Chapter I -- Enlightenment in a Traditional Chinese Garden

In 1993, in Suzhou city, Southern China, as a junior architectural student I visited a famous historical Chinese garden, Zhuozheng Yuan (the Humble Administrator's Garden). Delicate buildings, pavilions, free-shaped ponds, flourishing plants and well organized routes brought elegant enjoyment to tourists.

The climax of the tour happened at the Fragrant-Isle Landboat (See figure 1). Whenever appreciating scenes from inside or outside, the sense of harmony hit people's heart. The Landboat was an organic part of the beautiful scene, melding into its surroundings. It provided the best lines of sight of the surrounding garden for viewing the panorama from different vantage points, either from its pavilion, glass room or from its second-floor chamber. When viewed from outside, it provided points of visual focus beside the pond, balancing the composition of the whole picture.

Today, when thinking back and analyzing my personal experience with Fragrant-Isle Landboat, I concluded two architectural reasons for its magic. One is the careful framing of scenes from the Landboat towards its environment, which sets up a visual connection between them. The other is the layered spatial zones with differing degrees of enclosure through the section of the Landboat (See figure 2), which blurs the border between inside and outside.

These ideas were successfully practiced in traditional Chinese garden landscape design for harmonizing a building and the other elements in its environment. Can this also be utilized for solving conflicts between new and old in a historical area renovation in a small American town?