



Court of Mysteries

The fabled brick and abalone “yogi temple” on Santa Cruz’s Fair Avenue remains an off-beat architectural legacy to the eccentric Kitchen Brothers

By Geoffrey Dunn

For those of us of a certain vintage who were blessed to grow up in the lower Westside neighborhoods of Santa Cruz in the decades following World War II, the ornate and provocative structure composed of brick and abalone on Fair Avenue—then something of a distant outpost for those of us exploring the region on bicycles—was always a source of delight and mystery.

Santa Cruz was going through significant architectural shifts during the era. The elaborate Victorians that had defined the community in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had given way to the more modest and relatively inexpensive “bungalow-style” and “minimal-traditionalist” designs of Depression-era and post-war America.

But the structures at 519 Fair Avenue—with their ornamented brick and



(Above) The triangular shaped plaque featuring a sun and a moon, at the temple’s entrance was believed to have the power to predict the impending apocalypse.

abalone composition, all fronted by a cryptic arch—defied any contemporary architectural movement. The *Santa Cruz Sentinel* once dubbed the conglomeration “Westside Bizarre.”

When we were kids, the compound served as the home of the St. Elias Orthodox Church, headed by a priest named Elias G. Karim, who was concurrently serving at an Orthodox Church in San Francisco. According to local legend, the temple’s builder, a brick mason from Pennsylvania, once said it had been “inspired by a postcard he had received from India.”

(Top) Said to be originally inspired by a post card, Kenneth Kitchen’s Court of Mysteries has been a Santa Cruz curiosity for nearly a century.

Whatever its actual inspiration—and the record on that is inconclusive—it was something akin to our local Watts Towers, an American folk art homage to individuality and creativity. Conventional it was not.

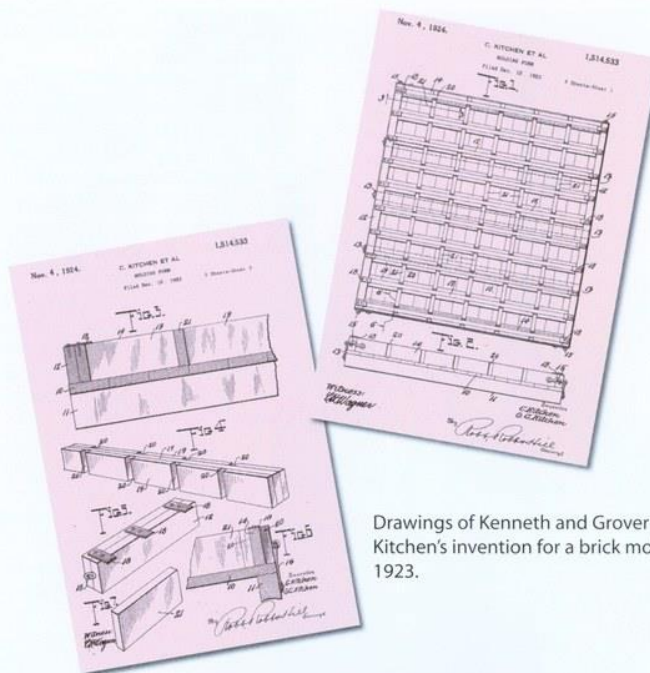
As it turns out, there were actually a pair of unusual structures built on Fair Avenue during this era—one more prominent than the other—but both stemming from two eccentric brothers, Claire Kenneth Kitchen and Sylvester Raymond Kitchen, who arrived in Santa Cruz with various members of their family in the aftermath of the First World War.

Today they are known collectively as the “Kitchen Brothers” (the Peabody Award-winning “Kitchen Sisters,” Nikki Silva and Davia Nelson, of NPR fame adopted their rubric from them in the early 1980s), though their lives and architectural proclivities still remain something of a mystery.

“Kenneth” (born in 1888) and “Raymond” (born in 1894)—they both used their middle names after settling in Santa Cruz—were the sons of William Sylvester Kitchen (1839-1926), who, by various accounts, fathered some 23 children with two different wives between 1861 and 1902 in the Appalachian Mountain region of west-central Pennsylvania. Both Raymond and Kenneth spent their early childhoods on the family farm near a little village known as Five Points. Both were innovative, ambitious, and, well, a little “off.”

The 1900 United States Census lists the sprawling family in the rural outpost of Chest Township, Pennsylvania. William’s occupation is identified as a “farmer.” By 1905, the family had commenced its migration west, running a farm in Eureka, Kansas. Kenneth’s World War I Draft Registration Card records him as still living in Kansas in 1917, working as a laborer in a brickyard, while Raymond served in the Navy as a seaman first class during the war.

The U.S. Patent Office lists an application in 1919 filed in Frederick, Kansas, by Kenneth (still going by the first name of Claire) and an older brother, Grover, for an incubator. The patent was granted in 1921. By 1922, the two brothers had moved to Northern California, filing a patent for an egg-turning device for incubators in Sonoma County. The following year they filed for a brick-molding patent, this time listing their address as Santa Cruz.



Drawings of Kenneth and Grover Kitchen’s invention for a brick mold, 1923.



Newspaper photograph of Kenneth Kitchen from 1940, when he learned of the suspicious death of his sister, Sarah Jane Daglish.



One of the two brick and abalone shell adorned spires on either side of the temple.

Over the next decade, other siblings, including brother Raymond and a sister, Sarah Jane Kitchen Daglish (who had her own rather bizarre and tragic tale), joined the brothers in Santa Cruz, then a semi-rural community with plenty of open space for eccentrics.

They fit right in.

The 1930 Census shows four of the Kitchen brothers living together on Walnut Avenue, just off King Street, on a parcel owned by Kenneth that he lost in 1933 following a highly publicized foreclosure suit that stretched out for several years. Raymond is listed as an "artistic brick mason" and Kenneth as a "master stone mason"—though it seems likely that the census taker mistakenly reversed their trades. (It was the other way around.) Either way, examples of their handy work can still be found throughout the community.

By the mid-1930s, Kenneth and Raymond (who had married) were both living at separate addresses on Fair Avenue.

Rumor has it that they had a contentious relationship.

Immediately following World War II—during which he was obsessed with Japanese and German submarines and was reportedly shipped to Pensacola, Florida, to pursue his obsession—Kenneth began construction of his "yogi temple," replete with a series of abalone studded turrets. He kept goats on the property and is said to have operated a goat-milk bar out of one of the units. He was a generation or two ahead of his time.

The following year, brother Raymond began construction of his own edifice (still located today at 1211 Fair Avenue), an equally unique design (the chimney looks something like a rocket ship ready for launch), although adorned primarily with stone, along with the brothers' trademark abalone settings.

Rumors about the brothers and the buildings have spread like wild fire in the ensuing decades, most of which must be taken with heavy grains of salt.

One of my own uncles told me that he remembered the brothers as "odd characters," but that he recalled one of them doing work on the Civic Auditorium that had been built by the Public Works Administration during

Kenneth established the triangular plaque at the center of the entry arch with a moon and a star and "believed that it was possible for them to move," apparently as a sign of an impending apocalypse. "When they lined up over a point or axis with the fireplace ..."

the New Deal. (Indeed, Raymond is said to have built the brick wall that still stands to this day on the west end of the auditorium's parking lot.) Another childhood neighbor of mine worked with Kenneth and described him as having a "screw loose," though being a fine bricklayer.

In other words, the Kitchen Brothers



Photo: Courtesy Geoffrey Dunn collection

The Kitchen Brothers' progenitor, William Sylvester Kitchen.

were weird long before the bumper sticker.

Their brother-in-law, William E. Daglish, was even weirder. Having been charged with insanity, he was later investigated for murdering the Kitchens' sister, Sarah Jane, following her suspicious death in 1940—immediately after which he married a 22-year-old former employee. According to a report in the *Sentinel* at the time, Kenneth Kitchen said that he and his brother "knew nothing about their sister's death" until they read about it in the newspaper. Eventually Daglish was exonerated of the murder.

In his *Sidewalk Companion to Santa Cruz Architecture*, first published in 1979, John Chase included a lengthy "anonymous" interview with someone who allegedly knew the Kitchen Brothers and who asserted that the "yogi temple" was built "after dark, by the light of the moon and a lantern lamp."

According to the interview, Kenneth established the triangular plaque at the center of the entry arch with a moon and a star and "believed that it was possible for them to move," apparently as a sign of an impending apocalypse. "When they lined up over a point or axis with the fireplace," the interviewee asserted, "it would signal the end of the world, or at least the United



The turreted entrance to Kenneth Kitchen's Yogi Temple on Fair Avenue in Santa Cruz.

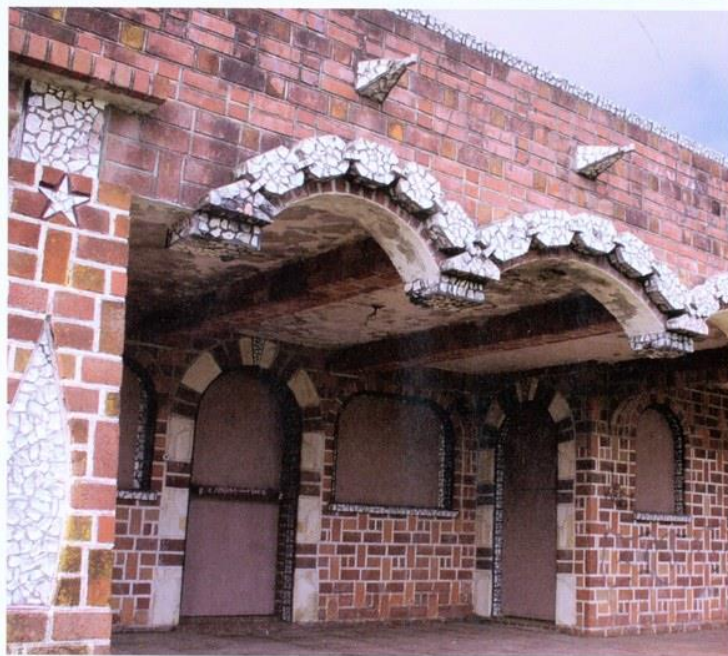
States."

Chase cautioned, however, that "the reader will be left to fend for himself in separating the more and less believable parts of the account."

The Kitchen Sisters themselves did some historical sleuthing in the early 1980s. In a delightful "oral mystery" of their iconic siblings, they encountered a series of conflicting tales, including that the brothers had shipped their building materials in a 1937 Packard. Or was it a Rolls Royce? They dubbed the structure "the joint that looks like it fell off the back of a pack of Camels."

Whatever the real story, by 1949, Raymond Kitchen and his wife had moved to the Central Valley, where he died in 1973. He is buried in the Tulare Public Cemetery, with a grave marker made of brass, not of stone. Kenneth left town in the early 1950s—but where he moved to and when he died still remain a mystery. ♣

Geoffrey Dunn is the author of *Santa Cruz Is in the Heart: Volume II* and *Sports of Santa Cruz County*, both released last year.



The main structure of the temple has served many purposes, including a goat-milk bar and Orthodox Church.