



ABOVE: A winding exposed aggregate water feature at the Chase Garden was featured on the cover of Time Life's Encyclopedia of Gardening's *Winter Gardens*.

LEFT: The collective vision of lone and Emmott Chase and Rex Zumwalt (far right) would turn the Chase Garden into one of the designer's most enduring and recognized contributions to the dialogue of landscape design.

Photo: courtesy of The Chase Garden archives

Landscape Designer Rex Zumwalt

A Mid-Century Modern Legacy

by STEVE CORDERA

THROUGHOUT HIS CAREER, Rex Zumwalt designed tasteful, restrained landscapes that seamlessly blended with the architecture of the time. Rex graduated with a degree in landscape architecture from Oregon State University in 1955, and after a brief stint working for the Oregon State Parks Department he entered private practice as part of Chaffey Zumwalt Associates. For

nearly 60 years he developed a unique, recognizable style that combined formal spaces and clean lines with decentralized plans and naturalistic, free-flowing paths.

Rex's most noteworthy garden is the nationally recognized Chase Garden in Orting, Washington. With its awe-inspiring view and temperate climate, the landscape blended native plants with a Japanese-inspired



A clear day at the Chase Garden with Mt. Rainier visible in the background. Photo: W&W Clauson

Mid-Century modern design. Rex completed the design for the Chase Garden in 1962.

Rex designed the bones of the garden, while owners Emmott and Lone Chase completed much of the construction and plant selection. Rocky outcroppings tumble through the native plants and laceleaf maples, blurring the line between a formal Japanese rock garden and a more naturalistic alpine planting. Rex excelled at the placement of large boulders and, given the garden's elevation and its mountain views, the various rocky outcroppings look particularly believable, as if they were an accident of nature. In fact, Rex or the Chases carefully placed each rock. As Emmott Chase said, "there isn't a plant, tree, or rock around this house that I haven't moved at least twice."

The modest house with its low-slung, Dutch gabled roof and extended rafters is a quintessential Mid-Century modern structure with distinctly Japanese overtones.

Paths meander among the flowerbeds and trees dividing the forest and meadows from the semi-formal lawns, the largest of which permits a dramatic, unobstructed view of Mt. Rainier framed by Douglas-firs. The path then disappears behind the trees, almost demanding exploration—an arrangement Rex would return to some 30 years later on my parent's front lawn. In many ways, the Chase Garden set the tone for his career that would follow, and elements from this early project were repeated in his design work as late as the mid 1990s. Now a part of the Garden

FIELD NOTES



Rex designed this pergola and gazebo for a private residence in Tacoma, Washington. Photo: Rex Zumwalt

Conservancy, the Chase Garden was featured in a 2002 article in *The New York Times* titled "Heavy Lifting for a Heavenly View."

While Rex was definitely a Mid-Century modern landscape architect, the Asian influence of the later Arts and Crafts movement often crept into his aesthetics. A pergola and adjoining gazebo designed for a private residence in Tacoma is an example. The pergola's narrowly spaced double vertical supports and the gazebo's unsupported corners exaggerate the broad shallow roof and deep overhangs. The final result evokes a Japanese teahouse with the proportions of a Toro lantern, expressed in an Arts and Crafts vocabulary, re-purposed for modern Western culture.

In this lakefront home (see photos below) Rex strips those same elements to their bare bones in a streamlined modern structure but still manages to sneak in some of the original Arts and Crafts aesthetic. The accompanying stairwell that leads up to the residence with its stepped white stucco retaining wall and minimalist light fixtures is undeniably modern.

I came to know Rex when I was still in high school, when my father contracted him to design the landscape around our Northwest contemporary home in Gig Harbor designed by Kevin Pederson. Steeply

pitched roofs, vertical elements, and intersecting angles gave the house a more monumental appearance than most Mid-Century modern designs. Before the landscaping was installed and the trees had time to grow up around it, the architecture stood out dramatically; so much so, that upon completion one neighbor felt compelled to tell us how ostentatious the new house was.

Today, the house sits nestled among a near-forest of golden deodar cedars and hemlocks and is completely obscured from the street. At the time, I cursed Rex as I helped my father plant every one of the nearly 20 trees in the new landscape. Each hole dug with a bobcat had to be backfilled with a combination of native soil, sawdust, and fertilizer; that yours truly had to mix by hand. Fortunately, Rex was impossible to dislike. As I watched his design take shape over the years and learned more about design and architectural history, my respect for Mr. Zumwalt's talent grew, and I was able to forgive him for the months of cramped hands and forearms I endured while helping my father realize his design.

Much like the lawns at the Chase garden, the front of my parent's property is also home to a large oval field defined by a teardrop driveway. In Rex's original plan, a



LEFT AND ABOVE: A more modernist take on a traditional structure and an accompanying stairway. Photos: Rex Zumwalt

FIELD NOTES



A large curving cement planter adjacent to the entry stairs in the Cordera landscape, with mature trees and other plantings, echoes the home's architecture. Photo: Steve Cordera

stand of cedars at the entrance to the property provided a backdrop for a Japanese flowering cherry tree. That tree was breathtaking when it was in flower. A focal point when viewed from the house, the pink-tinted white flowers hung like cotton candy clouds in front of the dark conifers. In fact, that cherry was probably intended to be the centerpiece of that entire vista. My father considered the snow-like effect of the fallen petals a nuisance and, despite our vigorous protests, he eventually removed the beautiful tree when it outgrew the space. Frequent (albeit hopeless) lobbying (nagging, whining) for the replacement of said tree continues to this day. I'm considering erecting a memorial to it. Maybe I'll plant a tree in its honor.

Where the driveway reaches the house and branches off to the garage before circling around to the street, Rex designed a large concrete planter. The prominent feature sets the stage for a terraced stairway leading to the front door and provides a logical way to deal with grade changes in the landscape. Golden deodar

cedars in the planter help tie the house in with the surrounding landscape while the architectural element visually connects the house with the garden. If Frank Lloyd Wright wanted to bring the outdoors into his houses, Rex was bringing this house out into the landscape. The result is so inviting and integrated with the home that going outside is as natural as going from one room to the next.

With such a long career and with so many projects under his belt, it would be impossible to review all of Rex's work. There is the added problem that landscapes when improperly maintained rapidly lose their luster. Many of the public projects Rex designed no longer look as intended. One project that has held up well after many years is the landscape surrounding the former Pacific First Federal, now Chase Bank, in Lakewood, Washington. The project has been well maintained and looks much the same as it did upon completion; ground covers have been revised to questionable effect, but the trees have matured nicely and I suspect Rex was satisfied with the enduring results.



Chase Bank in Lakewood, Washington. Photo: Rex Zumwalt

Rex Zumwalt passed away in 2013, but his contributions to landscape architecture endure. His impact is felt in the landscapes he designed, and in those designed by the people he influenced. Marty Lyon, principal of Lyon Landscape Architects in Kirkland, Washington and Sun Valley, Idaho, said that Rex Zumwalt had a "profound influence on my career as a landscape architect." Richard Hartlage, Land Morphology principal and landscape designer of Chihuly Garden and Glass, called Rex "One of the greats." He definitely raised the standard for landscape architecture in the southern Puget Sound region. In many respects, Rex is a bridge between the theories promoted by Thomas Church and the landscape designers of today. And that is his middle century modern legacy.

Steve Cordera credits High Line Park in New York City as reigniting his interest in gardening.



Today, mature cedars in the Cordera landscape provide a backdrop to winter-flowering cherry trees (*Prunus subhirtella* 'Autumnalis') and rhododendrons. Photo: Steve Cordera