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Napa Web designer creates kinetic art with K'NEX

Monday, March 11, 2002

By GARY BRADY-HERNDON
Register Staff Writer

Visitors who venture into the foyer of Chris Osborn's central Napa townhouse can expect to have the parameters of normal Valley sanity questioned. Things aren't as they seem.

The 31-year-old web designer's attachment to all things electronic is the first obvious trait the room displays. Remotes are everywhere, lying silent, waiting to give signals to a big screen TV and an immense stereo system mounted together on one wall. Across the room, a laptop computer and monitor stand at attention on a table next to a recliner.

Similarities immediately come to mind between the main command deck of the Starship Enterprise and the comfortable, open-spaced living room.

Beyond the electronic milieu emanating from around the room, the dominant feature of the 18-foot-high space is a massive two-tower structure made from plastic K'NEX construction pieces (think high-tech Tinker Toys), which dominates the back wall. With a flick of a remote, Osborn starts two 18-foot long carrier belts, which set the kinetic structure in motion from floor to ceiling. The result is impressive in its creativity, absurdity and utterly delightful presence.

The project began last year when Osborn and family members built a large roller coaster across the top of a mantle in a relative's home. When the novelty wore off and the space was needed for family activities, Osborn, undeterred, moved the coaster to his office and began a multi-level, frenzied expansion project of the coaster that eventually required removal of tiles from the ceiling to accommodate the pitch of the high-dive track.

As a day job, Osborn is co-owner of Full Systems, a web design company located in Napa.

The project was curiosity for customers who visited Osborn's office. They were required to walk under part of the coaster to get into the office proper, and eventually, the structure ran amok of office politics when employees were having trouble getting their bicycles through the door.

By that time, however, Osborn's grandiose plans for a similar structure -- on larger scale -- required a taller ceiling and more space.

In November, Osborn moved into his present home with its 18-foot tall ceilings and an upper balcony open space on the rear wall of the room. He envisioned a kinetic sculpture filling the room.

Just after the new year, Osborn assembled several friends as construction workers to assemble the project. Over the next three days, the gargantuan structure began taking shape, employing the two 18-foot belts, countless K'NEX plastic construction pieces, passageways, two tandem motor stations employing four motors (two for each station), a 17-foot parachute drop and funnels galore.

The two towers were built first, laid out on the living room floor, then uprighted and secured to the back wall before the remainder of the accessories were placed between them.

The result is a piece of art that is certainly an impressive display of what idle time, idle hands, idle minds and a heavy dose of whimsy can create. Working essentially without a blueprint, the crew's efforts can only be described as impressive.

"I had a rough idea of what I wanted to build around the two towers. We kept borrowing ideas from other projects and making up stuff as we went along," Osborn said.

Discriminating web voyeurs, who know Osborn and his web site, were able to e-mail design suggestions to the construction crew as the piece took shape. For would-be emulators, Osborn suggests novices go to www.knex.com for inspiration.

"Go buy several K'NEX sets -- start small," Osborn said, noting his first project began with two roller coaster sets. As to the number of pieces involved in the behemoth in his living room, he has no idea how many went into the actual construction. Even his leftovers junkyard is quite impressive. He owns 10 to 12 sets at this point with many extra parts stashed in an upstairs bedroom.

Asked what obstacles constructing a structure this size presented to his crew, Osborn answers without hesitating.

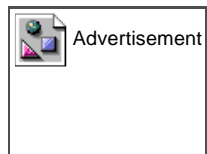
"It hurts," he said with a laugh. "Pushing the sticks together is painful. The other thing is the physics involved really bites you. You're constantly switching and balancing to keep the balls on track and not falling off."

Indeed, at any given moment during a five-minute run, random plastic balls would unexpectedly jump out of the passageways and come hurtling down to the floor, often from into a suicidal plunge onto the heads of unsuspecting visitors.

Fortunately, many more stay on track than take the plunge, Osborn said.

For a look into the mind of this futuristic engineer, go to his web site at www.fozztextx.com for views of previous K'NEX structures and ideas for your own project.

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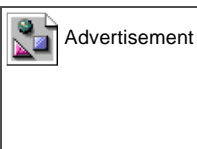
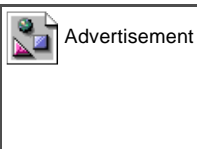
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