

Court of the Mysteries: Brothers Build Unusual Old Yoga Temple

By Ross Eric Gibson

It's always a surprise to discover the Fair Avenue ruins of an old yoga temple whose minarets, entry arch and buildings rise like an exotic oasis amid palms and overgrown gardens.

This folk art interpretation of a Hindu temple has been called the Watts Towers of Santa Cruz, after the folk art masterpiece in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. Yet the more one learns of the place and its builder, the more mystified one becomes, with even the 1941 Japanese invasion of the United States a part of that history.



Entrance to the 'Court of the Mysteries,' April, 1996. Photograph courtesy of Rechs Ann Pedersen.

This 'Court of the Mysteries' at 519 Fair Ave. was designed by Kenneth Kitchen, who came to Santa Cruz in 1934 with his partner and elder brother, Raymond. Both built their homes near the edge of town, where only a dozen houses stood on the 12-block stretch of Fair. (Raymond's home, converted to industrial use, still stands at 1211 Fair Ave.) Kenneth was a bricklayer, Raymond was a mason, and both exotic homes showed clients their individual craft at its most unfettered. Professional craftsmen have stood in awe at Kenneth's curving brickwork and Raymond's bulbous granite domes.

Another feature of their construction is inlaid mosaics of abalone shells -- whole or in shards.

This unusual mother-of-pearl feature was from the local abalone processing plant, whose waste product was piles of abalone shells. Other architects, sculptors and ornamental cement workers used this abalone in their work as a feature of Santa Cruz architecture. Yet none achieved the level of sophistication found in the Kitchen brothers' mosaics.

Kenneth, a student of Eastern philosophy, originally lived in a house at the south end of his property, and in 1935 built a molded concrete, brickwork and abalone fence around the site for his yoga temple. The gate arch has four square-tapered minarets, with windows in each shaft once bearing opaque, onyx-grained glass, which were picturesque when lit.

The field held his herd of goats. He built a wooden goat barn to the north and made goat's milk products there. He also built an annex in the back of the barn for his Scriptorium -- library and architectural studio -- which was listed as his residence in 1936. It had Spartan furnishings with Persian rugs, a mattress on the floor and books lined up against the baseboards. This was perfectly suitable for his lifelong bachelor-cum-hermit lifestyle and mystic yoga philosophy. Brother Raymond, however, married in 1937. The first brick building Kenneth constructed in the goat field was the pump house in 1936, to shelter his well. This crypt-like structure also included four lantern-topped minarets and became the center of an unusual project during World War II.

Eleven days after Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, a Japanese submarine appeared in Monterey Bay. Horrified Santa Cruzans watched helplessly from shore as the unarmed freighter Samoa, belching clouds of smoke, was pursued by the enemy sub. Over the next seven days, right up to Christmas Eve, the sub attacked 10 other ships along the coast, damaging two, sinking one and killing six people.

Because of the mile-deep Monterey Bay Canyon, this bay was the most likely point of entry for deep-water subs on the coast. So Kenneth buried a spoked wheel of railroad ties in the center of his field and erected two tall obelisks on either side. Those were described as radio sending and receiving towers for a "submarine stopping device," with its mysterious mechanism submerged in his well house. Author John Chase, quoting an interview, said: "Apparently the Navy actually did begin to have some trouble with its submarines and finally shipped Mr. Kitchen off to Pensacola, Fla."

But Kenneth was soon back and building his yoga temple at the center of the submerged iron spokes. The entry arch became the Gate of Prophecy with the addition of a triangular plaque with a celestial chart in abalone mosaics. It portends a celestial alignment between the plaque and temple's chimney, signaling an apocalypse before the "Age of Peace." The temple itself is reinforced with railroad ties to survive to that time, yet it stands unfinished, as a second story and dome were intended to complete the alignment.

Raymond left Santa Cruz in 1949 or '50. Kenneth stayed until about 1953. After a long vacancy, the complex was converted in the 1960s or '70s for St. Elias Orthodox Chapel and Shrine. Greek crosses were placed on all the minarets and the chapel's name was attached to the prophecy plaque, damaging the cosmic chart's design. Locals referred to it as the "Unorthodox Chapel," and it closed after brief use. Neighbor Robert Blitzer has investigated restoring and completing the yoga temple as a sculpture museum and adding side buildings in the same style for housing for the elderly. But the site's inflated price has been an impediment. Today, the temple's fate is uncertain.

Source

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