

# House Beautiful: Mid-century Rockland gem

Celebrated West Coast architect John Di Castri designed this house in 1961 and it's a gem — but Bradley Chatwin is the one who created the garden, a Victoria treasure, too.

"It's rather a cool story how I came to own this house," Chatwin said of the mid-century-modern home, originally built for June and Hugh Ferguson, who had a long career in the provincial Ministry of Finance.

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Chatwin was the couple's first gardener.

"Hugh and I worked on it together for about seven years, after he retired, was getting older and needed some help," Chatwin said. "We created a Japanese style in the back and I enhanced the rest of the property as much as I could."

Over the years, Chatwin became attached to both the garden and the owners — "They were a super sweet couple and we kind of adopted each other."

Eventually, he said he'd like to buy the property if they ever decided to sell.

"I'd always had a feeling about the place and one day, they sold it to me. It was important to them that the garden continue to be cared for."

Under Chatwin's care, the site has evolved over the years, inside and out.

"I've cared for the garden now for close to 25 years and I retained the bones, but changed almost every aspect." While it used to be a shade garden, neighbours cut down trees on the southwest side about 12 years ago, opening it up to the heat of the sun.

Chatwin has built fences and massive planters because the site is mostly bare rock. He also added a sculpture garden, stripped out two levels of lawn and designed a dry riverbed. The Rockland landscape was recently featured on the Victoria Conservatory of Music's garden tour.

The 2,200-square foot home, which has three bedrooms and two bathrooms and sits on almost half an acre, has also undergone changes, but always in keeping with its heritage, artistic lines and the sensitive vision of Chatwin and partner Dr. Philip Steenkamp, the new president and vice-chancellor of Royal Roads University.

Steenkamp, who was born in Botswana and was previously vice-president at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University, loves the residence and its architecture.

"We have sought to keep it in as original a state as possible," he said, adding renovations were done gradually over the past 15 years with the help of Maximilian Huxley Construction.

Combining a small den, kitchen and long hallway created a new L-shaped kitchen, a stylish open area that's seamlessly in sync with the rest of the home.

The room's new lines echo the curved two-storey walls on either side of the entry staircase, where Huxley painstakingly bent the wood trim to replace toe rails that had previously been wrapped in shag carpet.

Windows in the kitchen area had been partially boarded up by the original owners, who also dropped the ceiling. Chatwin and Steenkamp removed those boards and raised the ceiling back to full height.

Swiftsure Woodworkers did all the cabinetry, including a long, low cabinet that seems to hover weightlessly under the dining-room window. Above are a collection of artworks from Botswana, Zimbabwe and other parts of southern Africa.

A wall dividing living and dining rooms was removed and a new beam custom-created to match the original ones, which were salvaged in about 1960 when the Fergusons learned they were surplus to a Safeway recently built in Tsawwassen

Original shag carpeting was replaced 10 years ago with a rich looking, ultra-soft New Zealand wool in a subtle salt and pepper shade. New copper-penny-coloured walls complement the original teak-panelled ones that are extensively found in the home.

The owners credit Larry Myers of Alfresco Living Design for their new master ensuite and front garden entry.

The ensuite's heated Italian floor tiles have a linen finish that looks like men's suiting, and the tub's curved lines are a flowing, sophisticated contrast to the geometric lines of the vanity.

The room is a fusion of West Coast and Asian styles, and features charred shou sugi ban wood, a carbonized material employed in Japan for centuries.

Here it was used for its colour, texture and contemporary Asian ambience. Both cabinet and countertop appear to float, thanks to hidden lighting, which further emphasizes the horizontal lines of the home's architecture.

The new hardscapes at the front of the home also reinforce the architecture, said designer Myers.

"Our whole approach was to honour the intent and original artistic vision of the home and property, but to refresh the iteration," he said, adding the original architecture was ultra-modern in its time, but needed "something progressive and forward-looking now."

He suggested a new reflective pool at the front door to complement the water feature in the back and giant under-lit paving stones (21 polished squares) to entice visitors to climb through the garden, not walk up the drive.

“We took a clean, simple approach and didn’t use a lot of different materials or colour in the plants. We chose mostly boxwood for an interplay of light and texture, and to accentuate the rolling terrain and soft contours.”

Instead of a continuous hedging line on the far left side, he created a series of vertical panels that cleverly allow light and views to filter through.

“The driveway has separations, too, with gravel texture between the sections. It’s also functional as it allows drainage,” said the designer.

The owners are thrilled with the new front garden design: “The whole idea was to emphasize the horizontal lines of the house, to reinforce the architecture, and Larry really nailed it,” said Chatwin. The new entrance pond, plantings, pavers, driveway and lighting, done about four years ago, cost roughly \$60,000.

Chatwin noted that the garden looks very easy-care, but actually requires a tremendous amount of pruning and editing to keep its looking so deceptively simple.

“But I absolutely love it. It’s not a chore,” said Chatwin, who grew up at Sproat Lake near Port Alberni.

“I have always been drawn to nature, which is why I used to work in the city parks, previously co-owned Dig This and was assistant manager of Gardenworks in Oak Bay ... and why I used to have an amazing client list,” he said with a chuckle.

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