Designing a Buddhist Temple

Joan Barnatt
Cape Cod Lighthouse Charter School
Orleans, MA

Overview
Using background reading, research, and visual prompts, students will design a blueprint of a typical Buddhist temple in Chinese tradition. They will then build a model of the complex, or one of the great halls found within. Students will incorporate traditions of Chinese religion, art, and architecture, as well as math and research skills, in completing the assignment.

Grade Level: 6-12

Connection to Curriculum: An interdisciplinary unit that incorporate Social Studies with math skills, and art. Research skills may include both library and internet resources.

Standards addressed:
1. Places - Physical and human characteristics, concept of region, culture and experience of location.
2. Human Systems - Population, culture, human settlement

Objectives
1. Students will identify major features of a Buddhist temple
2. Students will recognize the traditional use of art and architecture in temple design
3. Students will gain an appreciation of the aesthetic beauty and sacred traditions of Chinese temples
4. Students will design a traditional Chinese temple
5. Students will build a model based on their blueprint

Materials
1. Background Sheet (provided) for each student
2. Student instruction sheet
3. Graph paper and pencils
4. Additional pictures, slides or website addresses (suggestions included) for visual prompts
5. Additional materials for building models, as provided by students

Procedure:
1. Review student background sheet enclosed
2. Display, or show pictures, slides, visuals of Chinese temples (see photo display at PIER website www.cis.yale.edu/pieris/lessonsfromchina/)
3. Handout directions and graph paper.
4. Review steps in setting scale. Have students draw in listed items and generate a key that explains items on the plan.
5. As an in-class, or extended homework project, have students build a model of their complex or a great hall. Students should be encouraged to bring in their own materials to work with, if models are made in school
6. Display models and blueprints

Extension:
Have students find pictures of Buddhist sites in other countries. Compare the design and architecture. How do these buildings differ from sacred sites of other religion.
Elements of a Chinese Temple
Background Reading

The ancient art of feng shui is the basis for temple arrangement in China. Literally meaning wind and water, feng shui is described as the natural science, or geomancy, of arranging objects to promote movement of energy and avoid evil forces in the environment. True masters of feng shui are few - it requires a few decades of study to become truly knowledgeable, if you have the innate gift. These masters are consulted before the building of a temple so that it is positioned ideally in the environment, and arranged according to patterns of positive energy movement.

In today's common use of the term, feng shui has expanded into the pleasing arrangement of home decorating and interior use of furniture, color and space, or exterior garden arrangement. This is perhaps a natural extension of the ancient art where palaces and cities as well as temples are based on these laws, but the contemporary rules and techniques of domestic feng shui should not be confused with the traditional development of a temple site.

In designing your temple, we will follow some basic laws of feng shui and add to your knowledge of Buddhism and Chinese traditional architecture to produce a visual depiction of a temple. You don't need to include all of these elements in your plans, but keep them for reference as you plan. Remember, too, that while we will be undertaking plans for a Buddhist temple, this general plan can be applied to all Taoist and Confucianist temple arrangements.

General Layout

The complex is enclosed by walls in a rectangular formation, with the main entrance facing south. Placement to the south of mountains and north of water is auspicious. A Feng shui compass will point south in Chinese tradition. The main gate include huge wooden doors. The grand entrance often contains two large statues or portraits of the guardian kings on either side.

Inside the walls, the main halls are located in a series of buildings which may be surrounded by lesser halls or pavilions. Usually, the inner most areas contain the most sacred shrines.

Lesser halls include residences for the sangha and administrative offices near the entrance. There are also bell and drum towers to call the faithful to prayer. There can be a few buildings or hundreds, as in a small city. Courtyards are arranged between halls. Urns for lighting and burning incense are located here, in front of the halls. A pagoda may also be included in the temple complex. They are generally the only multistoried building, traditionally with an odd number of tiers. These building serve to hold sacred relics and writings, as well as for protection.

The Great Halls: Buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats

Roof lines of the halls are curved, often decorated with highly ornamental ceramic tiles, with use of bright colors, and carvings. Often, there are three entrance openings. You must step up over a threshold raised several inches that is helpful in keeping out Auspicious spirits and vermin, to go into the shrine. The Buddha images will be at an alter centered in the front. There may be smaller alters to the sides, or there may be rows of statues along the walls. There will be mats to kneel for prayer in front of the central figure. In the larger halls, a roped off area for the monks may be included. The alter may also have an offering box for donations, and other offerings will be left by the monks at the alter, including incense and food. The alters may be glass enclosed cases, brightly colored and heavily decorated, or dim and dark enclosures. By moving around the alter, you can exit from the rear.

The first main hall contains the four heavenly kings, two on each side. They protect Maitreya, the Laughing Buddha. The fearsome faces of the yellow Northern King with his banner of truth, the white Eastern King and his lute, the blue Southern King armed with a sword, and the red Western King grasping a snake and a pearl protect the hugely corpulent, kind, and
mysteriously smiling Buddha, known as both the "Future Buddha" and "Compassionate Buddha". Among the **Great Halls** of most temples are three large golden statues sitting on lotus leaves. These are the **Three Generation Buddhas** of the past, present and future. The figures of three large Buddhas are seated on lotus flowers who represent the past, present and future (three generations). Sakyamuni is the Buddha of the present, the Nepalese prince (Siddharta Guatama) of relative recent history that western people most readily associate with the Buddha. The Buddha of the Past is Dipamkara, representing the Buddhas that preceded Sakyamuni, and the Buddha to come is Maitreya, the bodhisattva of compassion and girth. The walls usually contain smaller statues of the Buddha’s divine followers. These smaller figures around the Buddha and along the walls will be **arhats** or **bodhisattvas** in a Buddhist temple. The arhats are enlightened monks who have sought and achieved personal enlightenment. The bodhisattvas of the Mahayana Buddhist sects are those who are elevated to enlightenment but choose to remain in the final stages of attaining Buddhahood, to help all the world's inhabitants to find the way to Nirvana. Behind the three Buddhas is **Guanyin**, the Goddess of Mercy, also frequently represented in her own shrine. A second triad of Buddhas frequently found in one of the great halls are the **Longevity Buddha**, with the **Medicine Buddha** to the left, and the **Wisdom Buddha** to the right.
Temple Design Instruction Sheet

Part I: The Blueprint

Arrange a temple according to the general information given above. Follow the steps outlined below to make a blueprint of your temple layout. Check off each item as it is completed.

1. To begin, decide on a scale that will be used consistently in your plan and clearly indicated on the blueprint. (Example: one centimeter = 10 feet)

2. Indicate the cardinal directions on your graph paper, then locate the site of your front gate in the south. Enclose the complex in a rectangle. Add other gates as necessary.

3. Identify the hall for the guardian kings and Meitraya.

4. Include a bell and drum tower

5. Add a pagoda

6. Sketch in courtyards between halls

7. Identify the Great Hall of the three generations of Buddhas and Guanyin

8. Identify placement of urns and prayer mats

9. Add any other pavilions or buildings (living quarters for the sangha, administrative offices, additional sacred halls, exhibition halls, stores)

10. Each item should be labeled on your blueprint with a number that corresponds to the key, complete with necessary explanations, on a separate sheet of paper.

Part II: The Model

Using your blueprint developed above, make a three dimensional model of one of the following choices:

A. Your temple complex including representations of all buildings in miniature form, to scale.

B. A detailed replica of one of the great halls within the complex, including interior features.

Before making your models, you should spend time studying pictures of a variety of examples in the books, slides and websites that are book marked.
Consider including symbolism of Buddhism in your creation. Below are some of the many symbols that can be found in Buddhist temples.

Eight Auspicious Symbols:

The lotus flower - purity
The vase - holding spiritual knowledge
The umbrella - protection
The wheel symbol - The Buddha’s teaching
The banner - victory
Conch Shell - enlightenment
Twin Fish - Realization
Six sided knot - eternity

The Five Senses:

The robe - touch
Fruit - taste
Incense - smell
Mirrors - sight
Musical instruments - hearing

Shape:

Circle
Triangle
Rectangle
wholeness, unity, cycles of nature, sky/heavens
balance
shelter, winds, elements, directions (include center); protection, knowledge,

Color:

White - purity, peace, stability
Red - fire, power, pride, energy, revitalization
Orange - joy, warmth
Yellow - sun, vitality, wisdom
Green - life, accomplishment
Blue - space, sky, oceans, tranquility, healing
Purple - mountains, refinement, dignity, completion
Brown - humbleness, groundedness
Black - night, quiet, overcoming hindrances
no need to scan