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# Master carpenter from Japan visits Portland to inspect tea house he built 50 years ago

(http://connect.oregonlive.com/staff/npdxrebecca/index.html) By Rebecca Koffman, Special to The Oregonian (http://connect.oregonlive.com/staff/npdxrebecca/posts.html)

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The tea house at the Portland Japanese Garden is set back modestly in a rustic grove away from the main path that leads visitors through the grander Strolling Pond Garden





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### Motoya Nakamura, The Oregonian

Masahiro Hamada casts a keen eye over the tea house he built in 1962. There are very few traditional carpenters of his skill level in

#### (http://japanesegarden.com/gardens/stroll/).

The tea house, though, is meant for quiet reflection. It's a deceptively simple structure, almost austere in style. And it is authentic.

Masahiro Hamada and his father, two master carpenters employed by the Kajima Construction company (http://www.kajimausa.com/about/kajimaCorp/), built it in Japan in 1962. It was later disassembled, shipped to Oregon and reassembled in the Portland Japanese Garden where it was dedicated in 1968. Hamada at that time didn't know what had become of it.

This week, 50 years after he and his father built it, Masahiro Hamada returned with his son, Kenichirou Hamada, to formally inspect the teahouse and recommend a maintenance, repair and preservation plan that will protect it through the next half century and beyond.

#### The inspection

Tuesday afternoon, Hamada, 77, and his son are hard at work on the second full day of teahouse examination. The teahouse Hamada built so long ago has the typical four and a half tatami mats on the floor, a hearth set in the floor, a simple alcove and shoji

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sliding doors, that is wooden lattices covered in translucent paper . The architecture is intended to enhance the spiritual and aesthetic elements of the tea ceremony.

Father and son run their hands down cedar posts and columns, knock on stucco walls, test slidings doors for smoothness, probe behind beams and under the floors, and measure everything for square and plumb.

In 50 years a lot happens to a building: incursions of rain and wind, ants and mud wasps leave traces. Tatami mats shift ever so slightly from true. The two men are intent on their task, the son moving quickly and surely, climbing into the attic space and crawling beneath a sink while his father measures the spaces between wooden columns and writes down his findings in a notebook. The Portland Japanese Garden staff assists the pair.



Kenichirou and Masahiro Hamada bend over tatami mats as they measure the tea house.

Motoya Nakamura, The Oregonian

Hamada senior explains through a translator that his wife is a practitioner of the tea ceremony. And one of the reasons he builds teahouses is, he says, because it's a great way to spread Japanese culture throughout the world.

Chado, the way of tea, says Ingrid Arnett, spokeswoman at the garden, is about the preparation, serving and drinking of tea. But, as one of

it's practitioners explained to her, it's not just about consuming a beverage. "It's about the appreciation and discovery of what's right in front of us at each and every particular moment."

Hamada was visiting Washington State for work in 1979 when he heard that a new pavilion was being built at the Portland Japanese Garden and decided to visit. He laughs as he tells his story, perhaps remembering his surprise, when, as he walked through the gardens, he came upon the teahouse and realized it was his own work. He kept the discovery to himself.

All that the garden staff knew was that the teahouse had been built by Kajima construction. Then about four years ago, Sadafumi Uchiyama assumed the post of garden curator.

"I knew all along there was a carpenter behind this building," he says, explaining that only a few people in Japan are capable of such subtle work and complex joinery in what he calls the **sukiya style** 

(http://www.rothteien.com/landing/architecture/sukiya.htm): characterized by delicate understatedness.

He was amazed and delighted when he learned that Hamada, someone he had known for many years, was the craftsman.

"We found a new, old friend," he says.

#### **Recording history**

Email

This inspection has been planned for a while, and Uchiyama is recording the visit carefully. He's even having a videographer record interviews with Hamada.



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"My mission is to keep a good historical [account]," he says, "and in 50 years this will be a very precious record."

Uchiyama is also charged with maintaining, preserving and renewing the garden's plants and buildings. Does he have a sense yet what some of the Japanese master carpenters' recommendations will be?



Masahiro Hamada (left foreground) and Sadafumi Uchimaya, (right foreground) garden curator at the Portland Japanese Garden, look for wear and tear on the 50-year-old teahouse building.

"The foundation seems to be basically okay, which is a relief," he says, but there are some issues with the roof.
Once he knows the scope of repairs, he will draw up a five-year repair and renovation plan. Work will begin in 2014.

And, he says, in talking to the visiting craftsmen, "there have been several a ha! moments."

For example, he says, "some of

the woods are veneered," lesser quality lumber with an overlay of better wood. He had never been able to understand why, knowing as he did that there was plenty of good wood available in Japan in the 60s.

" Hamada-san told me that back then, this (veneering) was a new technology. It was more expensive than solid wood."

They were building, he explains, what they thought was the highest quality for the future.

He will work with the Hamadas to replace the veneered woods piece by piece, probably using local Western Red Cedar. In doing so, they will fulfill one of sukiya architecture's aesthetic requirements: the use of natural materials in harmony with one's surroundings.

## Chado- The way of tea

Visitors to the Portland Japanese Garden can observe a tea ceremony at the tea house 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. every third Saturday, from May through October.

japanesegarden.com (http://japanesegarden.com/)

611 SW Kingston Avenue 503-223 1321

It is wonderful to have the Hamadas here, says Uchiyama. "We are delighted to have access to this part of our history."  $\,$ 

-- Rebecca Koffman

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