

Tree Circus

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THE GUIDE

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LAND OF THE TREE

Will a famous but forgotten
local roadside attraction
again become an iconic part
of the Santa Cruz landscape?

Trees of History

If architect Mark Primack has his way, Santa Cruz might one day have

By WALLACE BAINE

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One is a largely forgotten Swedish-born rancher, surveyor and self-made man. The other is an East Coast-born, academy-trained baby-boomer architect.

But Axel Erlandson and Mark Primack are, by anyone's definition, kindred souls.

The two men, who never met, are bound together in Santa Cruz County history by their love of trees — in fact, a particular collection of trees.

Next year marks the 50th anniversary of Erlandson's death, and Primack, a well-known Santa Cruz architect who has also been involved in city and county politics for years, is shooting to build a kind of memorial that will ensure Erlandson's name lives on for generations to come.

Erlandson moved to Scotts Valley after World War II and established what came to be known as the "Tree Circus," a small plot of land off Scotts Valley Drive on which he showcased about 70 trees

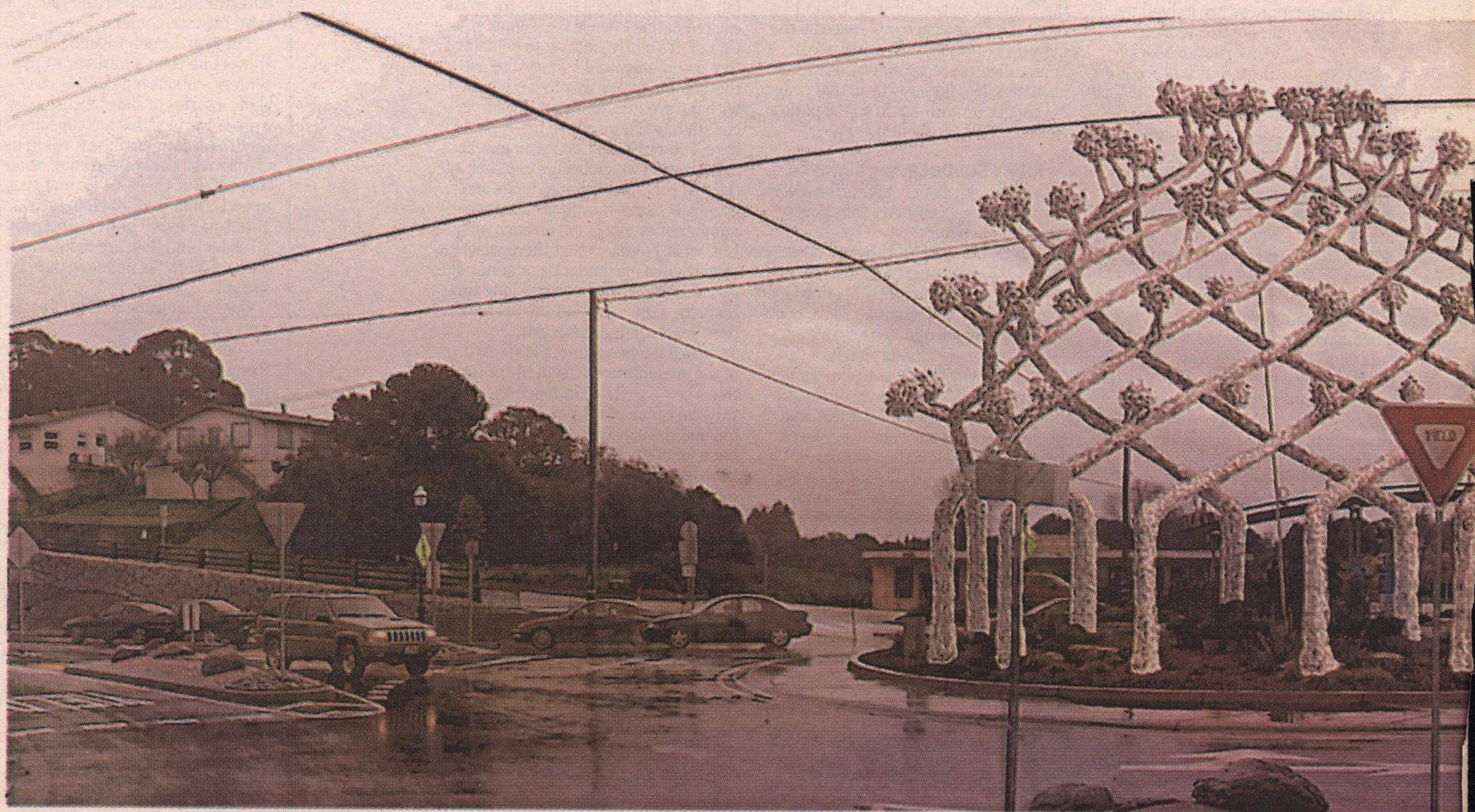
grafted and twisted and coiled. For almost 20 years, the attraction gained international popularity and featured in a popular newspaper feature.

"One was known as the Westside office, describing four separate trunks spaced apart in a topiary hedge so that, from a distance, it looked like a four-legged giant. You just had to be a void."

Primack is in the early stages of a dome-shaped structure modeled after Erlandson's Tree Circus topiary garden near Depot Park.

The project remains a long-term goal. Primack presented his plan before the city council, but is considering another art project.

But for Primack, such a project is a long-term relationship with a tree.



a living memorial to the long-defunct natural wonder known as the 'Tree Circus'

orted into a number of different shapes. Tree Circus was a famous local roadside attraction that drew national notice by regular mention in the "Ripley's Believe It or Not."

"four-legged giant," said Primack in his description of the enormous cypress that grew from the center of a square. "And Axel designed the tree so that, from the street, you didn't see the legs of the tree but saw this tree rising above what appeared

ages of developing and designing a large scale of living, grafted trees as a homage to be displayed at the center of the traffic circle between downtown and Main Beach.

ing shot; Primack has not formally presented his art commission, and, in fact, the city has not approved an installation for that space.

Installation would serve as a kind of capstone to the relationship with Erlandson and his bizarre trees.

The Tree Circus is long gone; there is an office park in Scotts Valley called Tree Circus Center where the trees once stood, and several of the surviving trees have long since been transplanted to Gilroy Gardens, an amusement park on Highway 152 between Gilroy and Watsonville. Erlandson's name, in fact, might be well on the way to sinking into obscurity, if not for Primack.

Mark Primack arrived in Santa Cruz in the mid-1970s, fresh from an architecture school in London. By that time, Erlandson had been 10 years in his grave and the Tree Circus had become a feature of a larger tourist attraction called "Lost World." Longtime residents will certainly remember the enormous fiberglass dinosaurs that dominated the Scotts Valley skyline.

Erlandson had come to the area from Turlock in California's Central Valley. He was a self-taught surveyor and polymath, a man interested in art and science — "Jefferson without the privilege" is how Primack describes him.

His experiments in tree-grafting led to all kinds of wondrous living

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GYPSY RAY/CONTRIBUTED

Mark Primack led a group of 'guerrilla gardeners' to tend the Tree Circus. From left, Cliff Friedlander, Dennis Britton, unknown, John Mahoney, Christie Kirven, Frank Foreman, Alan Counihan, Beth Regardz, Primack, Bill Schultz, Michael Zelter, Sandor Nagyszalanczy, Willie Pettus, Gail Rich and Michael Leeds. (not in the picture: Charles Prentiss and Nikki Silva.)



A rendering of what the living dome might look like in the Depot Park roundabout.

TREES

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organic structures, cypress, sycamore, poplar and other species of trees in the shape of ladders, chairs and phone booths.

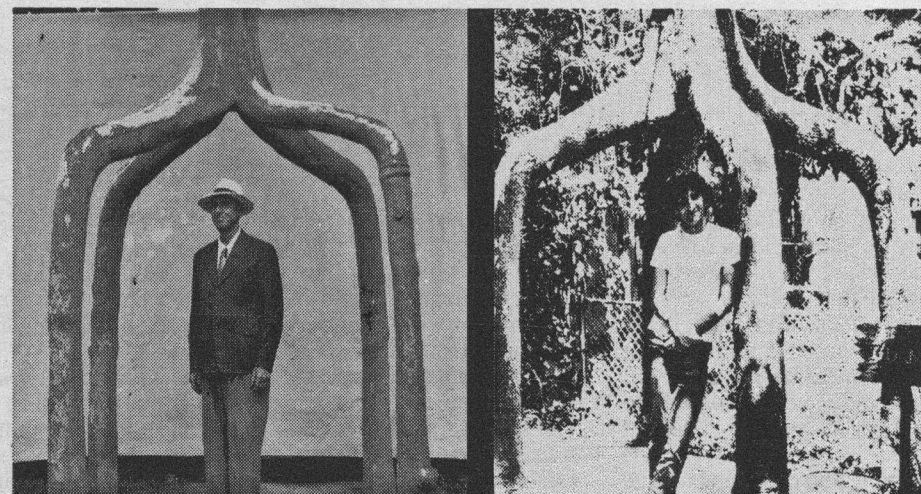
Erlandson's designs were, in fact, the embodiment of Primack's college thesis, developed while Primack was living in Limerick, Ireland, years before moving

to Santa Cruz. Primack, a self-avowed hippie and environmentalist, was interested in "botanic architecture," a kind of ideal meshing of nature and human habitat in which living trees served as the basis of practical architectural design.

He arrived in Santa Cruz in 1976, ignorant of Erlandson and the Tree Circus. When he stumbled upon the trees at the recently closed Lost World, it was a life-changing epiphany.

"It was like finding the lodestone, essentially," he said. "I mean, you're dreaming of something, and suddenly you walk through the gates of this abandoned property and there it all is. Someone's actually done what I had been dreaming about."

The property and Erlandson's trees were caught in limbo. Primack was in no financial position to buy the parcel, so, resigned to the fact that he could not save the trees from destruction, he set about to chronicle them as thoroughly as possible, with photographs and pencil drawings of each. He brought all that work together in a never-published book



CONTRIBUTED

Tree Circus creator Axel Erlandson (left) under the Four-legged Giant, 1947. At right is Mark Primack under the same tree, 1977.

about Erlandson and his trees.

By the mid-1980s, Primack had become the de facto leader of a movement to save the Tree Circus. He spearheaded an enormous publicity event to alert the media of the trees' threatened demise. He led a group of "guerilla gardeners" to tend to the trees when the property owner had decided to close off the tree garden to the public.

Primack's efforts eventually attracted the attention of Gilroy-based grocery mogul Michael Bonfante who swooped in and purchased many of the trees to move to his new family amusement park, then called Tree

Haven. About 20 of the trees are still on display in Gilroy.

Since then, Primack has built a thriving business as an architect, has served on the Santa Cruz City Council and ran for county supervisor. But Erlandson's trees have always been part of him. In February, he presented the idea for a Tree Circus-like structure at the Depot Park roundabout during the Pecha Kucha Night event at the Museum of Art & History. When later that month, two Santa Cruz police officers were shot and killed on duty, Primack decided to foreground the project and push for it, though the city was already committed to another art installation on

the site.

"We lost a part of Santa Cruz," said Primack in reference to the police shootings. "Let's add another part of Santa Cruz."

Primack sees the project as a large steel structure on which several trees will be trained and eventually grafted in one enormous organism, maybe 15 feet high. He figured that the new plant would take 25 years to completely grow and fill out, though others told him it could be done in half that time.

"I really like the idea of saying it would take 25 years to grow. You plant this thing for the next generation and the generation after that. It speaks to sustainability. It speaks to local history, and it's homegrown."

After a time, he said, the structure could be removed and repurposed for another Tree Circus-like project.

"Santa Cruz has a personality," he said. "It has a character. I didn't come here to impose an architecture on Santa Cruz. I came here to figure out what kind of architecture is appropriate to Santa Cruz. This is the time for some openness, and to remind ourselves why we live here. This is a time to get people comfortable again thinking of themselves as Santa Cruzans, and not just someone behind a locked door."

Photo: Rob Born

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