

Tokai's straw bale temple

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There are definitely fairies at the bottom of Chris and Silke Erasmus's garden in Tokai, where together with friends and followers they have hand built a mud and straw temple.

Far from a weird and wonderful construction, Temple Beautiful is a modern, warm red ochre structure, with green roofing and blond wood-ened doors and windows.

Once inside the door the magic begins. An overpowering tranquility and peace is the first impression in the small reception room where an inspirational tape library is stored. Linen curtains swathe the entrance to the main hall – a haven of beauty and simplicity.

The oval temple is lined with cream cushions facing the "altar" and a Japanese paper screen closes

off a lower section. The crime and grime of daily life vanishes in this organic space beyond time and place.

The temple is used as a meditation venue by a core of 75 people from diverse spiritual and religious affiliations. Pictures of spiritual leaders smile down from the altar area. Chris explains that the temple is dedicated to the ancient concept of "mystery schools inspired by ascended masters and the teachings of various traditions".

He holds meetings and courses for initiates and pre-initiates which he describes as tough going. People are encouraged to work through "stuck" places in their consciousness, process inner conflict and move on.

Paradoxically, Chris makes his living as an international journalist. After years in the Cape Times and

Cape Argus newsrooms he decided to freelance from a hi-tech office at home. Currently he networks local and Southern African stories to Australia, the USA and England, and leads a pressured life dominated by deadlines, computers and hot lines.

Temple Beautiful seems incongruous and out of step with his dynamic lifestyle. He reconciled the two by explaining that spiritual awareness has consistently been a large part of his life and he has always felt "guided". The temple has focused this spiritual work.

The temple took a dedicated team, working 12 to 13 hours a day, seven months to build. Architect Etienne Brouwer advised the team on design, and the R150 000 it cost to build was paid for by donations.

Chris said once the 10 tons of concrete foundations had been poured, the straw bales arrived and were

piled above. Then came the formidable task of covering the bales with the cob coating of clay and straw.

The final touch was coating the outside with linseed oil to protect the clay.

"Plenty of chances to be creative arose during building," said Chris, "for instance the temple is aerated with an ingenious system of plastic pipes, sealed with bungs to insulate the hall." This system has proved to be 100 percent heat efficient. The reed ceiling, which is suspended in an arc shape, enhances the warm ambience of the building.



■ Chris and Silke Erasmus standing outside the entrance to Temple Beautiful in Tokai.



■ The meditation hall at the Temple is a haven of peace and tranquility. The cushions around the wall are hand painted with symbolic spiritual