

# City of Gresham

## Historic and Cultural Landmark Inventory Form

### LOCATION AND PROPERTY NAME

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Historic Name: **Charles and Fae Olson House**

Address: **765 NW Walters Road**

**Gresham, Oregon**

**Multnomah County**

Township: **1s** Range: **3E** Section: **10**

¼: **SW ¼ of the SW ¼** Zip Code: **97080**

Tax Lot: **4400** Addition: Tax Map: **026**

Assessor: **R993102030**



North façade of Olson House from Walters Road.

### PROPERTY CHARACTERISTICS

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Resource Type: **Residence** Height (stories): **3**

Eligibility: **Eligible/ Significant**

Primary construction date: **c. 1946**

Secondary construction date:

Primary use: **Residence**

Secondary use:

Primary style: **Contemporary Modern**

Secondary style: **Flat-roofed**

Primary siding: **Seriated Shake**

Secondary siding: **Board and Batten**

Plan type: **Rectangular**

Architect: **Charles Olson**

Total # eligible resources: **1**

NR status: **Listed**

City Landmark Status: **Listed**

Use comments: **Good condition**

Style comments:

Siding comments:

Builder: **Charles Olson**

Notes: **Narratives quoted from National Register Nomination Form.**

### STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

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This is one couple's dream home. Charles and Fae Olsen designed this home through correspondence while Charles was over seas during World War II. When he returned, the couple built their modern dream home using locally milled lumber and careful resourcefulness. Along the way, they kept meticulous records and receipts, which allows us a snapshot into their dream and how they created it.

### ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

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Because the home is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the narratives are quoted below with minor editing.

**From the National Register Nomination:**

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The Charles and Fae Olson house was designed by resident Charles Olson while he served overseas during World War II, and built by him in the years after the war. The front of the house, which overlooks the city of Gresham, features a strong horizontal roofline twenty feet above the ground and appears to be two-story but is single story over a daylight basement. A large sunken living room with a massive fireplace and exposed beamed ceiling dominate the middle of the form. This center portion has a butterfly roof, and aggressive indirect lighting above a sixteen-foot wide window.

### Exterior

The north-front facade is sixty feet across not including porches. The eave extends five feet out in the front and at the corners is reduced to just the structure. Under these open roofs are corner windows accessible on the outside by porches. The porch on the west has no exterior access, and the front porch on the east facade is accessed by the main door. The use of glass is lavish for the period, and the large expanses of striated shakes are broken up by a section of very wide vertical boards without battens. The lower portion appears to be brick and glass, but the brick at the corners are a veneer and the brick in the middle is infill. Brick curvilinear planters flank the front walk and stairs to the front door.

The east-side exterior is short and has less glass in response to the strong east wind in the winter. The kitchen window with glass block below is typical for the date. The porch is protected by an overhang similar to the front, which is distinctive compared to the surrounding short eaves. Two sets of two traditional sash windows, with horizontal proportions are separated by a large section of glass block all set in a wall of board-and-batten. A two-story section with no windows, and a garage door below, finishes the design.

The west elevation, which has more glass and height, was built beside a small ravine. The corner window continues down the wall, and the end window is unusual for lower ventilating panels. The hillside is retained by a broken brick curvilinear wall and planter.

The remaining exterior wraps around a courtyard or patio area, with the hillside completing the enclosure. There is more glass facing this area, which is protected from the east wind. A circular planter in the middle of the patio contains a native dogwood tree. From the perspective of the patio, the house forms to the east and north have aggressive overhangs. The back wing, to the east, has two windows whose panes have the proportions of a horizontal brick, in a wall of board-and-batten siding. An original lowered eating area to the north of the patio is paved in brick, enclosed in glass, and features a barbecue on the back side of the fireplace mass. Looking west from the patio is another corner window. The upper room to the south has a wide overhang and porch, which looms over the patio and the horizontal window below.

### **HISTORIC DESCRIPTION**

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The Charles and Fae Olson Residence was proposed for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its contribution to the understanding of the post-World War II housing boom. The residence encapsulates the trend of the World War II Veteran returning from service to build his own house, which he designed during the war. The Olsons' preserved wartime correspondence reveals how the husband-and-wife team exchanged ideas and drawings of their "dream house." Following the many frustrating years of waiting, they purchased property and built, while they lived in, the new house. This large house is a collage of

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contemporary architectural thought gleaned by the designers from exhibitions, magazines, and books. The construction was accomplished largely by Charles, with help from his children, with materials logged from the site, salvaged from the Vanport flood, and purchased locally from Montgomery Ward. It was designed and built by a schoolteacher, and it is a study in economy, overcoming the problems of cost in post war Contemporary Modern housing.

Charles H. Olson was born in 1908 in Linwood, a small town on the Utah/Wyoming border, where his father clerked at a store. The family homesteaded a small protected plot near Manilla Utah where they attempted to make a living farming. Charles grew up there in a hand-hewn log house with a clay roof built by his father. This house fit the "ranch-house" criteria and it was always described as such. The family moved to Evanston, Wyoming in 1926 in favor of their children's education. Charles' father was involved there in a failed chicken business.

Charles went to high school in Evanston but he also started a machinist apprenticeship. He boarded and took night classes while working for the Union Pacific railroad in Cheyenne, Wyoming and graduated from Cheyenne High School in 1932. He enlisted in the Wyoming National Guard in 1931 to play trumpet in the army band. He attended classes at the University of Utah in the fall of 1932, graduated from the ROTC in 1936, and received his Bachelor's degree in Music there in 1939. Charles played trumpet in a jazz band that toured the Midwest in 1933. His interest in jazz and the railroad pass he held from working as a machinist got him to Chicago where he attended the Worlds Fair. Charles Olson taught math for Gresham Union High School starting in 1946. This subject took less outside time than a band instructor, leaving more time to work on the house. He was head of the math department at Centennial High School after 1959. After the house construction was under control he worked in the summers for Tektronix as a machinist and he pioneered the job of machinist in the Physics department at Reed College. In his later years he was best known as a ski instructor.

Fae Cottam was born in Provo Utah in 1916. Her father taught botany at Brigham Young University until the early 1930's when he was asked to leave because he taught evolution. The family moved to Salt Lake City where Fae attended East High School. They lived in a remarkably small 1929 house where the five children focused on grades and education. Fae majored in art while attending the University of Utah where her father was teaching. She later switched majors and graduated in psychology. Charles took every available job while he worked his way through college and was working as a model for a drawing class when he met Fae.

Charles and Fae married in 1938 and had two children born during the war in 1941 and 1943. Charles was an officer, eventually holding the rank of captain, and was transferred from fort to fort during the war with Fae attempting to follow him with the children. Their need for housing was a constant subject when they wrote letters while apart all through the war. They were in a schematic phase of the house design in late November and early December 1944 when the relevant letters were written. On November 25, 1944 Charles wrote in a letter, "I have been trying to work out our dreamhouse again today." Fae was living with her parents, and Charles was on a ship anchored "somewhere in the Pacific." Fae guessed which day he wrote each letter and wrote that date on the envelope. It is clear that they had been in this process for some time. Charles and Fae never had a government-backed loan, but they were totally involved with the excitement of planning a "dream house."

The Olson Residence was found eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A as an imposing example of a contemporary/modern-style dream house

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designed by the veteran and his wife during World War II, and hand-built for their own family following the War. The house is unusual in having supporting documentation in the form of letters that establish the designer's thoughts that led to the creation. These letters definitely link the design to specific dates during the war and to the architectural ideas of the time. The design is directly influenced, just before it is commenced, by the important book *Tomorrow's House*, and the building documents the difficulties of building in 1946. Although the style and size were a common dream, they are unusual because neither fits the economics of the post war housing and banking industries. The structure only exists because Charles and his family built it themselves; the processes used to bring the dream into reality were often singular and always resourceful. The unique design is good architecture: it inspires, conforms to its site, and accommodated its original occupants for sixty years. The structure is stable, and remains intact, in the setting in which it sprung.

### RESEARCH INFORMATION

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|---|---|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Title Records | <input type="checkbox"/> Census Records       | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Property Tax Records | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Local Histories |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Sanborn Maps  | <input type="checkbox"/> Biographical Sources | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SHPO Files           | <input type="checkbox"/> Interviews                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Obituaries               | <input type="checkbox"/> Newspapers           | <input type="checkbox"/> State Archives                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Historic Photographs       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> City Directories         | <input type="checkbox"/> Building Permits     | <input type="checkbox"/> State Library                   |   |

Library: **Multnomah County Public Library, Gresham Branch**

### Bibliography:

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Form prepared by: **David-Paul B. Hedberg, 2016**



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## Historic and Cultural Landmark Inventory Form



East and south façade from upper driveway off Walters Road.



North façade of Olson House from Walters Road.



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North façade from lower driveway off Walters Road.