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It Happened Here First

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Inverness, Calif.

HE is the Albus Dumbledore of green architecture. Long before the Prius hit the road and sustainability became the buzzword du jour, there was Sim Van der Ryn, now 70, the intrepid pioneer of the eco-frontier.

Mr. Van der Ryn was sitting in the living room of his home near Tomales Bay the other day, his collection of 1950's miniature trucks - a "monument to fossil fuels" - on prominent display.

As Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem were to the women's movement, so Mr. Van der Ryn has been to green design. The official California state architect in the mid-1970's under Gov. Jerry Brown, Mr. Van der Ryn began his career "as a hippie with hubris," pioneering concepts now taken for granted, from solar roof panels to rainwater catchment systems. At one point he was called Captain Compost for his relentless advocacy of compost toilets.

In more recent years Mr. Van der Ryn has designed what may be the world's largest green residence (15,000 square feet), a contradiction he freely acknowledges, and this fall work was completed on the Kirsch Center for Environmental Studies at De Anza College in Cupertino, Calif. The center is operated by students and was designed as a teaching tool with a transparent "truth wall," which lets them study the innards of the building.

Once considered to be a part of the Left Coast fringe, along with hot tubs and macramé, green design has been embraced by the architectural mainstream.

Last week's Greenbuild International Conference and Expo in Atlanta, sponsored by the U.S. Green Building Council, for instance, was attended by more than 9,000 people. In a sense, the profession is now playing catch-up with Mr. Van der Ryn, who, although possessing a healthy ego, regards it all with a somewhat detached amusement.

His experiments in back-to-the-land living, most notably the Farallones Institute, a community in Sonoma County dedicated to alternative technologies, nurtured the careers of young visionaries like Peter Calthorpe, now one of the country's most respected urban and regional planners. "It was a kind of astonishing time," Mr. Calthorpe said. "A lot of important ideas that are germinating now, about ecology, energy conservation and building, got seeded then."

Mr. Van der Ryn's five-acre rustic compound, including a chicken coop, has evolved since 1969, when he fled campus unrest at the University of California, Berkeley, where he was an architecture professor, to put down roots and teach a hands-on class in "Making a Place in the Country."

It is an example of what he calls first-generation ecological design, chronicled in his new book, "Design for Life: The Architecture of Sim Van der Ryn" (Gibbs Smith).

He lives here with Gale Parker, a former design director for Ralph Lauren, whom he met seven months ago when she responded to an online ad on Craigslist about renting the Ark, a solar show house on the property built with students between drumming, cooking and foraging for mushrooms.

The main house is an intriguing mix of funky and refined. The entrance hall is a blast of gold, pink and blue painted by Tibetan monks in an "endless knot" pattern, a Buddhist symbol of infinite wisdom and compassion.

A winding staircase with a driftwood handrail leads to the bedroom loft, its atmosphere inspired by wooden Polish synagogues. In the old days, his three children, now grown, descended from the loft to the main floor via a telephone pole with pegs.

The house is constructed like a pole barn, with interlocking reclaimed cedar boards. It used less wood than traditional framing. The windows were salvaged from trolleys and Dumpsters in Berkeley. The freeform cypress sink and front door, with a fiddleback eucalyptus latch, were crafted by the woodworker J. B. Blunk, a talented neighbor who died in 2003.

Though dated - he calls it 1970's green - it reflects Mr. Van der Ryn's abiding philosophy that "architecture that is completed and right is never going to be loved," he said. "Part of understanding architecture is understanding that a building is going to change over time."

In a sense, the house is a 3-D expression of Mr. Van der Ryn's unconventional career, which paralleled the alternative building movement chronicled in the Whole Earth Catalog. He fled the Nazis in the Netherlands at age 4 in 1939, landing in Queens. He attended the High School of Music and Art in Manhattan, eventually studying architecture at the University of Michigan. He remained somewhat disinterested until a "short peripatetic man" named Bucky Fuller visited the college, talking about domed structures that "weighed less than a Schwinn bike," Mr. Van der Ryn recalled.

Mr. Fuller's experiments with geodesic domes later inspired Mr. Van der Ryn to help create 12-sided tentlike structures that folded like accordions, a design that offered temporary housing for migrant farmworkers in California in the mid-60's. He was briefly caught up in the tenure game at Berkeley, as he put it, working with students on a freestanding energy pavilion that resembled a hippie lifeguard station.

It was a weird yet pioneering foray into the eco-lifestyle, with a homemade solar collector, a pipe that transported rainwater to 55-gallon drums, a small wind generator, a greenhouse made of PVC pipe and plastic and, oddly, a stationary bike that drove a food mill to grind grain and power a small electric generator.

Not all of Mr. Van der Ryn's eco-utopian schemes proved wildly popular, particularly his fascination with compost toilets as a means of saving water, the subject of a book he wrote in the 70's called "The Toilet Papers" (reprinted by Chelsea Green).

"The compost toilets were a fiasco," said Paul Discoe, a Zen Buddhist priest and builder who collaborated with Mr. Van der Ryn on a meditation hall and other buildings for Green Gulch Farm, an outpost of the San Francisco Zen Center. "They didn't compost." (They were eventually replaced by the low-flush variety.)

Mr. Van der Ryn might have toiled in off-the-grid obscurity were it not for Jerry Brown. As the official state architect in Sacramento, where he was often visited by his hippie brethren, who would show up at the Capitol without shoes, Mr. Van der Ryn and his design team championed the development of energy-efficient state office buildings.

The first one, named for the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, featured shades operated by a microprocessor that kept out the summertime sun. It was the first major building in the United States designed to save energy, even though one component, a system of heating and cooling air over rocks in the basement, was a bust. ("It was a bad idea," he said. "We weren't aware of mold issues back then.")

Nevertheless, the building, which opened in 1979, remains among the state's most energy efficient, comparable to those built in the last 5 to 10 years, said Matt Bender, a spokesman for the state's department of general services.

"It was a time when ideas and possibilities were taken seriously and what is now called sustainability was aligned with the culture," said Mr. Brown, who is now the mayor of Oakland. "Sim embodied that."

Since that time, of course, much of the culture has caught up to Mr. Van der Ryn. Currently, 29 cities and 13 states require buildings to adhere to Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, green building ratings, for new construction of public buildings. Another three states, including New York, offer tax incentives for private developers that meet LEED standards.

William McDonough, 54, arguably the highest-profile green architect, said he was inspired as a young designer by the alternative technologies Mr. Van der Ryn was developing in California. "His buildings were very prescient both in terms of the issues and the problems that start to evolve when buildings intersect with government and concrete," he said, alluding to status quo architecture.

Many architects, he noted, are now embracing green designs because their clients are demanding it. "A lot of them are designing with checklists," he said. "But Sim comes at it from a deep-rooted place."

That which is green, of course, is in the eye of the beholder. "I get calls all the time from people saying, 'I want an eco-resort in Costa Rica,'" Mr. Van der Ryn said dryly, casually extricating a smushed lizard found in the driveway from his pocket. "Where's the heart? Where's the soul?"

Sitting among kilim rugs, he can occasionally sound like an exuberant dinosaur. He seldom uses e-mail messaging and his cellphone service is nonexistent here in Inverness, an isolated community on the Point Reyes Peninsula redolent with redwoods. He will rant every so often about the state of the planet, and about architecture in particular. (Don't get him started.)

Nevertheless, he continues to explore sophisticated variations on his theme. The Guitar House, a 15,000-square-foot rammed-earth multimillion-dollar mansion built for Michael Klein, chief executive of Modulus Guitars, for instance, was six years in the making. "It took as long as Hoover Dam," said Mr. Klein, not quite in jest. "When you have a 10,000-square-foot house it's hard to talk about sustainable. But it was really important to me that the home I lived in was a reflection of my life."

Mr. Klein's house is sort of a temple at Karnak of green, from the solar-powered roof, which uses reclaimed wood from the Presidio of San Francisco, to faceted, striated columns of rammed earth. The floors are among the first to employ tan oak, a "trash tree" now being harvested as an environmentally correct wood.

In addition to living there, Mr. Klein, 50, uses the house as a retreat for the Rainforest Action Network, for which he is a director, and other nonprofit groups. "It feels warm and grounded to me, but not necessarily green," he said of the house, which morphed in size after he became involved with Roxanne Klein, the raw foods chef, from whom he is divorced. "It's not something you paint or put art over and cover up," he added. "The materials and the structure itself are the art."

David Warner, the general contractor, said the walls were so thick that there is zero heat loss. The house has two solar systems, one for electricity, the other operating a pump that heats and cools water. The energy consumption, he said, resembles that of a much smaller house.

"I'm not suggesting it's a solution to the world's problems," Mr. Van der Ryn said of Mr. Klein's ecologically correct palazzo. "But designing something beautiful that people love is more important than meeting some green standard."

Mr. Van der Ryn is working on a site plan for Lundberg Family Farms, makers of specialty and organic rice, in Richvale, north of Sacramento. The company uses solar and wind power to mill and process its rice.

He has also just begun a house in Sonoma County for Misty West, 34, and Jonathan Gay, 38, who wrote the software program Flash. They were charmed when Mr. Van der Ryn, never a marketer, pulled out a set of "falling-apart portfolios from various periods of history," Ms. West said. "A lot of things people talk about, he's done. Sim really walks the walk."