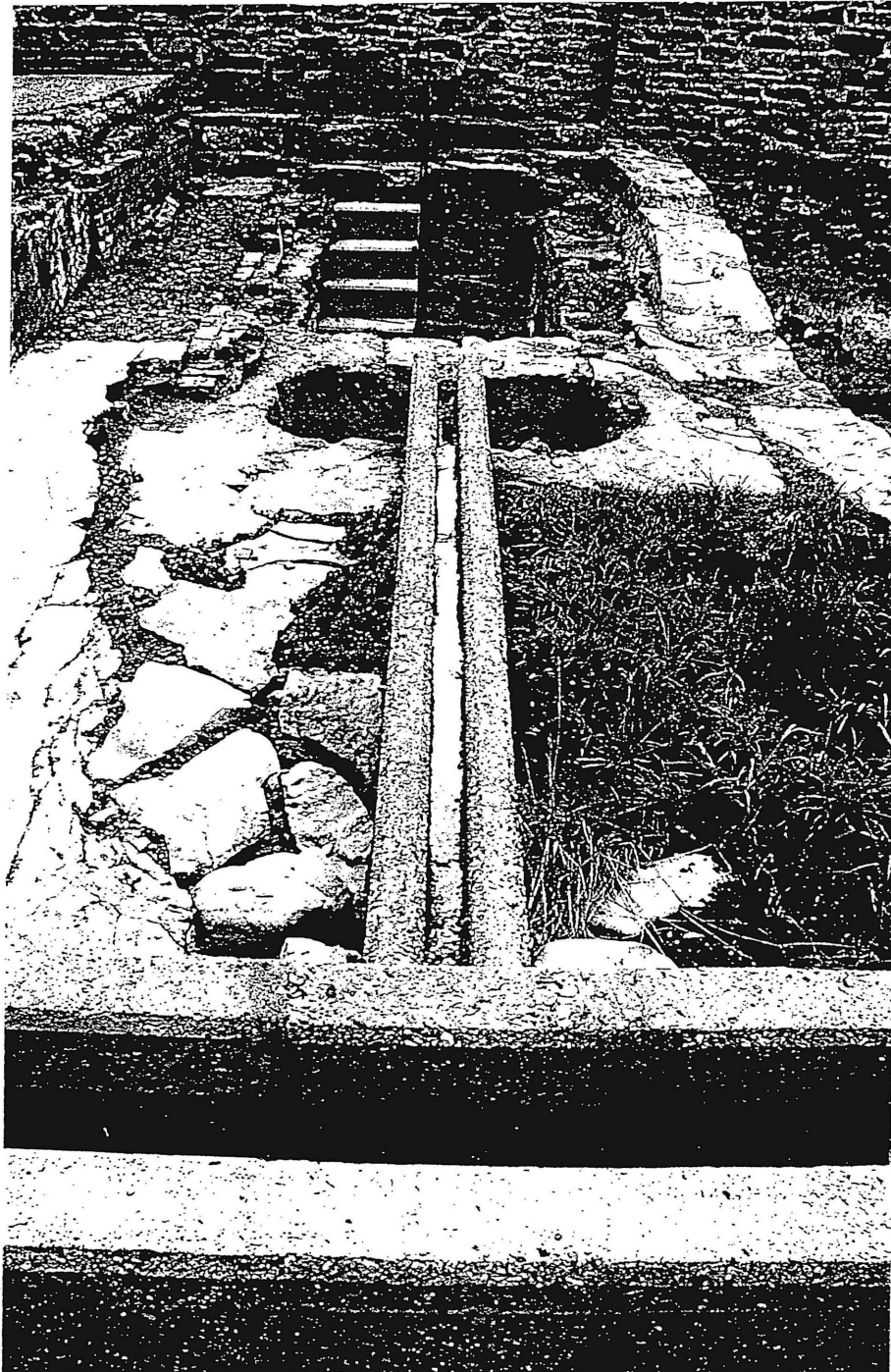


Figure 2. Winifred Lutz, The Mattress Factory Garden, 1997. Water trough, A view of the garden. Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



Figure 3. Wang Shih Yuan, Corner of the central lake. Suchow, China.



Figure 4. Winifred Lutz, A Reclamation Garden, 1992-1995.  
A view of the garden. Abington Art Center, Jenkintown, PA.



Figure 5. Winifred Lutz, The Mattress Factory Garden, 1997. Garden wall, A view of the garden. Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



Figure 6. Isamu Noguchi, Gardens for UNESCO, 1956-1958. Paris, France.

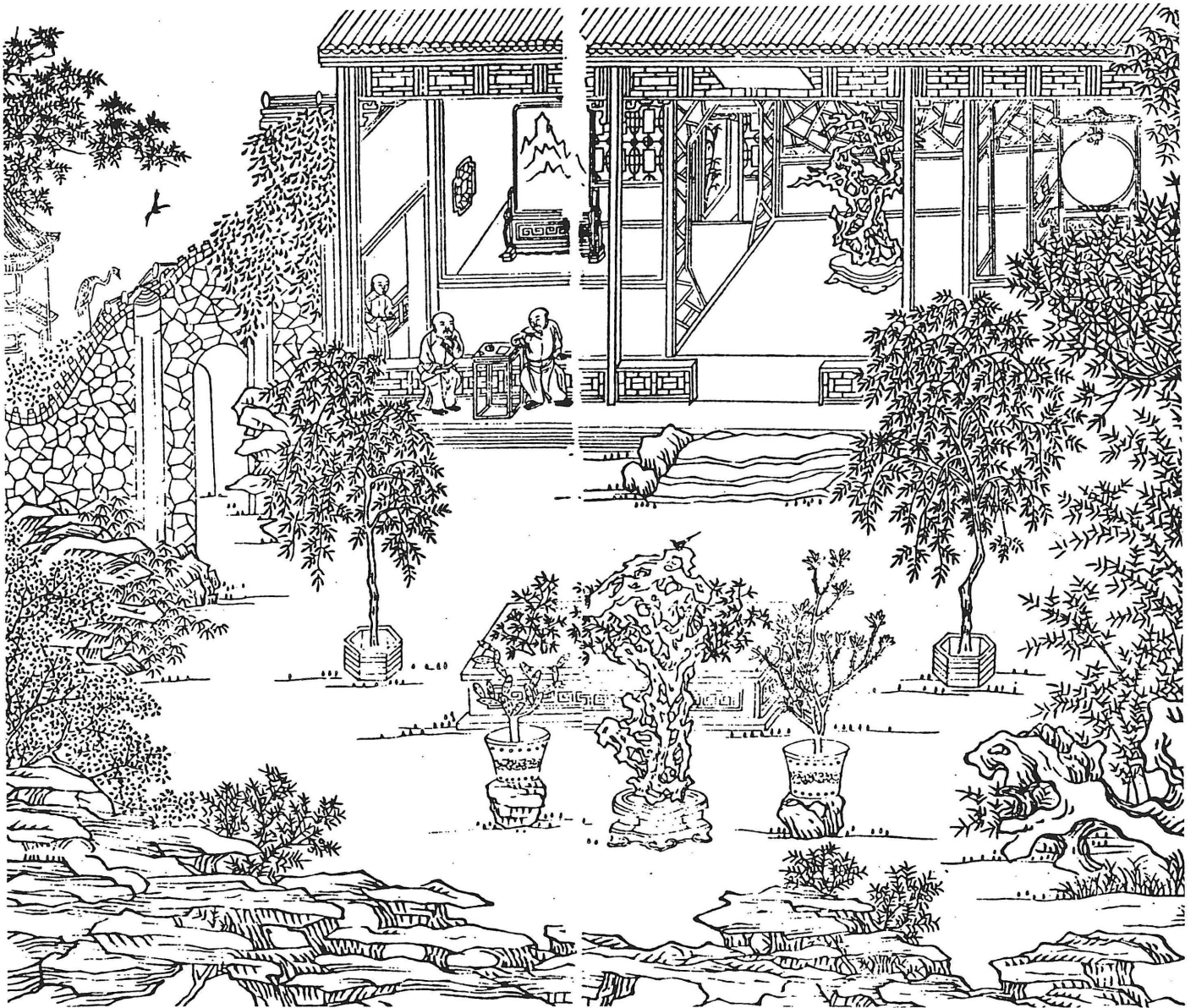


Figure 7. The Pai Shih Pavilion, woodcut from the 19<sup>th</sup> century illustrated journal of Lin Ch'ing. Peking, China.



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