

Arthur Erickson's "secret garden"



Behind a simple cedar fence in Vancouver's Point Grey neighbourhood, lies a "secret garden", a place of quiet, an "oasis", where Canada's famed architect, the late Arthur Erickson, made his home for over fifty years.

"A sanctuary for the creative spirit"

When Arthur Erickson returned from service in Asia during the Second World War his thoughts were for a life in the diplomatic corps. That was, until he saw a magazine photograph of Frank Lloyd Wright's recently completed and brilliant "Taliesin West"! If this can be accomplished in architecture, he thought, that will be my challenge and goal. Arthur studied at the School of Architecture at McGill University in Montreal and upon graduating he won the travel scholarship, which then took him to Egypt, the Adriatic, Mediterranean, Europe, Britain and Scandinavia for a very extended period of time.

On his return, and while lecturing at UBC, he found and purchased two side-by-side, 33-foot lots on a corner site in Point Grey. They were undeveloped except for a single garage and a shed, both on the lane at the back of the property. On the site were two very large, old growth, Douglas Fir trees standing in the NW and SE corners. On the west side was a mature Pine tree and in the SW corner by the intersecting roads stood an extremely large and most impressive Dogwood tree. The remainder of the site contained an English style garden with two apple trees, all surrounded by a picket fence and open to the surrounding streets.

Arthur combined the existing garage and the shed, with a connecting structure, to make them one. This formed his personal and small living quarters of just eight hundred and fifty square feet. The remainder of the property, well over eight thousand square feet, he dedicated to a simple but very clever and charming open landscape space.

He began by excavating the centre of the site to create a mound towards the south of the property so as to screen the view of the road as well as the house beyond. Within the excavation, in the centre of the space, Arthur formed a large reflecting pond. He incorporated reflecting water into every one of the projects he designed throughout his career whether residential, cultural or commercial.

Arthur brought in rhododendrons, azaleas, many grasses and bamboos. The south side of the site now has a high thick cedar hedge to the sidewalk and road and on the inside dense bamboos. Along the west of the property, adjacent to the adjoining street, is a simple vertically boarded cedar fence. Black trunks of numerous Laurel trees with their broad shiny leaves create a sheltering canopy overhanging the fence.

The east boundary borders the neighbour's property where a regulation height fence would not afford Arthur the privacy he wished. Three feet inside the property line, with no such height restriction, he built a second and higher fence, which begins three feet from the ground and goes up above head height. He called this the "baffle fence" and it runs the length of the garden's east side. Between the two fences, Arthur planted blue bamboo. Its clustered stems are visible below the baffle and its leaves cascade above.

There is a second, smaller and hard-edged, reflecting pond beside the house in front of Arthur's work area. Beside this pond, with the help of students, Arthur built a Dolmen. Three large vertical rocks support a larger moss covered capstone. Three large vertical rocks support a larger moss covered capstone. Such ancient structures date back two or three centuries BC.

On the south side of the mound is a now very well established, lone Arbutus tree. A species known impossible to transplant, Arthur claimed it was a gift from the birds. "It just started growing" Arthur said.

Even though the property is a corner lot, it is entirely secluded and private from the bordering streets. All windows of the house face the sunny south, into the magic calm, charm and unique seclusion of this private garden.

Counter to convention, Arthur placed the entrance on the long side of the lot rather than at the street address side. This idea of entering at a right angle to the main axis, is also found in the early 1950s Filberg House, the 1960s Simon Fraser University and the 1980s Bagley-Wright House in Seattle.

Once through the gate in the fence and the initial woods, one is almost in the center of the lot before the vista of the axis and openness is apparent and appreciated. From this point, as well as from the windows of the house, the waters of the reflecting pond disappear beyond foliage giving an elusion of spaces beyond.

The entire garden is monochromatic green, year round. The exception is in late spring, when the rhododendrons and azaleas inject their vivid colours, which reflect across the pond. Later, in the heat of summer, water lilies cover the surface of the pond. Arthur would also put out a few strategically placed brilliant red potted geraniums on the grey brick paving surrounding the pond.

Residing in his very minimal lane house with its beautiful interior finishes and large skylights, Arthur looked out to a contemplative garden landscape of reflective water and lush evergreen foliage. He described its essence as “a clearing in the forest”.

Indeed, this is where Arthur had the quiet he so cherished, away from the business of his office and the outside world. This was his oasis, where he worked alone on so many of the beginning concepts and visions of his enduring master projects.



Arthur repeated this strong visions of a tranquil open space surrounded by towering trees years later, in his equally brilliant Robson Square. As he knew they would, large towers have grown up to surround his low profile, horizontal, open and green public space, creating an oasis in the centre of our city.

Together, Arthur Erickson’s house and garden were his inspiration and his haven and one of his most delicate design accomplishments; a work of art, unique, and intact. His garden is considered to be one of the finest small gardens in North America.

To the public Arthur has been a superstar architect, a jetsetter, world citizen and this is all true. To those who knew him, he was also a very kind, quiet, thoughtful and considerate man, living a Zen-like life. He enjoyed one on one connections as well as occasions of small groups and large gatherings. Many of them took place in his garden when he invited locals as well as international celebrities for festive evening gatherings. One notable occasion was his after-party following the Queen Elizabeth Theatre performance of London's Royal Ballet attended by Rudolf Nureyev and Margo Fonteyn. On that occasion Arthur brought in two black swans for the reflecting pond.



The garden today remains a very significant place of intrigue, of inspiration and of learning for visiting scholars, students and the public. The house and garden are now held as part of the Arthur Erickson legacy, by the Arthur Erickson Foundation whose vision is-

“A better world through inspired architecture”

“You” are invited to be inspired by a to visit “Arthur’s secret garden”. Become a member of the Foundation in support of one of Canada’s most prominent citizens and help save, protect and promote his “secret garden” as a Vancouver and Canadian Heritage site.

Both membership and tours may be arranged through the Foundation, formed in Arthur’s name.

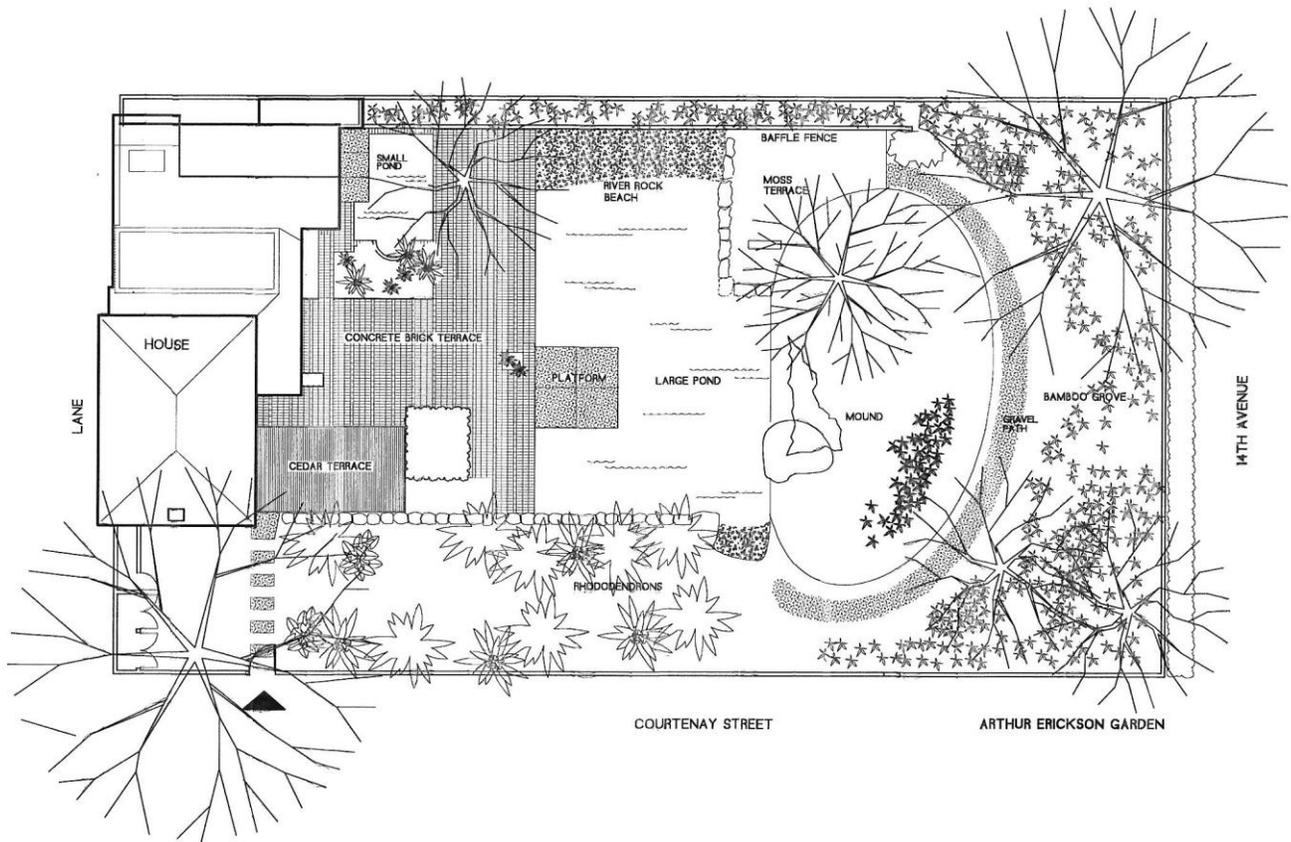
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We invite and welcome your interest and your participation.

Simon Scott

Friend and colleague from 1965

AEF board director and tour guide



Plan of garden