

Dojo Elegance

I used to work in a gymnasium school called the *Academy of Physical and Social Development*. It was an upscale after-school program for kids who needed some direction in athletics, social or family interactions, or with self-defense. The director, Mike Burg, did his early gymnasium work in a boxer's environment in which a lot of sweat and not a little blood and spit gave the gym a unique and very macho scent. This gym, however, was for kids and adults of both sexes and was funded by fees that came from people who appreciated neither too much blood and spit nor an overly macho scent. Mike managed to get the instructors to keep the place neat and clean without having it seem too pristine and un-gym-like.

As martial arts opened up to the general public in the sixties, the American version of the Japanese dojo with its stark training area, empty of decoration, plants or a fresh coat of paint, became a thing of the past. No mother was going to send her little boy into a "martial arts pool hall" nor an austere inelegant (to Western eyes) environment. Consumers wanted something closer to dance schools rather than boxing gyms. Dance schools were called "studios" and had an air of elegance. Ironically, so did traditional Japanese dojo (training places), but the transfer of these niceties somehow was lost during their original flights over the Pacific.

Dojo were not studios. A traditional dojo is indeed stark, usually white and earth tones exhibiting both *wabi* and *sabi* (rusticity and simplicity). The students clean it daily and kept it in good repair. When you enter such a place, it changes your mood for the better. You feel peaceful, not quite like entering a chapel, but certainly not like entering either a boxing gym or a dance studio. There are some things that "decorate" a traditional dojo. You may see pictures of the art's founder, history charts, mirrors, an occasional aphorism or school motto (often mistaken for decorative calligraphy), a rack with tags bearing each student's name, maybe a message board and perhaps a few plants to freshen the air. No matter how much a traditional dojo contains, it always seems just a little bare.

What you will *not* see are photos of the latest chop-socky movie, Power Puff Girls, Kung-fu Panda, racks of trophies, multi-colored uniforms, three colored walls with the school logo painted in a ten foot circle, a carpeted floor, large posters advertising the next competition, a four speaker CD player for stimulating music during the work-out, nor random items from Chinese, Korean, and Japanese lineages to give the place an "Asian look".

A sense of elegance for the traditional Japanese and Okinawan martial artist is one of understatement. If it does not set that certain, almost Chapel-like mood, it is not a traditional dojo. In modern times, even the traditional dojo has had to bow to certain commercial necessities. Events have to be advertised, uniforms have to be sold, but not as a major emphasis. If the school looks like a health club, its neatness may appeal, but what is its mood? To sell in a pleasant and semi-sterile environment? If a school looks like a dojo, on the other hand, its neatness will be taken for granted and its mood will be meditative even during the most active training.

Elegance affects the mind, which affects the body, which affects the quality of training. It is not an elegant sort of elegance. In fact, a bit of blood and spit give parts of it a patina, but it is elegance nevertheless.