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## CLASSIC REVIEW

### **Creative Gardens**

By James C. Rose, Reinhold Publishing, New York, 1958, out of print

**Reviewed by Dean Cardasis**

"The value of a book or idea does not begin at the periphery, it begins at the nucleus; I shall be very happy if only *one* person reads and understands my book because that will be the nucleus from which the truth can spread." Such was Siegfried Gideon's response to James Rose's "smart-alec student" question as reported by Rose in *The Heavenly Environment* (1987). It is revealing to note that both the beginning of Rose's first book, *Creative Gardens* (1958) and the ending of his last one, *The Heavenly Environment*, pay homage to Gideon's remark. Indeed, in the afterword to *The Heavenly Environment* Rose acknowledges that it "burned a hole in my best-seller core and ventilated my thinking thereafter." Certainly Gideon's great book, *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941) well-read and much-discussed throughout design culture has long since validated the "truth" of his assertion, but what of *Creative Gardens*, read (much less understood) by so few, out-of-print for so long? Is it really a "classic" which simply has not yet reached the peripheries of a painfully slow-to-develop profession? Or was Rose's thinking just less "ventilated" than he believed?





In *Creative Gardens* Rose advances the penetrating critique and radical, yet strikingly commonsense, design philosophy he had previously established in periodicals in the 1930s and 1940s. Then, in post-depression America, he had attacked landscape architects' continued reliance upon "Beaux Arts formalism" and the failure of architects to see the landscape as anything more than a pastoral setting for their buildings. Now, after World War II, his evolving ideas about the nature of creativity, the essence of garden and landscape design and the "fusion" of shelter, garden, community and city are presented in sharp counterpoise to the emerging materialistic patchwork American suburb of the 1950s.

In *Creative Gardens* Rose is now able to substantiate the merits of his unconventional thinking---and the shortcomings of American suburbia---with his own built works, completed roughly in the first decade following World War II. Here are revolutionary "gardens without houses," "modular gardens," and "space-sculptures-with-shelters," as well as distinctive responses to the landscape design problems

created by adherence to conventional suburban planning and design practice, the products of conventional thinking. Rose's radical 1950s gardens are

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without useless lawns and decorative foundation plantings; they are made of space and full of privacy.

In *Creative Gardens* Rose's ability to compose and deploy words to hold meaning is analogous to his ability to use material objects (including plants) to create space. As such he reinforces his belief in the creative by rendering the book more than a critique and catalogue; it is itself a creative literary work. Imaginative, humorous, theatrical, it presents us with a kind of 1950s suburban farce in which the antagonists include fraudulent advertising executives, greedy developers, "fascist" planners, self-indulgent architects, robotic building inspectors and naive clients. In this landscape drama all

unwittingly conspire to degrade the environment and the quality of life, which, of course, are inseparable. At the center, the protagonist landscape architect provides us with an heroic alternative by simply being rational, alert to his environment, creative, unsentimental about a "nature" which excludes man, yet unconventionally responsive to "natural" systems and features. Unburdened by preconception, unfettered by social convention, undaunted by law our hero bravely encounters the tangle of obstacles responsible for American suburbia. Through his adventures in suburbia, Rose realizes a kind of enlightenment, producing eloquent and insightful passages about the essence of garden and landscape, an essence that can be defined as the spatial experience of being connected to the infinite:

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*Cover page:* Modular Garden Variations, 1949.

*Right:* James Rose at home, 1953.



*Next page:* Entrance Court Improvisation, Ridgewood, New Jersey, 1953.

All photos courtesy The James Rose Center.

In a world full of self-imposed obstacles, one that has been arbitrarily subdivided, isolating houses as precious objects, Rose shows us the merits of designing whole sites as spatial experiences within which "shelter" is fused "space-sculptures-with-shelters" as he calls them. Sensible, imaginative and inspiring, these space-sculptures-with-shelters are important in suggesting not "how-to-do-it," but "how-to-think-it" and point to an alternative way of conceiving of the design of communities and cities based upon the integrity of space and the wholeness of the physical world:

"We do not have an individual word in the American language to describe the fusion of shelter with the landscape, but if the need for it should ever become recognized, we would probably get the word. And who knows? With such a word, we might build a whole community of space-sculpture-with-shelter, instead of houses-plus-gardens. It might even spread to cities, this fusion idea, and then we would have a lot of people going from one place to another and carrying on their business and living right in the midst of nature instead of preserving that dream patch of wildflowers somewhere else. It would be like going sane."

Rose continued his adventure with suburbia until he died in 1991, writing four books, numerous articles, hundreds of poems and two plays; as well as designing and building hundreds of landscapes, including his own seminal "space-sculpture-with-shelter," now the James Rose Center in Ridgewood, New Jersey. His clear, critical voice and imaginative, creative works relentlessly explored and expressed great design themes in their most concentrated and dramatic forms, while the



suburban environment and quality of life continued to degenerate around him. Today, more than forty years after the publication of *Creative Gardens*, as we experience the devastation of a suburban experience spawned, in part, by the conventional planning and design thinking Rose criticized, it is time for a new generation of designers and planners to pull up the curtain on *Creative Gardens*---if a copy can still be found. A reading of maverick Rose's first book would not only provide a distinctive historical and aesthetic perspective on the contemporary suburban dilemma; it might just

ventilate our well-established conventional way of thinking and give us some much-needed fresh air.

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