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For Chicago Woodworker, Cultural Exchange Project in Missouri is Whole New Cup of Tea

*Furniture Maker Commissioned to Construct Tearoom for
Kansas City/Kurashiki Sister City Commemoration*

Chicago, IL- Unusual furnishings and installations are not new for Scott Chambers, whose Fine Woodworks in the Ravenswood neighborhood of Chicago has long been a place to which architects and designers turn for custom furniture. However a big surprise came when last year, Dr. Masami Takayama, the head of the Chicago Institute for the Study of Architecture & Technology and one of the nation's foremost Japanese architects, who had commissioned Fine Woodworks to build some custom cabinetry for a Chicago client 10 years before, chose him to work on his most recent project- constructing a Japanese tearoom.

"I'd had virtually no experience with Japanese architecture, so I was immediately intrigued," says Chambers. "And the opportunity to work with Masami again on such an interesting project was exciting. Then I learned exactly what the project was for."

The tearoom, now complete with an entry garden and entry gate, was to be housed not in Chicago, but within the Loose Park Garden Center, in Kansas City, MO, to commemorate the city's thirty-year friendship with sister city Kurashiki, Japan.

"That was the most difficult part," Chambers recalls, "Building it with the understanding that it would be eventually be taken apart, shipped and reassembled to fit inside of another building. It was supposed to be a traditional Japanese tearoom, but obviously I couldn't build it on site with traditional Japanese joinery and materials. I had to blend an ancient design with more modern methods of construction. The walkway around the tearoom and the rafters above could only be assembled on site, by a carpenter in Kansas City, so the tearoom in Chicago was never in it's final form.

The size of a tearoom is determined by the number of tatami mats which are used. Tatami mats, the traditional Japanese flooring, are made of woven straw, roughly 2 inches thick and 3 feet by 6 feet. Tea rooms are frequently 4 1/2 mats in size, but due to space constraints, Takayama's design called for 2 3/4 mats. Chambers used western red cedar and bamboo for the walls, the interiors of which were either covered with rice paper or painted over. The sliding partitions, or shoji screens, are made of red cedar covered with rice paper.

An authentic Japanese tearoom does more than hold the revered tea ceremony. Based on ancient Zen ideals, it must convey a sense of simplicity and serenity, as well as follow a strict, basic design that creates elements essential to the ceremony itself (i.e. low ceilings over the guest entry so that one must stoop to enter, regardless of class or rank). "The tearoom is more than just a confined space," says Chambers. "When it occurs, the tea ceremony is seen as totally unique and individual. No ceremony will ever be the same as the one that you are participating in. The experience is of the present moment, and requires attention and mindfulness. As I read more and more about the significance of the tea ceremony in Japanese culture, I came to realize what an honor it was to build a tearoom. So for me, the project became much more than building a room, it was an effort from the heart."

Chambers was able to see his completed tearoom at the Loose Park Japanese Tearoom and Garden Dedication on July 10. The mayors of both Kansas City and Kurashiki were there as well. "It's a great solo undertaking," says Kansas City Mayor Kay Barnes. "And we're extremely grateful to Scott. The finished product is not only beautiful but provides invaluable educational and cultural opportunities for the public."

While tearooms and houses are common in Japan, there are relatively few in the Midwest. A number of private homes have them, but prior to Chambers' construction, the only public one in the Midwest could be found in Rockford, Illinois.

The Loose Park Japanese Tearoom and Garden were conceived in 2001 as a cultural exchange between Kansas City, MO and Kurashiki, Japan. Funding for the project was made possible by significant contributions from the City of Kurashiki, the Kansas City Kurashiki Committee and the Japan-American Society, among others. The tearoom and garden have been open since the dedication ceremony; however, since it can only hold 4 people at a time, reservations are required to enter it.

For more photos or further information about the tearoom or Fine Woodworks, contact Loose Park at 816-784-5300 or Fine Woodworks, located at 5915 N Ravenswood Ave, Chicago, IL 60660, at 773-334-6050.



(If you cannot view the above photo or would like to view it differently, e-mail rallen@mkcpr.com)