

'MYSTERIES' ON THE MARKET

Santa Cruz: Iconic Fair Avenue property inspiration for local legends



Historic Buildings

The Court of Mysteries on Fair Avenue was built by Kenneth Kitchen in 1946.

SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

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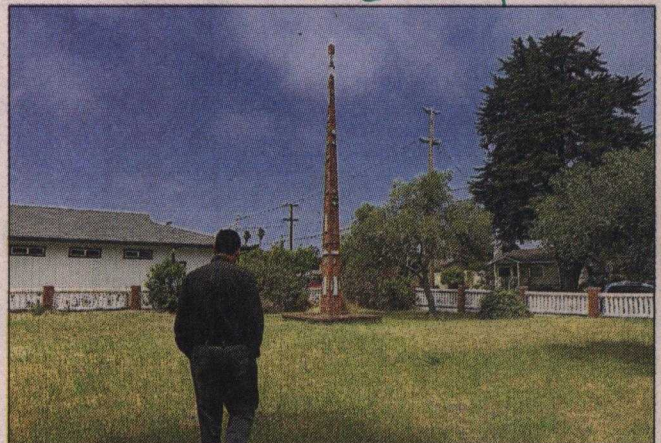
SANTA CRUZ » All the mysteries can be yours for \$2.2 million.

Over on Santa Cruz's Westside is a property that is odd both in design and backstory, either a symbol of unrequited love or a temple or even a WWII antisubmarine station. It has Middle Eastern obelisks and is meticulously decorated with shards of abalone. It has been empty more than it has been occupied, and over the years has conjured tales both whimsical and nefarious — and for the most part, untrue.

The Oklahoma family who owns the tattered landmark, at 519 Fair Ave., is trying (again)

to sell it, dropping the price some but still seeking a pretty penny for more than two-thirds of an acre in one of the most-highly sought after areas of the county. Their hope is that someone would keep and even finish the strange abode.

"That'd be the ideal thing to do, because where else are you going to find a thing like that?" said Andrew Karim, son of Elias Karim, a Greek Orthodox minister who bought the place as a family retreat and religious destination in 1962. "Surely there is somebody out there, I would think, that is going to be interested in this kind of architecture and this kind of structure and would want to fix it up."



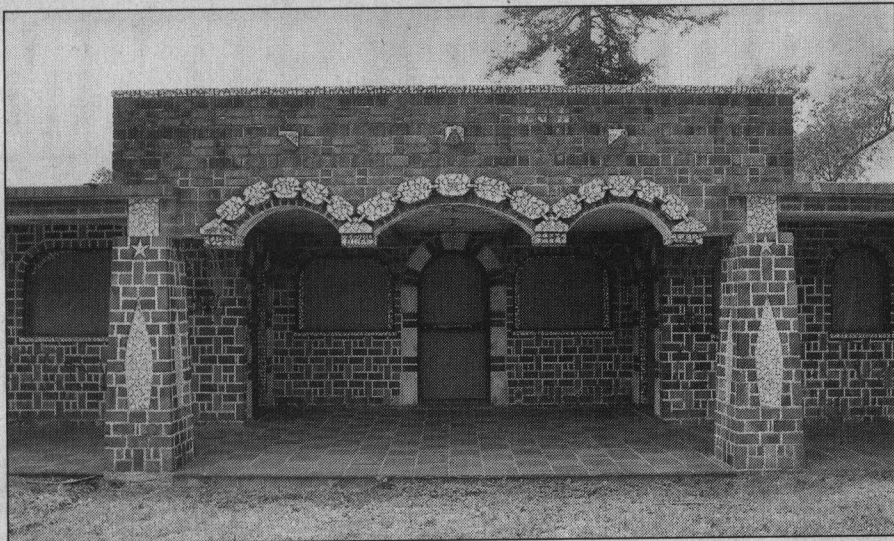
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Stories abound regarding the goings on at the Court of Mysteries, including one that insists that the antennas encased in the brick minarets on Fair Avenue were used to interfere with submarine activity in the Monterey Bay.

Home

FROM PAGE 1

It is known as many things, including a yogi temple, the abalone palace, the red castle and the Watts Towers of Santa Cruz, after the renowned installation in that city. But the name that seems to have stuck is "The Court of Mysteries," and there are so many tall tales told about the place that the fictions have collaborated to create real meaning — many locals would hate to see it go.



KEVIN JOHNSON — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Kitchen Brothers

The house was built by Kenneth Claire Kitchen, a Pennsylvania mason who never attended high school but who, along with brother Raymond, gave Santa Cruz a handful of iconic structures. From there, the yarns spin in different directions.

Historical reviews saying the house was built in 1946, though it's unclear where that number came from and likely that Kitchen worked at it for a unknown duration of time. He seems to have been a longtime Westside fixture, and then to have vanished.

Questions like why construction began and why it ended before completion aren't asked of lesser buildings. But 519 Fair Ave. has inspired legends because no one knows what it is — it was weird long before the 1970s rolled around.

"It's been kind of built up into this crazy mysticism," said architect Mark Primack, who drew up reuse plans for the property in the hopes of saving it.

Time hasn't been kind to its elegant gateway (sometimes called "The Gate of Prophecies") or its towering obelisks, nor have twin threats from vandals and city building officials. It was nearly torn down in the late-1990s as a nuisance, only to be rescued by neighbors and Primack, who would later become a City Councilmember.

Primack's plans include two new small homes and the reuse of the main structure, and come with the selling price, Karim said. While the house has long been on the block, Karim said the family wants more than ever to see a resolution.

"Things change, family dynamics change and everything else. It's just kind of a regrettable thing. We're not thrilled about it. It's just the way it is. It's time to let it go," he said.

But for years, the property has been stuck between its designation as a city land-

The owners of the 'Red Castle' home at 518 Fair Ave., in Santa Cruz are trying to sell the historic property.

mark, the selling price and the expensive work needed to make it habitable again.

"It's a very hard one to deal with," said Don Lauritson, a former city planner who suggested a church or studio might be a good fit.

Mary Alsip, a city planner, said any buyer would have to run their plans through a historic review. She said the city would be flexible because it does not want to see the property turn to rubble.

"If they come in with something that keeps the flavor but adds some value to it, we would definitely go for that," Alsip said. "We would like to see it restored."

Tall Tales

Legends surrounding the property rose up almost as fast as the weeds, though they've been harder to chop down. Past Sentinel articles have said it was built in the 1930s, though most put the start date at 1946. There are stories Kitchen worked only by night, and that he hauled immaculately cut bricks to the site in the trunk of a new Cadillac.

In his book "The Sidewalk Companion to Santa Cruz Architecture," John Leighton Chase interviewed an undisclosed friend of the brothers, who said the obelisks were designed as antennas to halt submarine activity in the Monterey Bay.

That supposedly landed Kitchen in trouble with the Navy and he was shipped off to Pensacola, Florida, possibly to jail. The tale fits with a local self-image of brilliant renegades, but also assumes a man with an eighth-grade education predated the National Security Agency by several years.

The property does have astrological symbolism, but some go further to claim it can portend Armageddon. Its reinforced concrete frame

already has withstood one cataclysm — the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

While Karim's minister father did use it for Greek Orthodox services, its origins are probably more secular than spiritual. Primack views it primarily as creative expression.

"In the spirit of the times, people were interested in what they were capable of. They had the confidence and the creativity to explore their medium," Primack said.

According to one story, Kitchen became enamored with a relative of the family that owned a pharmacy on the location of what is now Sylvan Music, on Mission Street. He began building the house to convince her to marry him, envisioning a grander palace than what stands today.

There is evidence that fits the story. Construction details indicate a second story, at least, was planned. Census records from 1940 show a 52-year-old K.C. Kitchen mere blocks away at 855 Fair Ave., listing his occupation as stone mason and his marital status as single.

But while Kitchen was nurturing his creative spark — the brickwork is spectacular by any measure, and the estate is filigreed with iridescent mother-of-pearl — his bride-to-be got tired of waiting. It had been on the market for several years by the time the Karim family snapped it up.

It may be another tale, and it seems just as likely that Kitchen assembled land near his prior home to build his dream house, but for some reason was unable to finish.

But there is one more detail. Early in their courtship, Kitchen supposedly presented his love with an expression of his devotion: a hand-carved, redwood violin. The story also seems apocryphal — Kitchen was

no wood smith, nor does music show up in any part of the many legends about him.

Yet the redwood violin exists.

Hard Truths

One day, a grand-niece of the object of Kitchen's affection brought the violin to Paul Hostetter's shop on Smith Grade. A luthier, Hostetter was asked by a local musician named Roseann Carcello — the daughter of the family that owned the Mission Street pharmacy — to restrung the instrument.

"This guy reinvented how to make a violin, because he did things no violin maker would do," Hostetter said, saying the body was made with redwood burl from Santa Cruz' North Coast.

Hostetter has not only seen it, he believes it is located somewhere in Humboldt County, where Carcello moved before she died, possibly in a museum.

Andy Carcello, Roseann's brother, is the last remaining member of the immediate family. The Sentinel tracked him down through Santa Cruz' Homeless Services Center, and he said the violin was kept in an attic until his sister unearthed it.

"I remember the violin from years and years ago as a kid, but there wasn't a great deal of value attached to it," Carcello said. "But my sister loved it and kept it."

As for Carcello's great-aunt, the object of Kitchen's affection and the possible inspiration for The Court of Mysteries, Carcello said her name was Lilly Scaroni, a music lover who travelled the world twice.

Family lore says Kitchen and Scaroni were close, Carcello said, before suggesting a reason why they never got married.

"She was accused of being a lesbian," Carcello said. "And probably was."