

Proposal for the Atwater Landscape Design Competition:

*The Garden of Scholarly Delights: The First Chinese Garden at Middlebury College<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> The title alludes to the Chinese scholar garden which literati and retired or exiled officials created as an escape to nature. They were a place of cultivation of the arts and were thought to be miniature cosmos.

## Introduction

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In our garden, we seek a harmonious relationship between man and nature. The creation of the first Chinese scholar's garden at the Middlebury College campus would support these goals.

Besides being simply just a sanctuary and place of repose, the Garden of Scholarly Delight has great educational potential. Image a tour group of prospective students' surprise as a Chinese garden is revealed amongst the sea of European/ Western style buildings. Think about the questions they will ask. Often, when walking across Battell Beach, it is common to see little children playing and laughing. What response will they have to the unfamiliar space? Will they touch the bamboo or delight in the sounds of gravel under their feet?

The strength in our proposal lies in its ability to further the College's aims to promote respect and learning of other cultures and broaden the scope of building traditions on campus. The College boasts a strong International Studies program and recently partnered with the Monterey Institute of International Studies. Furthermore, it is a leader in intensive language study; the undergraduate programs and the Language Summer School programs are world renowned. As China continues its emergence as a global leader, it is detrimental for educational institutions to push forward and support a truly global education for the College community.

Moreover, Middlebury College actively seeks to create a dialogue between members of the faculty, community, student body, and the environment. Its philosophy teaches students to be stewards of the earth through campaigns such as power out, gleaning, and "Get Outside Week," and clubs such as Middlebury Mountain Club and

Sunday Night Group. Middlebury College has one of the strongest Environmental Studies programs in the country.

The introduction of such a garden to the campus of Middlebury College seeks to further our institutional commitment to fostering cultural exchange. The design of our garden therefore reflects an artistic appreciation of the aesthetics of Chinese gardens. We do not strive for authenticity, for a garden removed from its cultural context loses much in translation. By remaining true to the several critical elements found throughout the evolution of landscape and the garden in China, we hope to capture the essence of the original in our re-creation.

## The Design

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Due to the humble scale of our design, it has the potential to be built in conjunction with another project. The small scale reflects the economic and spatial limitations as well as the private patronage of the traditional scholar's garden. In China, the garden was a status symbol which reflected the knowledge, wealth, and level of culture of the owner. Ji Cheng, an authority on the Chinese garden, stated that "garden design is nine-tenths about the wishes of the owner." He took special care in the design and selection of the vegetation. Plants were chosen based on their ability to evoke the senses. Color, aroma, height, density, and blooming season determined selection and location. Unlike Western gardens that often peak in the spring and summer seasons, the vegetation selection in the Chinese garden allows viewers to experience the joys of the garden throughout the year. The ever-changing, dynamic garden creates an atmosphere that cannot be fully experienced in one sitting. The audience is continuously invited to return and notice the changing environment from hour-to-hour, day-to-day, and season-to-season. The cast of the shadow across the stone benches as the sun falls or the red and golden leaves blanketing the pathway create constant new experiences.

As stated in the introduction, we do not seek to directly replicate a Chinese garden; this is an impossible task and one which would completely violate the guiding principles in Chinese garden construction. We instead strive to create a harmonious balance between the New England, twenty-first-century, Middlebury College environment and the traditional gardens. We actively considered the role of climate, views, and audience when making our decisions.

*Function:*

The scholar garden was traditional a refuge or retreat from government or city life. It was a place for contemplation, reflection, and for artistic and scholarly pursuits. We intend to place these functions in the context of the Middlebury College campus.

Without a doubt Middlebury students are busy; there are clubs, jobs, sports teams, and classes. Our garden would be a place to stop and reflect, to recollect with oneself and with the natural setting. With the loss of Atwater dining hall, the once bustling commons area has become a site of beer cans and mud. Our garden would provide an ideal spot for gathering, meeting old friends or making new ones. It would invigorate what once was an area filled with students lounging on the rocks trying to erase away the last remains of winter and yells and screams as wayward Frisbees fly overhead. The design of the Garden as a space of hidden reveals would allow the student to study or complete homework in quiet seclusion.<sup>1</sup>

*Location:*

The location reflects the humble and unobtrusive nature of our design. The outdoor design, located at the corner of the Atwater site between the two main residence halls, is the perfect refuge for the Middlebury student. It provides an alternative space to the Armstrong or Davis Family library; both buildings evoke the feelings of hard, no-nonsense study spots. The Middlebury College community is characterized by their love of the outdoors; the Adirondack chairs are often full and during the early-fall and late-spring semesters it is common to see professors conducting class outside.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of the reveal is a principle factor in the construction of the Chinese garden. Gardens are about the experience of making new discoveries.

The Sichuan-style horticulture is characterized with dense stands of bamboo which edge ponds and lakes, conifers, oaks, and magnolia. Our design will integrate some of these varieties with local New England plants.