



*By Jack Bookwalter*

Homebuilder Robert Rummer built nearly 750 Modern style houses in the Portland area between 1959 and 1975. These distinctive homes are often referred to today simply as *Rummers*. Many were built in subdivisions wholly developed by Rummer

# Rummers In Oregon: A Builder's Legacy of Mid-Century Modern Homes

himself (Vista Brook in southwest Portland; Menlo West and Taliesen in Beaverton). Others were built in subdivisions shared with other builders (Oak Hills in Washington County, Valle Vista in Gresham). Still others were built in scattered sites in the Portland area, Willamette Valley, and on the coast. Rummer houses are currently undergoing a resurgence of popularity as Mid-Century Modern architecture is becoming more and more appreciated for its elegant proportions, use of natural materials, and strong connection to the outdoors. The oldest of Mid-Century Modern houses (including Rummers) are now over 50 years old, making them eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places (see sidebar on "Oak Hills"). Any real estate listing with the word "Rummer" in the title is sure to attract attention and interest.

Just what makes a Rummer house so special? First of all, never call a Rummer a ranch! Ranch houses of the era were always more numerous than their Mid-Century Modern cousins, but the ranch's conventional (some would say boring) design did not reflect the futuristic and experimental qualities of Modern. A Modern house was often tagged with the phrase *House of Tomorrow*. Indeed many Mid-Century Modern houses seem very contemporary even today, a half-century later.

Modern's spare lines with exposed beams, vaulted ceilings, and abundant glass are deceptively simple. They actually cost more to build than conventional ranch houses. Modern's exposed visible construction required first-grade lumber and expert workmanship throughout. No sloppy carpentry could be tolerated. Ranch houses, by contrast, could (and often did) hide a multitude of sins behind their dry-wall ceilings. Modern houses have proved to be the better investment for their owners. Mid-Century Modern houses today sell for higher prices than equally-sized ranches (sometimes considerably more).



Covered entryway in this Oak Hills Rummer reveals the post-and-beam construction used throughout the house.



Post-and-beam construction allows walls to be built of floor-to-ceiling glass. Rummer living rooms always faced the rear garden.

Robert Rummer's house designs were heavily influenced by interpretations of Modern occurring in California at the time. Rummer houses are often favorably compared to the Eichler houses of the Bay Area, or to the Alexander houses of Palm Springs. Modern houses have a certain organic quality in their design that makes them easily adaptable to different types of sites. Rummer houses appear equally at home among the tall trees of Oregon as the Alexander houses do in the sand and rock of the California desert. Also, some features of Modern houses provided unexpected benefits when shifting locales. The California Modern feature of the atrium – designed to take advantage of

that state's indoor-outdoor climate — took on an additional benefit when transported to Oregon: It allowed natural light to penetrate to the center of the house, a feature much appreciated during our long, dark winters.

This versatility of Modern design in relating to its site also comes through in the house's interior. Some homeowners have chosen to furnish their Rummers in a minimalist modern style, preferring to let the house's spare, Zen-like design speak for itself. Others have found that the large expanse of wall space with diffuse natural light is the perfect backdrop for art, antiques, and collectables. In the recent Oak Hills Rummer tour (see sidebar) a variety of interior furnishings were seen: minimalist, retro, traditional, Asian, antique, eclectic, and more. Though many of these homes were similar in design and floor plan, each presented a different feel based on the tastes of the owner. Each home looked as if it had been designed just for that particular owner and no one else.

Another feature common to most Rummer homes is their reference to Japanese landscape design. This is not surprising given that the whole Modern movement after World War II was heavily influenced by Japanese ideas of proportion and beauty. Some Rummer owners have completely eschewed suburban-style lawns in favor of traditional Japanese gardens. Others employ a mixture of American and Japanese styles. It is the rare Rummer that has not at least a passing nod to Japanese landscape design. Look especially for Japanese maples and mugo pines in front and side yards. Of all the Rummer subdivisions, Vista Brook in southwest Portland seems to contain the most consistently Japanese-influenced yards and gardens. This is also Rummer's largest subdivision (built 1966) and makes a great place to begin an exploration of the Rummer world of Modern Homes. For the best experience, get out of your car and enjoy Vista Brook's interesting architecture and delightful gardens on foot. You will see many details of design, construction, and landscape that you might otherwise miss in a drive-by. ■

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## Rummer-Only Subdivisions in the Portland Area

**Vista Brook/Bohmann Tract** (Portland): SW Garden Home Rd. at SW 84th/SW 87th (north of Garden Home)

**Vista Brook II** (Washington County): SW Denney at SW 105th (south of Denney)

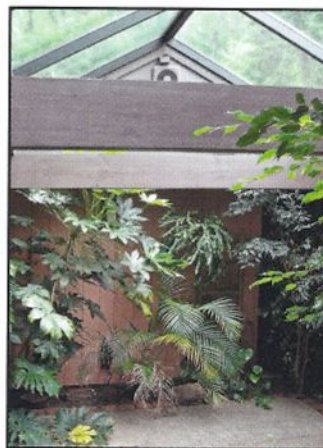
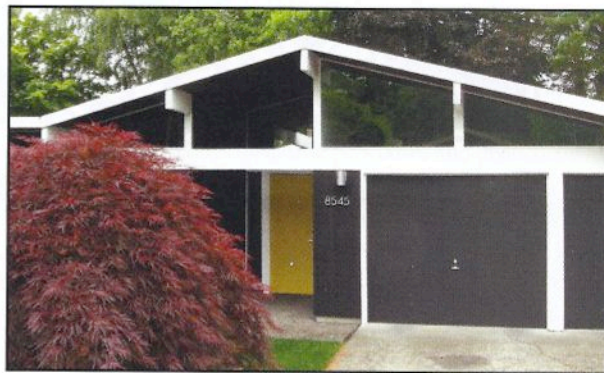
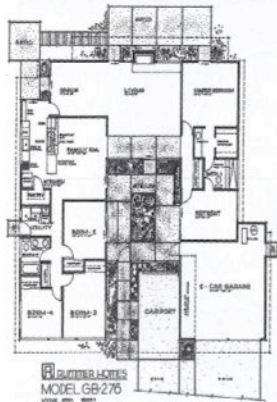
**Hyland Hills** (Beaverton): SW 130th at SW Hart (area to north and west)

**Menlo West (aka Bonnie Brae)** (Beaverton): SW Menlo Dr. at SW Bonnie Brae St. (west of Menlo)

## Mixed Builders Subdivisions in the Portland Area

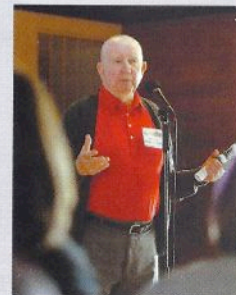
**Oak Hills** (Washington County): NW Cornell Road at NW 153rd

**Valle Vista** (Gresham): SW Towle Road at SW 10th



## Oak Hills Rummer Tour

On May 21, 2011 the Historic Preservation League of Oregon (HPO) sponsored a tour of eight Rummer Homes in the Oak Hills neighborhood near Beaverton. The Saturday event, with 450 people in attendance, also included an illustrated lecture



Mr. Rummer

Photo by Drew Nasto

on the Mid-Century Modern home design by *Northwest Renovation* writer Jack Bookwalter followed by a question-and-answer session by Mr. Rummer himself! The tour was a fundraiser benefiting the preservation programs of the HPO and the Oak Hills Neighborhood Association's efforts to seek listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Oak Hills is a planned development of 650 homes (including 28 Rummers) encompassing 265 acres. It is perhaps the best example of a mid-century planned community in the Northwest.