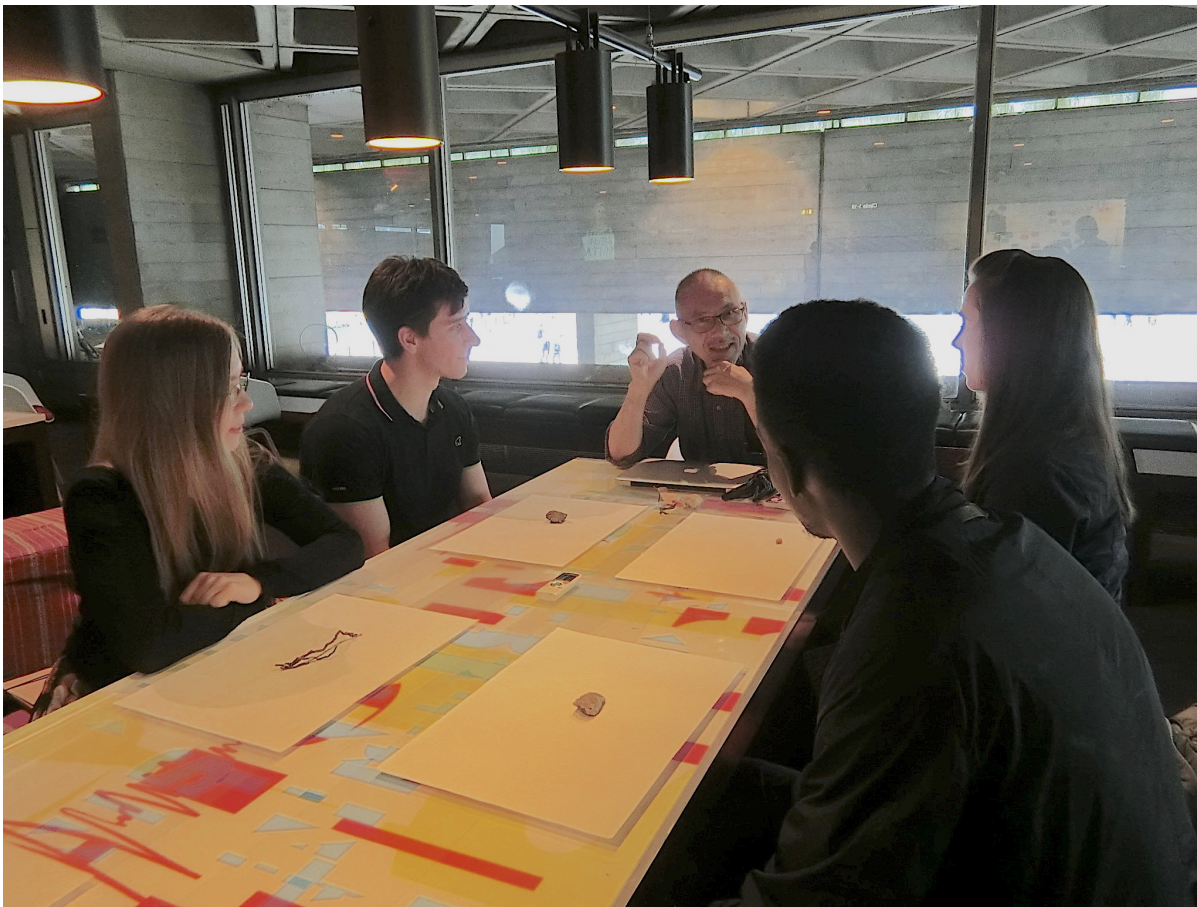


## ***Karesansui* - the Japanese rock or dry garden**

A talk about a Japanese traditional art by a Japanese sculptor was hosted by JLCE (Japanese Language and Culture Exchange) at the lobby of the National Theatre, on the 1st of July 2017. The participants age range was that of their 20's to 40's, who were interested in and/or were studying Japanese.



**Partick O. Kuti, an organaiser :** Hello, everyone and thanks for participating in this workshop today. I'll now introduce today's lecturer, Mr. Muneyoshi Hase. He is a Japanese sculptor based in London. Today, he will have a workshop about a way of thinking in Japanese culture that can be seen through 'Karesansui', or the Japanese rock garden. I'm very excited about it. Well, Mr. Hase, could you start, please?

**Muneyoshi Hase:** Hello, everyone. Nice to meet you. First of all, I'll show you some images of 'Karesansui', as I'm not sure whether all of you know it or not. (Images of Japanese rock gardens are shown on a computer.) We call this kind of garden, a rock garden or a Zen garden. There is no water in these gardens, but it uses pebbles or gravel to represent a current of water or the ocean. These gardens used to be made or arranged as a place for doing meditation or Zen meditation. The most famous one to date is one located at the Ryoanji temple in Kyoto.

Well, let's start by making up a short story or narrative to describe the object I asked you to bring as preparation for this workshop. The short story should be around 30 to 60 seconds in length.

**Participates:** This sounds a little bit difficult.

**M:** Don't worry. Please try and 'communicate' with the object using your imagination. In other words, let's try to ask it some questions, for example, 'Where are you come from?', 'What has your life so far?', 'Do you have a family?', 'what's your dream?', and so on.

Also, try to convey to the object your impression of it, for example, 'Your shape is nice.' 'I like your colour.' or 'I like your rough texture.' Now, the reason why I'm asking you to do such a thing is because I'd like you to become familiar with the objects that you brought with you.

Japanese people, traditionally, tend to think that everything in nature has its own spirit. Therefore, all things, even things that would be considered as 'inanimate', such as, your stone, twig or nut, as well as the current of water, a gust of wind, and so on, have their own spirit. So, they have a feeling of awe and respect for natural things and try to live together through 'communication' with them. You can see such ways of thinking in Buddhism and Shintoism in Japan. I think understanding this underlying thought process will be useful to you while you try to arrange objects in 'Karesansui' later.

Well, let's try to make a short story about your object in a free manner.

(The participants take some time to think of their stories.)

**M:** Well, shall we hear your stories?

**A:** (Her object is an almond.) OK. I'll try. So, I'm not from London, I'm not from the UK. I'm from somewhere else, from the ground, from the earth. I had siblings. I was picked by hands, and placed with other almonds that were not my siblings. And I found my way into a factory. I experienced metal for the first time and rubber, and then plastic. I was placed with almond that were not my siblings. And I was picked by a hand again. I might be eaten later, or maybe I'll return to the earth.

**M:** Good! Nice story. Well done. By telling the story, I suppose your feelings about your object have changed. You came to know it in a deeper way than before. And eventually, I hope you will come to cherish it. Who is next?

**B:** (His object is a pebble) I don't know exactly where I come from, but I feel, perhaps from the sky. And I don't know how I became this shape, but it's something that I'm happy with. I can't really see myself,... No, I want to really see myself, but what I really see is others that are similar to me, which is all my reflection. But one day I hope to become the shape that I want to be.

**M:** Very nice! While you were speaking, you really tried to get to know your object, this pebble. This process of trying to become familiar with something is really important.

So even if any of you find it difficult to create a narrative for the object, it doesn't matter very much. Who's next?

**C:** (His object is a pebble.) I remember that initially I wasn't this shape, I was a liquid, and I was under the earth. And I remember it was very hot and there was an eruption, and I came up from the earth, and started to cool down. After that some people came by and took me and other rocks around me, and brought us here in the UK. Now I'm cold and hard, but I'm also a kind of disintegrating a little bit. I can see small pieces coming down from me. So, I can see my future, I'm going to become smaller and smaller until I disappear.

**M:** Excellent! I think it's a really good thing to imagine yourself to be the pebble and making up its story. I think you can become closer to it.

**K:** (Her object is a twisted twig.) I look a bit awkward, with my shape and the way that I twist. So, no matter how you look at me, I'm different. From every point of view, I'm different, just like the tree that I came from. I'm a little part of something bigger, and that something big gradually broke and broke and broke until I became this size. And the last time someone picked me up, I broke again, and I wonder if I will just keep breaking.

**M:** Good job!. What you've done is observation. To understand an object, you observed it and draw out its characteristic.

**P:** ( His object is a pebble.) I don't have a name, I don't know exactly where I come from. Within me, lies millions and millions of memories, of thought of the earth, of animals, of people, and little pasts of history. It is as if I'm everything, and at the same time I'm nothing.

**M:** Good! I feel you feel something of the memory of that unnamed small stone. That's a nice feeling. OK. Well done, everyone.



**M:** I think all of you opened your mind up to the objects. As I said before, it is said that Japanese people tend to feel that they are a part of nature and they have a sense of awe and respect for it.

However, I think nowadays this is not popular with Japanese people, especially those who live in urban areas, but it can be said that this is a traditional Japanese way of thinking. Many people cannot afford to worry about things like these unknown little nature objects because of their being so busy with work.

So, if possible, please try to have such pleasant greetings with things in your daily life and attempt to become closer to them.

Now we'll move on to the next exercise.

Let's try to feel the world of 'Karesansui' by creating a small easy installation made of papers. I'll show you some images on my PC.

As I said at the start of this workshop, these kinds of gardens have no water in them, but use pebbles or gravel to represent a water current or the ocean.

In the garden some natural rocks are arranged to represent a philosophical world for meditation. Usually, the number of rocks is an odd number like three, five, and seven. It is said that since ancient times, odd numbers can bring happiness. So, I recommend you follow this rule as a guide.

From now on, please feel free to make either three or five objects of different size, form and colour by crumpling paper torn from this magazine. These objects will be substitutes for the rocks in the garden that you will produce. So please place them on the white paper in front of you. For the time being, let's leave the longer side of it as the front of the garden.

And after a while, I will explain a bit more what we're doing.  
For now, please ask me any question, anytime without hesitation.

(Participants start making objects from the pages of the magazine and set them on the white paper.)



**M:** Now I will tell you a way of thinking useful to making a story for your garden. What I want you to do is to make a story based on the current of something, such as water, wind, or spirit. Please decide one piece as the starting point, move through every piece and release the current from the last piece. Any story is OK.

In addition, it's very important for you to consider the empty space in your garden. Because it is said that one of the ideas of a rock garden is to leave empty space in order to give the viewer an opportunity to feel something in that space. An effective space can play an important role in making the garden have philosophical depth.

**D:** There is more air, because if it is standing up, your vision becomes wider, the garden becomes visually wider.

**M:** (Advice to the participants) The important thing is not only to focus on setting pieces of paper but also paying attention to the space between pieces and the space surrounding them. The setting of your story or concept depends on this. In general, it's better for you to set your objects at unequal intervals.

I know it's really difficult to think of the space, but considering a relationship between the space and the paper objects in your display is a valuable experience in thinking about the conception of space. In Japanese culture, they say that empty space can have a significant meaning, because it is said that such space can be filled by the imagination of the person who experiences these elements.

In the field of art, it is said the meaning of the space is made by the objects in it, and vice versa. So, please pay attention to the space between objects and the space that surrounds them.

**P:** I have a question. Do we have to describe how we feel when you changed arrangement?

**M:** Yes. Please feel something from the space.

**P:** So, if you put it on its end like that, maybe we feel its a bit tight, no? Can I say that?

**K:** I feel the opposite because if you put everything lower and flat, it just becomes very heavy. So, if you place it vertically it opens up more of the view, so you don't just look at this. You look at more space.

**M:** OK. There's another way.

(Advice to the participant) In this case, the distance between these two pieces is almost the same as the distance between their place and the centre of this field. I would say they need to be put in another place to avoid making a composition too symmetrical and in order to create a sense of movement. Like this.

(Showing a change of setting.)

**M:** (Advice to the participants) To make a current, I think it's better for you to decide the starting point of the eyes of viewer or a current of something. They say that Buddhist priests seem to think a current as one of a spirit, which connects with the universe.

**M:** (Advice to the participants and C) In the case of your work, if the top of this piece is the entrance to the world, the current of the eyes or spirit will start from here and move in this direction, reaching this part of the next piece, and going out from this point. Then it will pass through this space and arrive at the next piece. After circulating through every piece, the current is released from here into space. Then the cycle starts again.

I know it's really difficult to understand this, because there are lots of emotions when creating the composition.

**M:** (Performance to let the participants know the difference of the meaning of the space in making it.)

I'll show you some examples for thinking about space by performing some actions or a kind of skit so to speak. If I talk to something in this direction, you probably focus on this area of the space. On the other hand, if I talk in the opposite direction, your attention changes to that area of the space. The focus of your attention has changed just by me changing the direction of my face.

To take another example, if you change the arrangement of the furniture in your room using the same household goods, you might feel something new and fresh, or else you might feel uncomfortable. This means the atmosphere of your room was changed by the change of arrangement of the furniture. As I said before, the meaning of the space that people interpret can be changed by the objects in it, and vice versa.

**E:** So, kind of Feng shui?

**M:** It's not Feng Shui, per say. The type of energy or power of spirit a viewer feels in the rock garden depends on each person.

**Participants:** There are lots of differences between our works. It's really interesting.

**M:** If you create a good composition of the papers, the spaces will have a kind of power. So please check whether you feel so or not.

(Participants keep making their 'gardens'.)

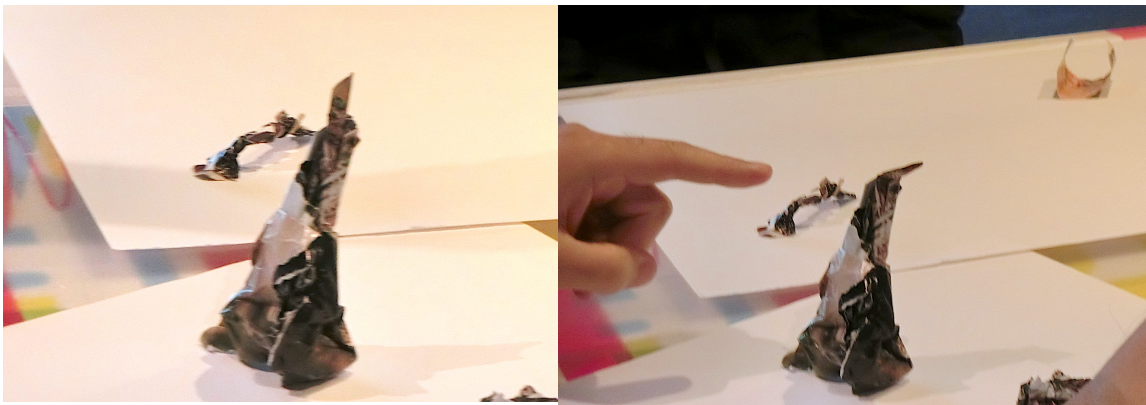


**M:** (Advice to the participants) I think your composition become much better.

**M:** (Advice to the participants) I recommend that you change the place of these pieces. Now they were set in a straight line. If you place them in different places, you could create a difference meaning of the space.

**M:** Well, now I'll show you one of the ways in which you can change people's attention within the space.  
(Advice to the participant)

Please look at this part of the object. Can you recognize that this part catches this area of the space? Yes, OK. How about this? I just changed the direction of this part of the crumpled paper. I hope you can understand now how this part catches this area of the space. Can you sense the subtle change? OK, nice. In this way,, even a small objects or small change can influence a person's perception of the space.



(Looking around the works of the participant)

Everyone says it's difficult.

**K:** I find this difficult, because I feel like there are two different lines that I'm tracing, and I keep feeling conflicted between the two. One line is the line that you trace from each rock to the next, and the other line is the air that you trace in between the rocks. If you trace this it will be different line than if you trace it like this?

**M:** (Advice to K) How you make a current of something depends on your idea. There is no correct answer. So please select one way based on the feeling or thought that you have now. In addition, even a small change of the direction or colour of any part of an object has an influence on how the space between it and other objects is interpreted. For example, if the colour of this part turns to white, like this, I'm hoping you would feel that the power or meaning of its surrounding space has changed.



**P:** Do you understand?

**K:** Yes, I understand. But I think it is very difficult to arrange it.

**P:** Yeah!

**G:** Yes, it's difficult even for Japanese people nowadays.

**K:** I understand the concept, but I just find it difficult to actually put them into practice.

**P:** Yeah!

**M:** It is almost the end of our workshop. I think it's difficult to understand today's talk, especially about significance of empty space.

Let's look back at today's workshop.

First, you made up a short story or narrative of an object that you had. It is a good way to become familiar with it through observation and imagination, also, this attitude towards things can show one of the ways of thinking of the Japanese.

Next, you tried to make 'a rock garden' using paper and studied the relationship between objects and space. If you use valuable things, such as jewellery, the garden would probably literally be valuable. But, Japanese rock garden or Zen garden are composed of unknown natural objects like rocks, stones, and gravel. It is priceless because of the philosophical appreciation of its atmosphere.



**P:** I'd just like to paraphrase, do you mean that we should cherish things like the little sounds, how we feel, watching water droplets, watching insects. Little tiny observation which you would not normally appreciate.

So, you want us to appreciate it, cherish it, personify with it. Pretty much what we did today was one of those exercise that you want us to keep on practising?

**M:** Yes, I understand.

If you have an opportunity to visit such a garden in Japan, please enjoy this feeling of having a connection with the universe made out of rocks and space.

Thank you for your participation.