

THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

## A Southern University Embraces a Sacred Japanese Tradition

By *SCOTT CARLSON* | AUGUST 15, 2008



In its final days of reconstruction, the Place of Peace is a hallowed gallery of sounds. If you close your eyes and listen, you can hear each one registering on the wind and rustling trees on Furman University's campus. The krish-krish of footsteps over the broken and leaf-littered ground. The skrit-skrit of trowels, pushing plaster onto walls and into corners. The ping-klunk of a board falling into place with a hammer blow. And, occasionally, the banshee scream — rheeeee! — of a circular saw or belt sander, forcing wood to comply where hand tools won't do.

The men here — all of them Japanese, all journeymen in the ancient art of building Buddhist temples — do not speak, even, for the most part, with each other. The task at hand is exacting, serious, and sacred.

This reconstitution of a Buddhist temple — which was disassembled into 2,400 pieces in Japan, shipped in four containers across the Pacific Ocean and through the Panama Canal, and reassembled in South Carolina — is a unique undertaking, especially unexpected for a Southern college once closely associated with the Baptist church.

But then, how Furman decided to take on the project in the first place is an unusual tale. The temple once belonged to the Tsuzuki family, which owned and operated a textile company in the Carolinas and built the Nippon Center, a Japanese cultural center in the middle of Greenville. The American textile industry has been on a downward slide for decades, and a few years ago, the Tsuzukis needed to sell off some of their properties both here and in Japan. The Nippon Center would have to go, and Furman, which is trying to build a top Asian-studies department, approached the family about taking some artifacts from the center.



*An artisan wearing traditional footwear with rubber soles to improve balance and tractions stands in "migi hamni," or "right posture," as he works on the temple.*

The Tsuzukis also owned a plot of land in Japan upon which sat the family's handcrafted temple, built by some of the best artisans in Japan from the finest materials. The land's buyers had no use for a temple and said they would have to tear it down if it were not moved by January 2006. "We essentially said to the Tsuzuki family that we would love to relocate this temple here," says David E. Shi, Furman's president.

The matriarch of the family, Chigusa Tsuzuki, had long ties to Furman. Twenty-six years ago, she began taking courses in Japanese philosophy with David Shaner, a professor of philosophy and Asian studies here. Shaner is one of the world's leading aikido instructors, and later she became one of his aikido students — and a friend.

When she died in 1995, a cherry tree was planted in her honor in an Asian garden near where the temple is being reconstructed. Asked what the temple project means to him, Shaner,

standing on scaffolding surrounding it, is visibly moved.

"I feel blessed," he says. "To be at the epicenter of this, because of my connection to the family, I just can't believe it. I just look at this every day, I feel like I am in Japan."

Furman has tended to have a more politically and socially conservative climate than other liberal-arts colleges. "Thank God for David [Shi] for shepherding this project, where we could have had a very conservative alumnus or a nonvisionary president who said 'A temple on campus? Oh, no — that's dangerous turf.'"

The **Americans at Furman** had to continually show the Japanese contractors that they would not screw up their end of the job. Japanese craftsmen are famously exacting in their work. (The Japanese architect Tadao Ando has recently complained that American contractors do not have the discipline or the skills to pull off his designs.) Temples in Japan typically face south, east, or southeast. Shaner wanted to orient the Place of Peace northwest, toward the Asian garden and the campus lake. The man who originally designed and built the temple in the 1980s disapproved — until Shaner showed that orienting the building to the east would point the Place of Peace at a parking lot. Then the designer agreed to the new orientation, as long as Furman provided a brochure explaining the inconsistency with tradition.

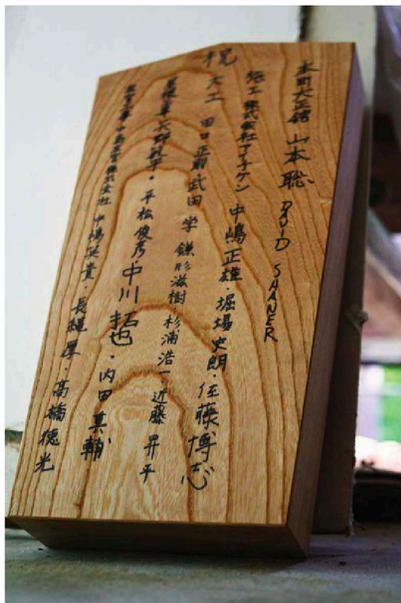
Furman also had to lay a foundation for the temple. "They kept telling us, 'If you're one millimeter off, you're going to mess it up.' They kept looking at us like, 'You can't do it,'" Shaner says. The Japanese doubted the quality of granite the university would acquire for the foundation; it turned out that granite from Georgia, Furman's source, is frequently exported to Japan for use in temples.

But the skills at work on the temple — deliberate and precise, yet not slow (the workers finished the job seven weeks ahead of schedule) — would put most American contractors to shame. Standing on the scaffolding, Shaner points to one Japanese worker, his head wrapped in a cloth, who is massaging ghost-white plaster into a tight space underneath the roof, using a trowel about the size of an adult thumb. This man has trained most of his life to apply plaster to temple walls — nothing but temple walls — and that's all he does, Shaner says.

There are plaster workers, tile workers, and wood workers, each highly specialized. "I sit there and eat lunch with them, and nobody is talking," Shaner says. "It's kind of like a monastery. 'We're plaster. You're tile.' So much for oneness."

When the temple pieces were disassembled to be placed in shipping containers, Japanese carpenters crafted wood braces around the pieces to hold them tightly in place and keep them from warping on the humid ocean voyage. To see the precision of those braces, Shaner says, one would think they were works of art.

The materials that compose the tiny building, which is about 900 square feet, are some of the finest in temple construction. Most of the wood is keyaki, an extremely hard and rare wood native to Japan. The ceramic roof tiles, which had to be remade, are heavy and were fired at a temperature three times that of most clay pottery. Even the humble plaster lath is special; the craftsmen ordered the simple wood strips from Japan because the wood available at the local Home Depot, for reasons mysterious to Shaner, was simply not good enough.



The Place of Peace cannot technically be called a temple anymore — the butsudā, or shrine, once encased at the center of the temple, has been removed and is in the family's possession. But the building will not be merely an artifact or museum piece, either. Shaner plans to use the Place of Peace as a lesson not only in Asian studies but also in sustainability, another strategic focus at Furman. The construction of the Place of Peace itself reflects a mind-set immersed in sustainability. For example, the original wood joinery was designed to be taken apart, so that craftsmen might repair pieces of the building as they wore out, rather than tear down and replace the whole thing. (Keyaki is so durable it may take hundreds of years to wear out.) The keyaki pillars on the front of the temple are oriented top to bottom the same way they stood as trees in the forest — a gesture of respect to the tree that gave its life for the wood.

Where the butsudā once sat, Shaner may hang a poem in calligraphy: "Shimpo uchurei kanno soku genjo," or "Blessed universal spirit, immediately we feel your presence." It is meant to be chanted to help focus the mind. He says the Place of Peace, including the nearby Asian garden and surrounding grove, should be for meditation and reflection. Pay attention to your surroundings. Close your eyes. Listen to the running water, the wind in the trees, your own breath. "The place is an opportunity for each person to connect with nature," Mr. Shaner says, "but maybe with themselves first."