

History of Domo Restaurant

It was fifteen years ago that we built Domo Restaurant and first created the Domo Japanese Gardens. At that time, my teacher came from Japan to observe the creation of the garden and make suggestions for its design. I remember him saying at the time, “In about fifteen or sixteen years, this will be a beautiful garden”. When I heard that Domo had received this award, I thought of my teacher’s words. This award came right at the time he predicted so long ago.

Domo is of course a restaurant, so most of our newsletter articles are about Domo’s cuisine, but this time I wanted to write about the building of Domo Restaurant itself, which was built in the year 1996.

Some of our guests over the years have asked me if the wood used at Domo was imported from Japan. Others have wondered where all the wood came from, and occasionally a customer has voiced a little concern, wondering if we had cut down too many trees to make the restaurant!

Actually, more than 90% of the wood used for both the interior and exterior of Domo Restaurant and gardens is recycled. Most of the wood we found at a junkyard east of Denver that “specialized” in old timber. We visited the junkyard regularly and hauled away as much of the wood as we could afford. Most of the old lumber we found was easily over 100 years old. Apparently some of the original buildings in downtown Denver were framed and supported with large wooden beams and posts; some over 16 inches square in diameter! Many of the old beams and posts we found at the junkyard were too decayed to use, but many we discovered were treasure! The junkyard man could not understand why we wanted so much of that old wood, but was basically happy we were taking it off of his hands.

After retrieving our wooden treasures, we spent days and weeks burning the outside of the old beams, scrubbing them clean and finishing them by hand with a wax finish. The end result was the decorative beams you see at Domo today. More wood was used in the Japanese Folk Art Museum and adjacent Aikido dojo.

All of the post and beams had to be finished by hand because most of them still contained large bolts and screws that could not be removed. This meant that none of the wood could be processed with a machine. The process by hand was time consuming and laborious but the results were posts that look very much like the wood used in traditional Japanese country houses.

The wood in traditional Japanese farmer’s houses turned black from the fires used inside houses for cooking and heating. The smoke and soot from the fires turned the timbers to a shiny black like you see in Domo. Traditionally in Japan, the oil-based soot also served to treat the timbers; helping to protect them from burrowing insects.

Hanging from the ceilings in Domo Restaurant and museum are some very unusual “chandeliers”. These fixtures were made from fallen cottonwood trees found near southwest of Denver that had been exposed to long periods under water. Most of the fallen trees we found had succumbed to decay, but we did find enough branches to resurrect for our Domo décor.

The rope used to bind the branches together for the “chandeliers”, (called nawa in Japanese) was made from made from rice straw; a natural bi-product from harvesting rice. The bound branches were framed with bamboo and the paper used to cover the frames came from a very used, slightly moth-eaten, water-stained Japanese manners primer (kyoiku chokugo) over 100 years old. All of the fixtures at Domo, I put together by hand, made from 100% recycled materials.

In Domo's main dining room, the museum and in the Aikido dojo, large sections of a 120 year old Cottonwood tree and a 100 year old Ponderosa pine tree were used. The pine tree sections came from a single 90 foot Ponderosa Pine tree from Castle Rock that had been killed by pine beetle. The Cottonwood tree came from a Denver City Park that had to be removed from the park for safety reasons. The tree was too old and too big to be safe any longer in a public place. The community surrounding the park was concerned about the trees removal



The bark of the Cottonwood tree peeled for use in decorations.

The Cottonwood tree used for much of Domo's décor .

until it was decided that the tree would be recycled and put to good use at Domo. Both of these trees were donated to Domo by the Swingle Tree Surgeon Company who removed and transported the trees to Domo free of charge. If we had not taken the Cottonwood tree and the Ponderosa Pine tree, they would have been reduced to firewood and mulch in very short order.

The thick bark of the Cottonwood tree was used as a decoration as part of the indoor roofing eaves. The large stumps were used to make the table bases in the main Domo dining room and the smaller sections were used to make the stools. Every piece of wood from these trees was used somewhere in Domo including making the many decorative doors that give the illusion of hidden secret spaces. All of these doors were made entirely of scrap wood from the construction of the restaurant, museum and Aikido dojo. If you look carefully at the walls in the main dining room, you will see that straw has been mixed into the "adobe" finish. This straw was left over from the installation of the reeds used to cover the ceilings.

The table tops at Domo were made from pieces of flagstone we found at the old wood junkyard that had been discarded during the demolition of some of the old buildings in downtown Denver. We found the flagstone half buried in the junkyard and felt very lucky indeed that we were able to make use of it at Domo.

One of the most beautiful views at Domo was built by design in the large doors that open from the restaurant out into the Domo gardens. The gardens have grown into a spectacular oasis that complements the rustic beauty of the Domo dining room interiors.

The large rocks in the Domo gardens came from a quarry outside of Idaho Springs. The large blue-grey boulders were moved into place with rented bobcats in only two days. We spent so much time on Domo's interior that we had little time to complete the garden before deadline. On a shoe string budget, we learned that if you rent heavy equipment on a Saturday you can return it on a Monday without an extra days charge! So over one weekend, the shape of the garden was formed.

There were no landscaping plans for the garden only inspiration and a little good luck. Some of the boulders were so large they could not be moved from where they landed upon delivery as they tumbled from a large semi-sized dump truck. The smaller boulders I asked where they wanted to sit and we did our best to accommodate them!

Most of the plants and trees in the garden were purchased at Home Depot and other local garden stores and were only knee high when they were brought to Domo for planting. As the garden looks now, it is difficult to imagine these humble beginnings.

Many of our visitors marvel at the beauty of the garden and the two ponds especially draw a lot of attention. The water that is circulated in the ponds is all organic and a key component of the gardens ecosystem. The water in the ponds is not clear, because no chemicals are used and all of the natural minerals and organisms maintain balance in the garden. Before the garden was created, one third of this space was used for organic gardening, enriching the soil below. We have many permanent residents that live in the Domo gardens including the many koi and gold fish that live in the ponds, dragon flies and other insects, snakes, frogs, birds and even a visiting raccoon or fox on occasion!



The Domo Garden: in the beginning...

All of the decorations in the restaurant and objects in the Folk Art Museum were hand-carried by me personally from my hometown area in northern Japan. There are many artifacts in the restaurant and museum from snow country of Japan and some of them are quite valuable.

Some of the items of great historical value in the restaurant and museum are made of wood or rice straw. Items such as these are difficult to preserve in a country like Japan with high humidity. Colorado with its dry climate helps to preserve antique items that are naturally disappearing over time in Japan.

I hope this article helps everyone to understand a little more about Domo Restaurant, its creation and history. So if you see a table that is crooked or a crack in a door or a bolt in a post, you can appreciate better why it is there.

Domo Restaurant was created with a very limited budget and a lot of imagination with all of the recycled materials we could find ourselves. Domo was put together like a grand puzzle that was a challenge for all of us. This restaurant was built by hand by me, Gaku Homma, Mr. Scott Olson, Mr. Don Perotta, Ms. Emily Busch and countless student volunteers and friends.

Today we celebrate the honor of being recognized with the Mayor's Design Award 2010 under the category of; "Home is where the Art is".

We couldn't agree more...

Thank you for all of your support,

Gaku Homma
Domo Owner and Head Chef



Raising the flag in the Domo gardens-1996