

Statement of Significance

1964 Fairfield Road – Abkhazi Gardens

Original version from 2005 – written by Steve Barber

Amended – October 2023 by Kristal Stevenot, CoV Senior Heritage Planner

Description of Historic Place

The historic place comprises a designed domestic garden, garden buildings, and an early modern bungalow set around and upon a rocky knoll, in Victoria’s Gonzales neighbourhood.

Heritage Value

The historic place, begun in 1946 and still evolving, is valued as one of the very earliest expressions of Modernism in both garden design and domestic architecture, in post-war Victoria and for what its design tells us about its creators’ lives. The garden is valued for its long tradition of plant conservation.

Peggy (nee Pemberton-Carter) and Nicholas Abkhazi’s approach to the planning and design of their home and garden represents an isolated example of an international shift in design thinking, that was, in part, a reaction to war, but which also sought to celebrate new technology, often itself a by-product of war. The garden contains references to, and is seen by many as a metaphor, the lives of its creators. The layering, texture and colouring – a reference to Chinese art and landscape – reflects the influence of Peggy’s time living in China; the tranquility and privacy – a response to lives shattered by wartime internment; for Peggy in a Japanese camp, and for Nicholas, an exiled Georgian Prince, in a German prisoner of war camp; and the energy that went into the creation of the garden on a difficult site – an expression of their love that began in Paris in 1920 and triumphed over the adversity of war to be rekindled when they met again after the war and moved to Canada.

The summerhouse (1946), and the house (1947), are important surviving examples of the domestic work of accomplished Victoria-based Modernist architect John Wade and are valued for the way the planning and detailing responds, not to the tyranny of precedent, but rather to the spirit of place, the integration of house and garden, the function of space, and the celebration of post-war construction technology.

Continuing a course followed by the Abkhazis until Nicholas’ death and in 1987 and Peggy’s in 1994, the garden continues to evolve to survive, reflecting new realities such as the drier climate and public accessibility. It is valued as a setting for rare plant conservation, for important rescued specimens from Vancouver Island collections, and

of hybrids developed by key Island plantsmen including Ed Lohbrunner, Herman Vaartnou, and Joe Harvey.

Character-Defining Elements

- the single-storey house with deep overhanging enclosed eaves
- the ratio of window openings to walls, and the location and size of the window openings in relation to the landscape
- the distinctive wide beveled siding
- the stone chimney stack
- the stone revetments, stone steps, stone walls on the house and garden shed, and stone foundation retaining walls
- the view from the kitchen to the garden looking north-west
- the position of the bay window opening in the sitting room that marks the location of the original arrangement of French doors flanking a window
- the remains of the roman brick fireplace
- the fitted cupboards at the rear entrance, which was once the mud room
- the position of the kitchen sink
- the acoustic tiles on a vaulted ceiling
- birch-faced plywood wall coverings
- oak parquet floors and under floor heating infrastructure
- lighting integrated into the window valences
- the original interior wood doors (swing and sliding)
- the underlying natural landscape elements including the rocky outcrops and the Garry oaks
- the lawns, the incised concrete walkways and their signs of a once painted finish, stone and gravel paths and stone terrace, and outbuildings
- the ever-evolving three ponds and their surrounding benches, rocks and plantings
- the evolving borders resulting from the addition and translocation of rare and threatened species and specimens from other gardens in Victoria, and experimentation with hardier and drought tolerant plants, see Head Gardener's landscape plan and plant inventory
- garden buildings including the summerhouse and the tool shed
- the Rhododendron woodland garden
- the Georgian horn beam hedge along the perimeter of the garden
- Lot 2 – adjacent property where the green house, compost area, propagation area and gardener's shed are located.