

# TRACES OF SELF- EXILE

**“W**ords! Can we ever untangle them?” reads James Rose’s opening salvo in *Pencil Points*. Appearing in the definitive journal of modernist design thought, the landscape designer’s 1939 essay rejects preconceived ideas of formal or informal design and makes the case for an organic and materials-based approach—an argument approaching revelation at a time when Beaux-Arts methodologies held sway.

Reading the text today, Rose’s words cut through the decades, carrying with them equal doses of wit, creativity, and frustration with the status quo. An uncompromising designer from his time in and out of Harvard (he was expelled in 1937, later returned but never graduated) to his death in 1991, Rose is the subject of the latest volume of the *Masters of Modern Landscape Design* series published in association with the Library of American Landscape His-



## A NEW BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES ROSE EXPLORES HIS DIFFICULT BRILLIANCE.

BY MIMI ZEIGER

tory and the University of Georgia Press. It’s the first biography dedicated to the landscape architect, who although a prolific writer throughout his career and author of four of his own books, has yet to receive the kind of canonical recognition bestowed on his Harvard classmates Garrett Eckbo and Dan Kiley.

As director of the James Rose Center for Landscape Architectural Research and Design—a nonprofit located at Rose’s Ridgewood, New Jersey, home—the book’s author, Dean Cardasis, FASLA, is well-placed to untangle the competing forces of Rose’s career. Few of Rose’s works survive in their original form,

**ABOVE**  
The landscape architect James Rose with “snake dance” fountain, early 1960s.

and a spare eight are presented as illustrated case studies—a fraction of the more than 80 projects produced in his lifetime. Much of the book is devoted to advocating for Rose's achievements while trying to account for the designer's disillusionment with the culture of post-war landscape architecture and his eventual self-imposed exile to suburban New Jersey. Although these two threads are not in opposition, they do place a strain on the narrative, suggesting a portrait of a man whose increasing radicalism over the course of decades—from modernism to ad hoc material sensibilities to environmentalism—contributed to his own isolation. "He was a rebel's rebel from the start, an incisive critic destined to follow his own path," Cardasis says.

Early in the prologue for the book, Cardasis describes his first encounter with a 76-year-old Rose (just a couple years before his death). The passage is clearly loving, but also disconcerting. A disheveled and mismatched Rose steps out of a "rusty, egg-yolk-colored 1970s VW van," and Cardasis writes: "An incredibly long, almost wizard-like straw hat grazed his shoulders and shaded his face. As he looked up I could see he was wearing glasses, but one frame was empty, and the remaining one held a tinted sunglass lens. In that

instant I had my first silent lesson from the iconoclastic modern landscape architect James Rose: 'Have no preconceptions.'"

It's from this point that a revolutionary must be nudged into the historical fold. The task isn't easy, though it is most successful early in Rose's biography. Cardasis, unpacking Rose's interest in modernism, finds parallels in the spare poetry of William Carlos Williams and the easy spatial flow of Rudolph Schindler's Kings Road house, which serves as a precedent for Rose's home in Ridgewood. In both projects, the use of outdoor rooms and landscape features illustrates Rose's maxim that "landscape design falls somewhere between architecture and sculpture."

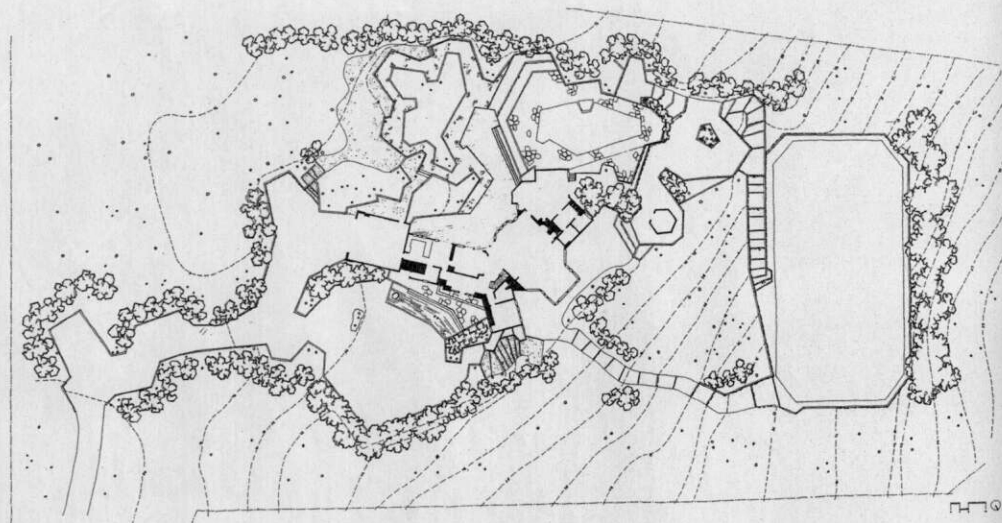
Indeed, Rose's own writings referenced modern artists such as Pablo Picasso and the Russian constructivist Naum Gabo. Rose even wrote that a Georges Braque still life and Kurt Schwitters's *Rubbish Construction* are "interesting suggestions for gardens." The book describes that fascination with collage and assemblage, tracking it through

Rose's work, where it appears initially in the model Rose made of his future home while in the navy, the materials scavenged from around his military station, or in the scrap metal fountains he improvised in the 1960s and 1970s. The author continues this line of argument to suggest Rose's use of recycled railroad ties and asphalt—used for the steps and terraces of the Averett Garden and House in Columbus, Georgia (1959)—as an example of Rose's affinity for "found objects."

But later, as modernism gave way to countercultural influences, it is harder to pin Rose down. Cardasis chronicles the designer's withdrawal from mainstream landscape architecture and, more generally, American culture, citing a growing aversion to the impact of postwar suburban development on the existing landscape as the cause. He quotes from Rose's 1958 book *Creative Gardens* as evidence: "The recipe is simple: first, spoil the land by slicing it in particles that will bring the most dollars, add any house that has sufficient selling gimmicks to each slice, and garnish with 'landscaping.'"

#### ABOVE

Eleanore Pettersen, the architect for the Paley house, brought Rose on to design the garden. The site was a rocky, sloping woodland.



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Perhaps as a respite, Rose began traveling regularly to Japan and eventually began practicing Zen Buddhism. "He went to Japan in 1960, and that started a love affair with the country that went on for his whole life," Cardasis told me by phone. "Rose found inspiration in the Eastern tradition, especially in the attitudes to the natural world."

Given Rose's then-radical understanding of landscape architecture as an integration of spatial and natural conditions, the banal blanketing of suburban conventions across the United States would surely account for his retreat; however, Rose was not alone in his critique. Other writers, designers, and artists of the period shared his early environmentalist stirrings, so it is strange to find few references, especially given the wealth of parallels drawn in support of Rose's embrace of modernism. The book makes brief and tantalizing allusion to significant countercultural figures: Timothy Leary (Rose apparently dropped LSD with him but "wondered what the fuss was all about") and Alan Watts (Rose studied with him but then renounced Watts's teachings). It would seem that his cantankerous personality instigated isolation as much as his ideology.

The biography doesn't hide that Rose was gay, though the narrative doesn't put emphasis on the designer's sexuality as an overt source of his outsider-ness. "As you know, Rose lived in a time when being gay was extremely difficult, and I can only imagine how that influenced his life and work," Cardasis said in an e-mail. "Because of this and in deference to his expressed wishes not to belabor the fact, I did not explore the issue further than a simple reference to his sexuality in the book. More (or less), I thought, would be inappropriate." The result of this tact, however, is that the biography seems a bit closeted—the queerness in Rose's methods left for others to explore at a later time.

Despite his iconoclasm, there were moments that suggest possible connections between Rose and other prac-

tioners. For the 1960 issue of *Progressive Architecture*, the editors asked Rose, Lawrence Halprin, and Karl Linn—the environmentalist, activist, and pioneer of urban gardening—to review each other's work. Rose's *Macht Garden and House* in Baltimore from 1956 was subject to strong critique by the others for its expressiveness, particularly what was termed the "incessant" angled terraces. While Cardasis characterizes the grouping of designers as something the magazine "cooked up," as if it were a bit of a stunt, there was clearly editorial intent here to make alignments between three landscape architects operating outside the conventional mien, with anticipatory ties to social and ecological movements. As Rose's work reenters the canon, more research is needed to better situate it historically.

**ABOVE**

A view nearly without boundaries from inside to out at Rose's house in Ridgewood, New Jersey.





Did Rose deliberately push away his contemporaries and potential allies? It's likely. He was never shy about getting into arguments with clients, but he also had his defenders. In the 1970s and 1980s, he collaborated with the architect Eleanore Pettersen on some 30 projects. In addition to sharing his design sensibilities in terms of fluid relationships between inside and outside, she often acted as Rose's advocate, especially when he put off clients and building officials. There seems to be more to explore here between the iconoclastic designer and his champion. Pettersen apprenticed with Frank Lloyd Wright and was the first woman architect to start her own practice in New Jersey in the early 1950s. One can't help but wonder why someone who probably had to fight against social norms throughout her career would willingly stand up for the volatile Rose.

The answer in the biography points again to Rose's possessing an irascible genius, the nature of which compelled others to be forbearing. This was a period of his practice when he would meditate in the morning and then go build improvisationally on site without drawings. Pettersen, interviewed in 1992, is quoted in the biography simply telling clients: "It will be worth it."

Justification for that value is elusive and impressionistic. Because of that lack of documentation, the James Rose foundation has a limited record of projects to refer to for backup. Although he published regularly early in his career, writing essays and three books from the 1930s through the 1960s, Rose's pace slowed afterward, and he published his last book, *The Heavenly Environment: A Landscape Drama in Three Acts with a Backstage Interlude*, in 1987. Ultimately, it is

Rose's own home, now the James Rose Center for Landscape Architectural Research and Design, that serves as an interpretative text for understanding the work: handmade, iterative, and as quixotic as its author, with courtyards, roof gardens, and a Zendo, each in various states of repair.

The biography puts forth a belief that understanding Rose's later oeuvre comes mostly through understanding his singular methodology. Words are left behind to untangle. "You can feel it when you go to the site," Cardasis says. "As you move through, the garden seems as if it could go on forever. There was no plan as an approach; he just moved through, adjusting things to make people aware of their connectedness to things larger than themselves." ●

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**LEFT**  
Rose and a carpenter confer during roof garden construction in 1970.

**RIGHT**  
For the courtyard of an electronics factory and office building, Rose assembled copper sheeting and scrap metal into lanterns and a fountain in 1963.