

# ROSE, JAMES C.

(1913-1991)

landscape architect, author

James C. Rose was only five years old when his father died and, with his mother and his older sister, he moved to New York City from rural Pennsylvania. He never graduated from high school because he refused to take music and mechanical drafting, but nevertheless he managed to enroll in architecture courses at Cornell University, and subsequently to transfer, as a special student, to Harvard University to study landscape architecture. He was expelled from Harvard, however, in 1937 for refusing to design landscapes in a Beaux-Arts manner. Along with his fellow students, Garrett Eckbo and Dan Kiley, Rose went on to be one of the leaders of the modern movement in American landscape architecture.

The design experiments for which Rose was expelled served as the basis for a series of provocative articles expounding modernism in landscape design, published in 1938 and 1939 in *Pencil Points* (now *Progressive Architecture*). Subsequently, Rose wrote many other articles, including a series with Eckbo and Kiley, as well as four books that advance both the theory and practice of landscape architecture in the twentieth century: *Creative Gardens* (1958), *Gardens Make Me Laugh* (1965), *Modern American Gardens—Designed by James Rose* (1967, written under the pseudonym Marc Snow), and *The Heavenly Environment* (1987).

Rose was both a landscape theorist and a practitioner. In 1941 he was employed briefly in New York City as a landscape architect by Tuttle, Seelye, Place & Raymond, working on the design of a staging area to house 30,000 men at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. For a

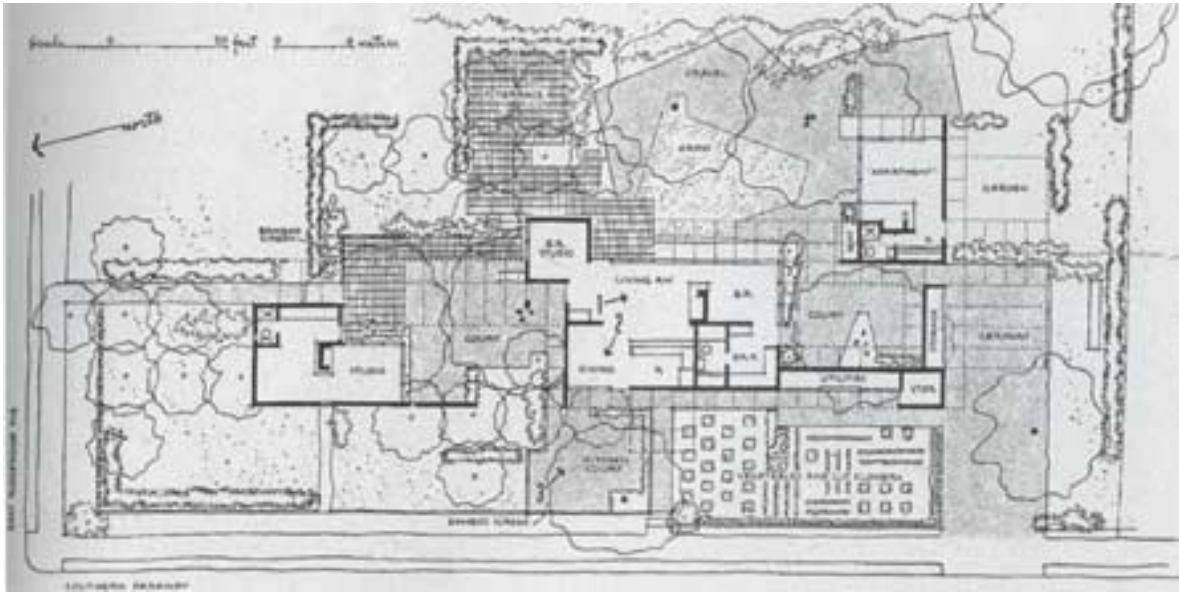
short time Rose had a sizable practice of his own in New York City, but he quickly decided that large-scale public and corporate work would impose too many restrictions on his creative freedom, and he devoted most of his post-World War II career to the design of private gardens. (This is one of the reasons his built work is not as well known as that of his fellow modern rebels, Dan Kiley and Garrett Eckbo.)

In 1953 he built one of his most significant designs, the Rose residence (now the James Rose Center for landscape Architectural Research and Design) in Ridgewood, New Jersey. Rose had conceived of the design while stationed in Okinawa, in 1943, and had made the first model of it from scraps found in construction battalion headquarters. The design was published in the December 1954 issue of *Progressive Architecture*, juxtaposed with the design for a traditional Japanese house built in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City; the article commends Rose's design for its spatial discipline. The house clearly expresses Rose's idea of fusion between indoor and outdoor space as well as his notion that modern design must be flexible to allow for changes in the environment as well as in the lives of its users.

From 1953 until his death, Rose based an active professional practice in his home. Like Thomas Church and many others, Rose practiced a form of design/build because it gave him control over the finished work and allowed him to improvise in response to the sites of his gardens. As a result, most of Rose's work is concentrated near his home in



*James C. Rose holding a model of his house made from scraps during World War II, Okinawa, Japan. Courtesy James C. Rose Archives, James Rose Center.*



*Plan of James Rose residence, Ridgewood, New Jersey. Courtesy James C. Rose Archive, James Rose Center*



*View looking out, James C. Rose residence. Photo Frederick Charles*

northern New Jersey and New York—although significant examples also exist in Connecticut, Florida, Maryland, California, and abroad. Besides spontaneous improvisation, several other distinct qualities characterize the gardens of James Rose. The gardens lend themselves to contemplation and self-discovery. They respond to their sites in specific ways, often recycling raw materials found therein and incorporating existing natural features such as rock outcroppings and trees as part of a designed, flexible, asymmetrical spatial geometry. Abhorring waste, Rose often re-used discarded building materials and constructions originally intended for other purposes. Old doors became elegant benches, metal barbecues turned into fountains; railroad ties became

walls for irregular terraces. Overall, Rose’s gardens are highly ordered sculptural compositions of space meant to be experienced rather than viewed. They are like giant origami, the experience of which unfolds from the inside. While Rose’s garden exhibit little interest in color or concern for variety of horticultural species, they sensitively reveal the nature of their sites.

In 1970, Rose was invited to be a participant at the World Design Conference in Japan. This experience instilled in him a continuing appreciation for Japanese culture, reflected in many gardens that have sometimes been mislabeled “Japanese”. Rose’s distinctive modern American gardens, like many Japanese gardens, attempt to reflect the spirit of the place in which they exist. He made frequent trips to Japan and



*Fountain and courtyard, James C. Rose residence.  
Photo Frederick Charles*

became a practicing Zen Buddhist, but his gardens retain their American identity almost by definition. Rose himself, in response to a query from a prospective client asking if he could design her a Japanese garden, replied, “Of course, whereabouts in Japan do you live?”

Rose was one of the most colorful figures in twentieth-century landscape design. Skeptical of most institutions, he nevertheless served as a guest lecturer and visiting critic at numerous architecture and landscape architecture schools. Before he died, he set in motion an idea that had been in his mind for forty

years—the establishment of a landscape research and design study center—and created a foundation to support the transformation of his Ridgewood residence for this purpose. Rose died in his home in 1991 of cancer.

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Rose, James C. *Creative Gardens*. New York: Reinhold, 1958. Rose’s first book, expounding modernism in both theory and practice; includes numerous photographs and plans.

Rose, James C. *Gardens Make Me Laugh*. Norwalk, Conn.: Silvermine, 1965. Rose’s second book, a humorous essay reflecting on the nature of Rose’s contemporary landscape architectural practice; drawings by Osborn.

Rose, James C. *The Heavenly Environment*. Hong Kong: New City Cultural Service, 1987. Rose’s last book, which he described as “a landscape drama in three acts with a backstage interlude”; expresses Rose’s mature theory and practice; illustrated.

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***Pioneers of the American Landscape Design, 2000***