

Odd structure became a city landmark

By JOAN RAYMOND

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SANTA CRUZ — It's an odd structure with an odder history and now it's lodged into a niche of posterity as a city landmark.

It's the St. Elias Orthodox Chapel and Shrine, but some people call it a yogi temple, the Red Castle or "that weird building on Fair Avenue."

Over the public protest of no one, the City Council proclaimed the vacant, turreted chapel a landmark at 515 Fair Ave.

There's something odd about that too. The address is really 519 Fair Ave., at least that's what everyone involved except city staff seems to think.

The reason it is a city landmark is that some say it's a great example of "soft" or "folk" architecture.

As a landmark, changes made to the chapel must be in keeping with its softness or folksiness.

The city Historical Preservation Commission voted unanimously for the landmark status. So did the council.

It is brick and sculpted concrete — all inlaid with mother-of-pearl and abalone shells, and Byzantine in appearance.

The chapel has been boarded up for years. No trespassing signs mark the ornate entrance. Snails cling to the turrets. Bullets have shattered windows.

High weeds sway in the wind like amber waves of grain.

A neighbor said even kids have lost interest in the fort-like structure as a place to hide.

It's owner, Very Rev. Archpriest Elias G. Karim of Oklahoma City, hasn't visited the property for more than two years, but he says he hasn't lost interest.

Father Karim hopes someday to breathe some life into the chapel and fulfill his dream of topping it with a gold Orthodox dome.

It was Father Karim, now 55, who 20 years ago planted tiny olive and palm trees on the property. "I remember buying those trees from Sears and Roebuck for 98-cents apiece."

Now the trees have matured, but there are only snails to capitalize on the shade.

Father Karim, a missionary priest in the parish of Holy Ascension in the Oklahoma territory, said he didn't even know he owned a landmark.

City Planning Department staff had mailed information to him, but some of it never reached him due to an address change.

There were public hearings on the landmark proposal, but no one testified.

But Father Karim, a married priest, is glad for the notoriety. He has no intentions of changing the property.

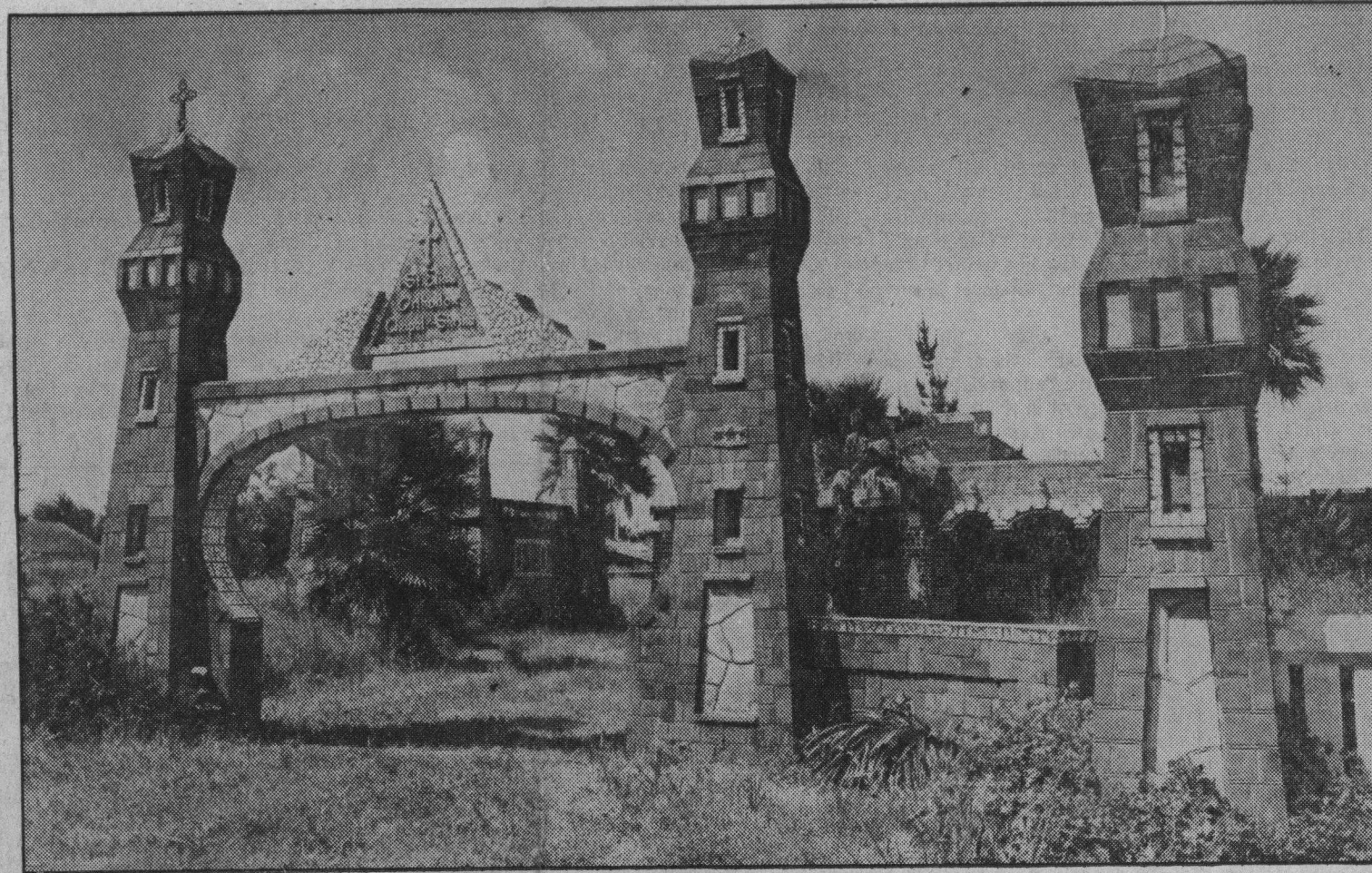
"I have always dreamt of going back to Santa Cruz and completing the work I began for the Lord."

The dream was interrupted by medical problems and a transfer for Father Karim from San Francisco to Oklahoma at the time the chapel was dedicated.

How the Red Castle became an Orthodox chapel is a tale with twists and myths.

Legend says the buildings — with their indoor well, huge fireplace and stairs glistening with mother-of-pearl — were built in 1946 by two stone masons called the Kitchen brothers.

John Chase, in his book "The Sidewalk Companion to Santa Cruz Architecture," describes the buildings as "a folk-art Byzantine conglomeration of bits and pieces of tile and abalone shells in sculpted concrete."



St. Elias Orthodox Chapel is now a landmark

Pete Amos/Sentinel

"Note the unsupported arches and the elegant, thin obelisk topped with what appears to be indoor-outdoor carpeting."

Chase, through an interview with an acquaintance of the Kitchen brothers, gives some background history, but warns, "the reader will be left to fend for himself in separating the more and less believable parts:

"The yogi temple was built after dark, by the light of the moon and a lantern lamp. While erecting the temple, Mr. Kitchen lived in a little shack to one side of the temple. He constructed the two obelisks as antennae, one receiving and one sending.

"They were used both for his radio set, and as a device to stop submarines in Monterey Bay. The electrical apparatus for the submarine-stopping device was housed in a well, in the water

"Apparently the navy actually did begin to have some trouble with its submarines and finally shipped Mr. Kitchen off to Pensacola, Fla.

"Kitchen, who was something of a hermit, eventually moved out of his shack into a building or cottage on the temple grounds which doubled as a goat-milk bar. Inside were piles of books on Indian religion and philosophy."

Father Karim was the pastor of St. Nicholas Orthodox Church in San Francisco from 1952-64.

While stationed in San Francisco, he did missionary work in Oregon and Northern California, including Santa Cruz.

It was during a visit to Santa Cruz in 1962 on July 20 — which happens to be the feast day for St. Elias — that Father Karim said he came across the Fair Avenue property for sale.

Coincidentally, due to a change in location for the San Francisco church, Father Karim had no

room for the St. Elias chapel that he had kept at his home. "My wife and I said to each other that we would just have to put the St. Elias chapel away in boxes. But St. Elias had other plans."

Father Karim said he found the Fair Avenue property just as he was looking for a home for the chapel.

The property had been for sale for years.

There was another coincidence. The day the real estate deal closed in 1962 was Aug. 6, the Feast of the Transfiguration in which Jesus turned into a radiant light and there appeared Moses and Elias.

Father Karim said "it took 33 Saturdays, the only days I had off" to restore the property.

His four sons — who were young children at the time — painted the long fence themselves "with 55 gallons of white stucco paint." Today, sections of the fence are missing, but the fence is still white.

It was the priest's intention to make St. Elias a place for visitation, rather than a full-fledged church "because I couldn't be there 100 percent of the time."

He chisled off what he said were astrological signs at the entrance and climbed to the top of the tallest pillar to install a pulley for the American flag. Someone stole the flag.

"Following the ancient traditions of religion, I built the altar for the shrine over the well."

It appeared there would be new vitality at 519 Fair Ave.

More than 250 persons showed up the first Sunday of Lent in 1963 for the official dedication of the shrine.

But, around the time of the chapel's beginnings, Father Karim suffered a heart attack and was transferred from San Francisco to a small parish

called the St. Elijah Orthodox Church to recuperate for one year.

That one year stretched into 18.

Two years ago, "due to church politics," Father Karim said he retired from the St. Elijah parish and established the Holy Ascension parish for missionary work.

But, Father Karim said he has never abandoned his dream of making the chapel a place for visitation — "not a full-fledged church."

A neighbor who acts as caretaker recently started mowing the high weeds.

"I've never talked to anyone who doesn't like it," said one neighbor.

Said another longtime neighbor: "I've never met a neighbor who has ever even said anything about it."

"Nothing happens over there. The kids used to vandalize it until they got tired of it."

Chase's book gives the address as 519. So do the Santa Cruz directory and past newspaper articles. The address on the entrance post is clearly 519. But city staff said 515 was chosen because the buildings sit on several lots and 515 was the middle lot.

"It surprised me that I own a landmark," said Father Karim. "Little did I know that it would develop into such."

The Bible says the prophet Elijah (Elias in the New Testament) was taken to heaven in a whirlwind, thus showing Israel the possibility of life beyond that on earth. Elijah is believed to be the forerunner of the second coming of Jesus.

Father Karim said a realtor offered to buy the property a couple of years ago for \$1 million. "We never heard another word from them."

Maybe St. Elias still has other plans.

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