

U.S.

Preserved Under Fiberglass Domes, a Counterculture Spirit Thrives

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN JAN. 20, 2015

DAVIS, Calif. — The trill of panpipes from a yurt wafted across the mulch hillocks of the Domes, a 1970s experiment in communal housing in which students live in igloo-like fiberglass domes and snuggle up in snow-white interiors of plastic foam.

Although plenty of campuses offer specialized housing — often reserved for vegans, teetotalers, athletes and other like-minded souls — it is probably safe to say that there is no place quite like the Domes, an early venture into sustainable living at the University of California, Davis. The complex of 14 tiny domes (elevation: 52 feet, population: 28-plus) is officially named **Baggins End**, after the Tolkien characters.

Handcrafted signs by “Domies” enjoin visitors to take their time and “make a new friend” while meandering through the Domes’ gardens. There, amid fruit trees, scampering chickens and rows of spinach, they can marvel at a gazebo made from bicycle wheels, a metal Triassic flying reptile in a tree and a multicolored apiary that sums up the Domes’ philosophy: “Just bee.”

Clarke Love, a junior civil engineering major and one of many green-thumbed Domies, relaxes by making prickly pear jam from scratch and “life force smoothies” from fresh collard greens, dandelions, figs, mint and whatever else is in season on the Domes’ four acres. Her gardens rely on recycled water from the Dirty Laundry Lounge, the Domes’ outdoor laundromat.

Like the other Domes, which have sleeping lofts with vertiginous steps, the one Ms. Love shares with her domemate, Delaney McKinney, has a “sweet spot” — an acoustical effect similar to the “whispering gallery” in the United States Capitol, in which sounds are curiously amplified. “When it rains, there is such a beautiful sound, like a rain-stick,” Ms. Love said of her dome. “You feel in tune with nature,” she added. “For me, it’s pretty holy.”

Rituals at the Domes seem drawn from an earlier era. Students meet for potluck dinners four nights a week in the yurt, which functions as a circular town square. Community decisions at weekly meetings are made by consensus. New Domies are required to attend an “anti-oppression workshop” to prepare for the rigors of a cooperative existence in which even a decision about whether to have a party is discussed ad nauseam and then voted on.

In a world full of squares, Domies prefer the round. “There are no right angles here,” said Lucas Hill, a senior majoring in sustainable agriculture and food systems. “It makes you think creatively.”

Opened in 1972 and designed by a contractor, the Domes were a pioneering low-cost student cooperative. Unlike geodesic domes, a period archetype, the fiberglass shells of these dorms were cast in one piece and then lowered by crane onto a concrete pad with prefabricated plumbing. They were meant as bulbous and iconoclastic expressions of the times, intended to inspire personal growth and an eco-friendly, grow-your-own commitment to the land.

The spirit lives on in today’s Domies, some with nose jewelry, who plant almond trees, roast chicken, make acorn flour and walk barefoot through the mulch. “The hippie movement fell through,” Douglas Dora, a senior human development major, observed over a potluck dinner announced by the ting of a metal triangle. “But there are still people wanting something outside the norm.”

The university, founded as an agricultural extension of the University of California, Berkeley, has long been recognized for innovation — in breeding tomatoes, for example, and other crops. Davis itself has been an early adopter of passive solar heating, ecologically planned communities, city bike trails and other progressive environmental amenities.

Simon Sadler, an architectural historian and design professor, said the continued appeal of the Domes is “counterculture redux.” Last year, he pointed out, students protested tuition increases with a mass walkout, and in 2011 they made global news when a group of seated demonstrators supporting the Occupy movement was pepper-sprayed by a university police officer in riot gear. “The Domes represents the conscience of Davis,” Mr. Sadler said. “It’s a base camp for a fairly hard-core interest among young people in sustainable communities.”

Several years ago, the structures were the subject of an impassioned “Save the Domes” campaign when university officials considered closing them, citing the exorbitant costs involved in fixing degraded foam, providing wheelchair access and

addressing other structural and safety issues. Domes countered with wheelbarrows full of flowers and thousands of support letters. Eventually, hundreds of volunteers worked with the Solar Community Housing Association, which runs three eco-conscious co-ops in town: They patched foam, built paths and made two Domes wheelchair accessible.

“Very few artifacts from the period survive,” said Kurt Kornbluth, the founder and director of the university’s Program for International Energy Technologies and a Domes alumnus. “And unlike Haight-Ashbury, the Domes are still happening.”

Nevertheless, there can be misperceptions, even among peers, said Peter LaFollette, a senior chemistry major. “People ask if we have toilets and showers,” he said. “I tell them we have Wi-Fi and live two minutes from a grocery store.”

Not everyone in the Domes milks goats, Mr. LaFollette noted, “unless you’re taking a class on goats.” (The university’s department of animal science has a dairy goat research facility.)

Ashley Cable, a human development major, said that when she lived in a regular dorm she was “lonely and shy.” Over a potluck with bubble tea and drumming in the background, she explained that “having a vote in everything we do” has given her confidence. “My social skills have developed like crazy,” she said.

Ms. Love admits that her friends sometimes think she lives in “super hippieville” — an impression that is perhaps reinforced by the sofa with a leopard throw pillow sitting in the middle of the Domes lawn. “It’s experiential,” she said. “You’re only in college for so long. You should definitely try extreme things.”