Vancouver architect Ronald Thom designed the house for interior designer Rudy Kovach, and Bill Reid had his studio in the lower level in the 1970s. The three friends are said to have collaborated on the design; known as The Art House, it was completed around 1963. Ronald’s liberal use of glass to connect inside and outside spaces along with the rooflines of the house and carport reveal his influence on modern Western architecture.

When Michael bought the house, the gardens were in poor condition. Ronald had often used Japanese landscaping to enhance his architecture, but over the years, the property had deteriorated; it was Michael’s vision to bring both house and garden into alignment with Ronald’s original conception. He had already removed part of the gardens due to construction when an interview with Yoshihiro Kawasaki, who operates Zen Gardens with his wife, Dorothy Kennedy, convinced Michael that Yoshi was the right person for the job.

The first thing to greet visitors is the sound of moving water. Yoshi says the main pond, or stream, was the most challenging aspect of the design and one of the things he likes best about the garden. “It’s modernistic,” he says. “Michael and I wanted it to connect to the lines of the house as well as the traditions of the Japanese garden.”

A little over a metre (4 ft.) wide and nine metres (30 ft.) long, mimicking the spare rectilinear lines of the house and its windows, the pond is constructed of concrete and painted black. Gently descending levels represent waterfalls in a river. The focal points are a stone lantern and three large rocks set in the stream. This rock trio is echoed throughout the garden; minimal plantings of sweet flag (Acorus gramineus ‘Ogon’), lilies and iris accent the stream without overwhelming it.

Michael Smith bought the property in 1990. The house itself is of historical interest (Michael won a District of North Vancouver heritage award in 2006 for its restoration).
Past the pond lies the main garden. Constructed as a “stroll” garden, the intent is to wander slowly along the path and contemplate each aspect of the garden in a leisurely way. Square concrete stepping stones set into the gravel paths, chosen instead of the more traditional natural rock, carry through the lines of the house and stream. Though the 13- by 18-m (43- by 60-ft.) garden is relatively small, it feels much larger because of the “borrowed view,” an important element in Japanese garden design. In the distance, across a deep ravine, is a thickly treed, steeply descending hillside. Low plantings alongside the path, including heather, Rhododendron “Purple Gem”, dwarf kalmia, dwarf iris, euonymus and several ornamental grasses, frame the scene and make it part of the garden.

When Yoshi first visited the site his attention was immediately drawn to a large natural rock outcropping flanked by two towering cedars. This, he felt, was the heart of the garden. "You feel immediately if a place is suitable for a..."
Japanese garden,” he says. “This already had many elements – rock, moss, evergreens. That part was not a challenge.” Yoshi also liked the rooflines of the carport, which reminded him of the teahouses in Kyoto, where he lived and studied his art.

A grouping of three rocks is a focal point in traditional Japanese gardens, says Yoshi: “a large upright rock, a horizontal rock and a smaller vertical rock, representing heaven, earth and humankind.” Rather than making the arrangement itself the main focal point, he installed the rocks in the gravel of the path in front of the natural outcropping to draw attention to the feature nature placed there. Throughout the garden, rough-hewn rocks such as these have been carefully handpicked for their shape from a local landscape supplier; they were able to find just-right rounded ones on the property.

The garden is spectacular in spring, when azaleas, rhodos and camellias put on their show. But it is also lovely through summer and into fall, when the textures and rhythm of the plantings are showcased. In one bed, limey-green, low-growing Pachysandra procumbens surrounds the base of a cedar. The pale greyish-green leaves of a hardly fuchsia form a contrast, its delicate, red, late-summer blooms adding a subtle accent. Other contrasts of height and colour are the dark leaves of a single ‘Brunette’ cimicifuga with its tall flower spike and the white flowerheads of gooseneck loosestrife (Lysimachia clethroides). A native huckleberry bush with a few lingering red fruits grows out of a stump, another link to the natural setting.

All the garden beds are bordered with Ophiopogon japonicus ‘Nanus’. In Japan, this is the standard edging, say Yoshi and Dorothy. It’s not as easy to find here and it’s expensive, but it’s a hardy and no-fuss plant. At this stage of the relatively young garden, it mostly forms a uniform border, but as it grows into the other groundcovers, it is beginning to create an undulating, more naturalistic edging.

Exiting the main garden, one admires a small azalea and osmanthus, offset from one another, planted in the gravel pathway. They function as a means to slow the passage of those strolling through.

The narrow garden at the other side of the house has its own charm and is another favourite of both Yoshi and Michael. It is made to look larger with the clever use of perspective. Viewed from the kitchen window, the shape of the bed changes from narrow to wider, giving it visual depth. The very small scale of the bamboo fence separating the bed from the paving also gives the illusion of size.

At the back of the house is what informs both house and garden: a breathtaking view of the hillside and the Seymour River rushing past some 30 metres (100 ft.) below. From this
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