

*Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism*

# **BUDDHIST ARCHITECTURE IN AMERICA**

**BUILDING FOR ENLIGHTENMENT**

Robert Edward Gordon



*“Buddhist Architecture in America: Building for Enlightenment* is a magnificent contribution to the growing body of literature on Buddhism in America. It provides a brilliant and long overdue insight into an aspect of American Buddhism that has been needed for decades. Few authors have provided as comprehensive an insight into American Buddhism as Professor Gordon. It is a must read for all Buddhist Studies scholars.”

**Charles S. Prebish**

“As my eyes sweep over the pages of *Buddhist Architecture in America*, I keep thinking, if I had read Dr. Gordon’s book in the 1970s, my own understanding of architecture and religion and my own book “Space and Place” would be so much better! In the last phase of a very long life, I am happy to think that there can be genuine progress in scholarship.”

**Yi-Fu Tuan**



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# Buddhist Architecture in America

This book is the first comprehensive overview of Buddhist architecture in North America and provides an analysis of Buddhist architecture and communities.

Exploring the arrival of Buddhist architecture in America, the book lays out how Buddhists have expressed their spiritual beliefs in structural form in the United States. The story follows the parallel history of the religion's emergence in the United States since the California Gold Rush to the present day. Conceived of as a general history, the book investigates Buddhist structures with respect to the humanistic qualities associated with Buddhist doctrine and how Buddhist groups promote their faith and values in an American setting. The author's point of view starts from the ground floor of the buildings to move deeper into the space of Buddhist practice, the mind that seeks enlightenment, and the structures that help one to do so. It discusses Buddhist architecture in the United States in a manner consistent with the intensely human context of its use.

A unique and ground-breaking analysis, this book adds to the study of Buddhist architecture in America while also addressing the topic of how and why Buddhists use architecture in general. It will be of interest to scholars of religion, architecture, space and place, U.S. history, Asian Studies, and Buddhist Studies. It will also be a valuable addition to the libraries of Buddhist communities across the United States and the world, since many of the observations about Buddhist architecture in the United States may also apply to structures in Europe and Asia.

**Robert Edward Gordon** is an Assistant Research Professor at the University of Arizona, USA, and a Fellow at the UArizona Center for Buddhist Studies. His work encompasses a broad range of interests: Eastern art and architecture, art and economics, freedom and aesthetics, art and poverty, and humanistic geography. His writings can be found in *The Wall Street Journal*, the Japanese American National Museum's Traveling Exhibition, the journals *Space and Culture*, *Philosophies*, *Social Philosophy and Policy*, *The Athenaeum Review*, and others.

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# **Buddhist Architecture in America**

Building for Enlightenment

**Robert Edward Gordon**

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**To Rashida Ferrer Gordon, and her mother.**



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# Temples

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Buddha Mind Monastery, Oklahoma  
Buddhist Church of San Francisco  
Byodo-In Temple, Hawaii  
Chuang Yen Monastery, New York  
Eihei-ji Temple (Japan)  
Fire Lotus Temple, New York  
First Zen Institute of America, New York  
Green Dragon Temple (Soryu-ji), California  
Hanmaum Zen Center of New York  
Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple, Los Angeles  
Honpa Hongwanji Hawaii Betsuin  
Horyuji (Hōryū Temple, Japan)  
Hsi Lai Temple, California  
Insight Meditation Society Retreat Center, Massachusetts  
Kagyū Shenpen Kunchab Bodhi Stupa, New Mexico  
Koyasan Buddhist Temple, California  
Linh Quang Buddhist Center, Nebraska  
Los Angeles Hōmpa Hongwanji Buddhist Temple  
New England Peace Pagoda, Massachusetts  
Odiyān Buddhist Retreat Center, California  
Providence Zen Center, Rhode Island  
Rinzai-ji Zen Center, California  
Rochester Zen Center, New York  
Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, California  
San Francisco Zen Center  
Shambala Mountain Center, Colorado  
Shasta Abbey Monastery, California  
Soto Mission of Hawaii Shoboji

Tassajara Zen Mountain (Zenshinji), California  
Teo Chew Buddhist Temple, Texas  
Tin How Temple, California  
Tōdaiji Temple (Japan)  
The Great Stupa of Dharmakaya Which Liberates Upon  
Seeing, Colorado  
Washington Buddhist Vihara, Washington, DC  
Wat Buddhanusorn, California  
Wat Buddharatanaram, Texas  
Wat Dhammaram, Illinois  
Wat Nawamintarachutis Meditation Center (NMR),  
Massachusetts  
Wat Thai of Los Angeles  
Watt Munisotaram Buddhist Temple, Minnesota  
Weaverville Joss House, California  
Zen Mountain Monastery, New York  
Zenshuji Soto Mission, California



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# Introduction

Quite often academic studies find their energetic impetus within the biographies of the scholar. Childhood memories, adolescent experiences, and/or a mature fascination with some aspect of the world frequently become the object of scholarly examination. The motivation to engage in this present inquiry stems from my personal interest in Buddhist thought in general. All forms of Buddhism have been a source of fascination for years. Yet, nothing comes from nothing. Western society's engagement with Oriental culture has been steadily increasing for centuries. And over the recent of decades of heightened globalization and interconnection, the Occidental attraction to Eastern thought and custom has ramified throughout the world. Originally centered primarily on the materialistic concerns of spices and riches, in my opinion the Western allure with Asia is now focused much more on the spiritual, insubstantial elements of Asian culture. There is a certain abstract quintessence present in this modern attentiveness to a distant and antique history that is growing ever more ubiquitous to contemporary consciousness. One gets a sense of it in present-day encounters with the martial arts, yoga, or the New Age movement. Feature films touch on it with storylines that romanticize Oriental wisdom or portray Asian figures with mystical powers (*Star Wars* even comes to mind here). It is a feeling that references more than just cartographic distance or physical appearance. Something intangible but generative is at work in the juxtaposition of an ancient culture—still alive in unbroken threads—when set against the forward *au courant* momentum of today's global modernity. Doubtless my attraction to Buddhist art and architecture stems from this broader setting.

In the study of Buddhism in America, the role of architecture is not sufficiently addressed as an explicit endeavor. Scholars have mentioned Buddhist temples chiefly in passing or in a limited context. Michihiro Ima, for example, only briefly discusses the various styles of Japanese Pure Land temple architecture in Hawaii during the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> An entry in Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams's *Encyclopedia of Religion in America* contains just a few pages on Buddhist architecture.<sup>2</sup> Paul David Numrich investigated two Theravadin temples, not in terms of architecture, but to understand how Thai immigrant Buddhists have assimilated

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to the United States.<sup>3</sup> Jeff Wilson's valuable chapter in *American Buddhism as a Way of Life* discusses the Rochester Zen Garden with respect to community and its structural environment.<sup>4</sup> Jonathan H. X. Lee's short entry in *Asian American Religious Cultures* quickly but succinctly discusses the syncretistic emergence of Chinese temples in America, which blend Daoist, Buddhist, Confucian, and folk religious traditions in an amalgamation of Chinese religious culture.<sup>5</sup> Emma McCloy Layman's *Buddhism in America* contains valuable experiential and doctrinal commentary on a number of temples of various denominations. As an early work, one still comes away with the sense of having an authentic feel for the Buddhist groups she investigates.<sup>6</sup> George and Willa Jane Tanabe's *Japanese Buddhist Temples in Hawai'i* aims at cracking the semantic shell behind the complex symbolism of Pure Land Buddhist iconography. Organized and written principally as a reference resource, "The book is not primarily a history of temples (though brief historical information is included), nor is it an architectural history (though architecture is analyzed)."<sup>7</sup> Their central goal is to describe what one sees in the temples.

Each of these texts has elements in common with the overall ambitions of this investigation. Yet, in the end none of these volumes explore design or teleology with respect to the structural and spiritual foundations of the sites under consideration, a primary goal of this book. Given the ambitious scope of the project, the discussion at times can be overly general, schematic, or even cavalier with Buddhism's deep, circuitous history and complex philosophies. I conceive of this short volume as an initial inquiry into the topic. Nonetheless, the objective here is to articulate the larger historical trajectory of Buddhist architecture in the United States while investigating significant examples of Buddhist structures of various denominations, and to understand those artifacts in relation to the spiritual underpinnings of the religion that inspired them.

With respect to Buddhist belief, most studies address the Theravada (Path of the Elders), Mahayana (Great Vehicle), and Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle) traditions as specific categories. All retain the elemental core of the Buddha's teachings. Each tend to be associated with particular geographical areas in Asia, but have highlighted or augmented different strains of Siddhartha Gautama's overall message of enlightenment. One finds all three of these Buddhist vehicles or paths and their associated structures in the United States. The issue as to whether a particularly unique form of American Buddhist architecture exists is still an open question, just as a distinctive and universally agreed upon American path of Buddhism has not at this point manifested. In the history of Buddhism, royal and aristocratic patronage greatly helped transition and institutionalize the religion into foreign settings. This did not happen in the United States, which may be one reason why a potential "American Buddhism" is so elusive. The final chapter in this book discusses one way such a path (*mārga*) or vehicle (*yāna*) might begin to emerge.