

The Onion House

The Legend Lives On

“The Onion House was a combination of two people who had a passion — my aunt’s passion for Hawaiiana tradition and Ken Kellogg’s passion for creating structures that placed living spaces in harmony with nature.”
— Beth McCormick

Hand built in the early '60s by renowned architect Kendrick Bangs Kellogg and his colleague Bill Slatton, the Onion House features scalloped arches made of translucent Alsynite fiberglass.

By Kristina Anderson

Imagine for a moment archeologists of the future uncovering the scalloped roofs, lava rock walls and concrete arches of the Onion House. What would they conclude? Clearly no known Hawaiian civilization had produced such an enigmatic structure. Would they say it was a Taliesin Far, Far West? Fanciful Fred Flintstone Palace? Magnificent example of innovative, early '60s Frank Lloyd Wright-influenced architecture? It's all of the above and more. In 1959, Elizabeth von Beck — also known as Auntie Dofeen — commissioned the house to be built by now-celebrated architect Kendrick Bangs Kellogg, whose most noteworthy works would one day include the Onion House. When Kellogg handed Auntie Dofeen the blueprints for his brainchild, she looked them over, leaned back, lit a cigarette and said, “Build it!” ▶

Photo by Giselle Thompson



All rooms in the Onion House are circular, including the living room that overlooks the pool and gardens. Massive concrete arches support the entire structure, while lava rock walls extend from the inside to the outside of the home.

Photo by Giselle Thompson



Photo Courtesy Beth McCormick

Featherwork runs in the family. Beth's grandmother (center), circa 1965, created handmade, feather-adorned hats.



Photo Courtesy Beth McCormick

Before and after: The home's original owner, Elizabeth von Beck, a.k.a. Auntie Dofeen, transformed herself from a well-schooled aristocrat in Virginia (above) to a Big Island kamaaina with a flair for the exotic (below).



Photo Courtesy Beth McCormick

The strange project created controversy among local residents. One woman was overheard to say disparagingly, "The damned thing looks like an onion!"

"Everyone thought she was crazy," says Beth McCormick, the present-day owner of the Onion House and niece of Auntie Dofeen. "The house was as outrageous then as it is now."

Beth says the strange project created controversy among local residents. One woman was overheard to say disparagingly, "The damned thing looks like an onion!" When word got back to Auntie Dofeen, her immediate response was 'Eureka! That's IT! 'The Onion House!' After all, she surmised, the house was partially financed by the sale of McCormick dehydrated onions, so the name was only fitting.

The daughter of a sea captain and niece of the McCormick spice company founder, Auntie Dofeen loved all things Polynesian — the more exotic the better. After falling in love with Hawaii Island in the 1950s, she wanted to build a home that made a statement. And what a statement it was.

The Onion House, completed in 1963, was such a wild design at the time that the ambitious young architect had trouble finding a contractor for the project. Vowing to complete his vision, Kellogg, then in his late-20s, moved to Hawaii with his wife and ▶



Photo Courtesy Beth McCormick

Onion House builder Ken Kellogg (left) takes a break beneath the fireplace arch with fellow builder and welder Bill Slatton, who also created ironwork for Frank Lloyd Wright's famed Taliesin West in Arizona.



Photo Courtesy Beth McCormick

The Onion House took 14 months to complete. The construction process was like "a happening," says Kellogg today. "You figure out how to do it as you go along."



Photo by Giselle Thompson

The eclectic nature of the Onion House allows for the playful placement of varying pieces and furnishings in assorted colors. The original tile work was laid by architect Ken Kellogg.

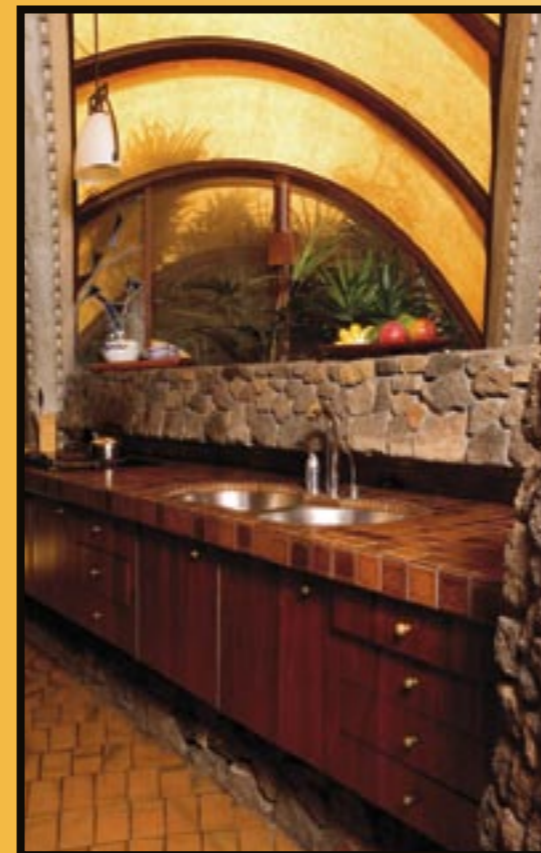


Photo by Giselle Thompson

The kitchen counter is built within a beautiful rock wall enclosure.



Photo Courtesy Beth McCormick

Auntie Dofeen, pictured here, was good pals with hula master Iolani Luahine.



Photo Courtesy Beth McCormick

Grandfather Semu, a Native American from the Chumash tribe, blessed the house for Beth in 1997. He was a featherworker and an admirer of Beth's art.

children and built it by hand himself, using a wheelbarrow, cement mixer and pick-up truck.

Scalloped domes rise over a pool, fishponds and gardens, and are the defining element of this unusual house composed of lava rock walls and intersecting concrete arches. Light filters through the translucent, arched roof panels made of Alsynite (a type of fiberglass), casting colorful spectrums across the house. Stained glass and mosaic tile work was crafted by artist James Hubbell. Bill Slatton, who created ironwork for Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West, added the decorative wrought iron spires, sculptures and entry gate, and also helped with construction. The movement known as Organic Architecture, so aptly represented by the Onion House, had begun.

Organic Architecture has been described as the creation of structures in harmony with nature, their sites and their surroundings. Although Kellogg was influenced by Wright, the Onion House, which he called the House of Shells, was his "breakaway" house wherein he first separated from Wright's influence and began to express his own unique vision.

Hawaiian-inspired details fill the home. Beth says ▶



Photo by Giselle Thompson

Overlooking a private water garden, the lava rock master bathroom features a round sink made of Corian.



Photo Courtesy of Beth McCormick

The view from the master bedroom: Visitors describe the sensation of feeling like a butterfly under a leaf when standing beneath the translucent fiberglass domes of the Onion House.

**ONION HOUSE
ARCHITECT: KENDRICK
BANGS KELLOGG**

In 1955, as an undergraduate Architecture student, Kendrick Bangs Kellogg heard a speech by Frank Lloyd Wright and was forever influenced by the words of the master. He later set forth his own interpretation of Organic (“living”) Architecture focused on harmonious, free-form structures with lots of compound curves.

When hired to design the Onion House at the behest of Elizabeth von Beck, Kellogg was relatively unknown. But with his unique style and talent, he quickly rose to prominence. In the late 1960s, he was commissioned by the Charthouse Restaurant chain to design many of their iconic spaces including the award-winning “underground” restaurant in Rancho Mirage, California. Kellogg, ever the purist, has never once designed a building or private residence on a computer (“Why? You can’t push a button called ‘feeling.’”) and says he can still survey a lot in three hours using \$20 worth of equipment.



Photo by Giselle Thompson

Kellogg created cement arches with forms he built from plywood and affixed together. He poured cement into the completed forms to create a single arch in one solid piece. The master bedroom, pictured here, includes a lava rock fireplace.

“This home takes advantage of the natural breezes that come from the ocean in the day and from the lava-laden mountains at night. It was built for the joy of living in the tropics.” — Ken Kellogg, architect



Abstract stained glass work created by artist James Hubbell casts interesting colors and light throughout the home. Each door in the Onion House was fashioned in a different shape.



The master bedroom is a separate structure from the main house, with its own bath and private garden. (Below and opposite page): Detail of Beth's featherwork.

Photo by Giselle Thompson

that Auntie Dofeen loved the ancient rock wall structures at Pu'uhonua o Honaunau so much that she wanted to recreate the powerful presence of the Hawaiian sacred heiau. Other fascinating Onion House details include unique pivoting glass doors trimmed with redwood and koa, indoor atriums, a 90-foot canopy above the outdoor walkways that seems to float without structural support, and a fireplace that calls to mind the jaw of a great white shark.

There's no symmetry at the Onion House, and as Beth notes, it's by design. "It's totally asymmetrical; it's all 'off,'" she says. "There is zero symmetry, yet it's all harmonious. In a strange way, it shifts the whole concept of finding beauty in symmetry."

Unfortunately by the late 1970s, the house and ►



"It's such a privilege to do the work of carrying on the vision and legacy of this house. It has a life of its own."

— Beth McCormick

Photo Courtesy of Beth McCormick



Even the carport is a study in circular design and creativity.

Photo Courtesy of Beth McCormick



Onion House owner Beth McCormick created this headdress made of feathers from an Australian Rosella bird. The feathers were given to her by a friend, who had collected them from her pet bird over a period of 11 years. Beth also sculpted the clay bust. (Right): Some of Beth's dramatic pieces can be seen at the Gallery of Great Things in Waimea.

BELLA PIETRA; 28p5.159; 5.5 in; Black plus one; 382252

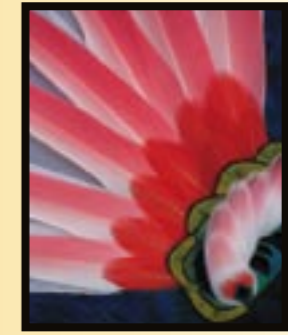


Photo Courtesy of Beth McCormick

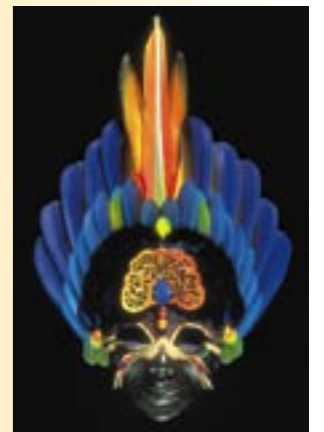
grounds had fallen into disrepair, becoming something of a hippie haven and half-way house for wayfaring friends. Even the swimming pool had turned into a swamp. Auntie Dofeen and her compadres, a very soulful, high-living bunch, were not dedicated to the daily physical maintenance needed to preserve such a landmark residence. As the jungle slowly engulfed the Onion House estate, they frolicked amidst it.

One night when Auntie Dofeen was off-island sailing around Fiji, a policeman who'd arrived to check out the weird ruin in the jungle, shined his flashlight on what appeared to be the lawn, walked over it and fell right in. He had stepped into the deep end of the pool wearing his uniform and gun, disappearing over his head into the swamp water. The story is still told today among old-time cops.

In 1984, Beth, who had been involved with the home since she was five years old, stepped in and saved it from foreclosure, completely restoring it to its present-day splendor. Auntie Dofeen, whose life was as eccentric and free-wheeling as the home itself, passed away in 1987.

Beth is still in touch with the architect. He says that children who have grown up in many of his unique living spaces have gone on to become artists. In this tradition, the Onion House has nurtured the growth of a unique art form: Beth's colorfully ornate, all-natural featherwork, which evokes the artistic tradition of ancient feathered cloaks, headdresses and god images of old Hawaii. Interestingly, Auntie Dofeen had always wanted to work with feathers herself, just as Beth's grandmother had.

"I find myself, years later, fulfilling many visions of my Auntie," muses Beth. "It's amazing how things come around full circle. My work of stewarding the Onion House is a tribute to the sense of flamboyant joy that inspired its creation." **AH**



SAN JUAN FIB; 28p5.159; 5.5 in; Black plus one; 381525