

Statement of Significance: Abkhazi Garden

Description of Historic Place

Abkhazi Garden is located at 1964 Fairfield Road, in the City of Victoria, British Columbia. The site is 1.598 acres. The property was purchased in 1946 by Peggy Pemberton Carter who later wed Nicholas Abkhazi. The defining features of the Garden — glaciated rock outcroppings and mature Garry oak trees — strongly present the characteristics that are unique to the southern tip of Vancouver Island. The Garden is surrounded by residential properties on all three sides. The original residence has been repurposed as a teahouse. Other structures include the Summerhouse, storage shed, and greenhouse.

Heritage Value

One of the first things Peggy did was to hire John Wade to design her summerhouse. Wade was a young architect who had worked in the offices of Richard Neutra, the brilliant modernist architect in Los Angeles. Neutra had a strong sense of the flow between interior design and the exterior landscape that became a hallmark of the California West Coast style. The California landscape architects of the time were also expressing new ideas about a garden being “more than a collection of plants, more than an imitation of historical styles and that it could be, once again, an art form, expressive of its place, time and people.” These ideas strongly influenced Wade in his design of Abkhazi Garden’s structures and terraces.

Peggy Pemberton Carter probably needed little convincing about the soundness of these new ideas that embraced the familiar aesthetic of gardens near her former Shanghai home. Chinese gardens, essentially places of meditation and escape, must have been very appealing for both Peggy and Nicholas Abkhazi after their experiences in World War II POW (prisoner of war) camps. Nothing in a Chinese garden is hurried or blatant. Paths are not just a means of access; they are a way of exploring slowly changing views while journeying through the garden.

Abkhazi Garden is a dynamic work of art within a discipline imposed by the site. A unity of execution is evident in the layout of buildings, paths and plant material. Forms and materials were selected to express one overruling idea, the rhythm of the natural landscape. The house, summerhouse and garden shed, modest in size and construction, complement this landscape. The intimate paths show a human scale appropriate for the private world the Abkhazis wanted to create for themselves.

Character-defining Elements

The sculpturally strong Garry oaks predominate the site and provide a unifying sense of stability and serenity. Other significant plants on the property are especially notable for their maturity and precise placement. Some rhododendrons are over 100 years old, their gnarled trunks as attractive as their flowers. Trained mature conifers cascade down the rock faces, and carefully pruned azaleas provide living sculptures. Each season, naturalized bulbs carpet the garden in sheets of colour. Choice alpine plants are sited carefully in natural rock crevices.

Abkhazi Garden is more than the sum of its plants. As their tastes changed through their lifetime, the Abkhazis made modifications. Many plants have been lost over the years, as happens in all gardens, but others are being added; some have historical precedence, and others are new to the trade. With the best nurserymen of their day as their mentors, the Abkhazis chose plants to enhance the natural landscape, not detract from it. The plants that have thrived over the last fifty years are those that have proven to be best adapted to the site. This evolution to a more drought-tolerant planting is an ongoing process.

Abkhazi Garden is significant because, for over forty years, the same two people watched and managed its development, pruned and shaped its trees with a constant and shared vision that they lived to see come to maturity. In our mobile society this is a rare occurrence.

The dramatic story of the Abkhazis, with its tragedy, romance and reunion, is well documented and gives another level of interest and significance to the Garden. Peggy and Nicholas were both very private people, yet from as early as 1949, they welcomed groups of visitors to enjoy their beautiful property. The Abkhazis were cultured people who came to Victoria because Peggy was told that in Victoria one could be left to be as eccentric as one wanted to be. They pursued their eccentric lives here and left a unique and priceless garden legacy that has now been preserved for our eternal enjoyment and education.

- *Judith Brand (May 2008)*