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From ashes, an artist's compound blossoms
Hubbell to open doors to public

By J. Harry Jones
STAFF WRITER

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WYNOLA – A week after the Cedar fire had burned through this town east of Santa Ysabel, renowned artist-designer James Hubbell still hadn't been allowed back to his compound.

Hubbell lived and worked on a hilltop in a series of unique hand-built structures he and his wife, Anne, began building in 1958. They were filled with decades of his artwork.



Hubbell sneaked in a back way and was met with an unforgettable sight: "The earth had turned to three inches of powder."

JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune
Evidence of the 2003 Cedar fire's destruction was obvious where artist-designer James Hubbell lived and worked in Wynola. The public is invited to an open house tomorrow.

Four of the eight buildings, including his main studio and living quarters, had been completely gutted. Three other buildings were less damaged, but windows had either melted or shattered in the heat.

Two large metal containers, the type you might see on a railroad freight car, contained hundreds of pieces of his art. Their contents had burned from the bottom up because the floors were made of wood. Only bronzes and stone sculptures survived.

"It was pretty depressing," Hubbell said this week. "But we had 40 pretty wonderful years here and we're not going to let it get us down."

After all, I'd rather have had the fire than have cancer."

Until the October 2003 fire, the Hubbells would welcome anyone to their compound once a year – an open house for people to marvel at the sculpture, stained glass, mosaics, paintings, wrought iron and the surreal designs of the buildings and surrounding grounds.

Tomorrow, for the first time since the fire that changed so many lives, the compound will be open again.

"We're desperately trying to get ready," Hubbell said Wednesday while walking through his property surrounded by workers, mostly volunteers who came to be near Hubbell and to learn from him.

"I wanted to do something that said, 'We're just not going to rebuild.' It's a new thing, not just an old thing."

One new thing is a sculpture garden with a memorial arch and meditation spot in honor of Steven Rucker, the firefighter who died just a few hundred feet away while trying to protect the home of one of the Hubbells' neighbors.

Money from the open house will go toward the rebuilding effort and the nonprofit Ilan-Lael Foundation, which the Hubbells started in 1982. Ilan-Lael is a Hebrew word, Hubbell said, meaning "a tree . . . with its branches in the sky and its roots in the earth . . . a symbol of spirit and matter united in one form."

Hubbell home
and studio tour

When: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.
tomorrow

Where: 930 Orchard Lane, off
state Route 78 between Santa
Ysabel and Julian

Cost: \$50 for those not
registered, \$40 for Ilan-Lael
members

Information:
com/whatsNew.htm

For the first 10 years, the goal of the foundation was sparking interaction between various groups in the county that were concerned with art, architecture and planning. When that work seemed to conclude, Hubbell said, he began to concentrate on his interest in the need for "hands-on" building and apprentice programs, the foundation's focus now.



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune
James Hubbell stood Wednesday in a refurbished room on his Wynola compound, where he and his wife, Anne, held annual open houses until the 2003 fire gutted half the buildings and lots of art.

Hubbell, 73, was trained as a sculptor and for 50 years has created unusual artworks and living environments using common materials, providing what he describes as beautiful shelters for humans to dwell in harmony with nature. His work, in glass, wood, metal, concrete and stone, appears in homes, schools, gardens, pavilions, nature centers and peace parks around the globe.

Hubbell said he is committed now to the construction of a series of Pacific Rim parks, including four already built on San Diego's Shelter Island and in Tijuana, China and Russia.

For many years the Hubbells had been planning to donate a portion of their property to the foundation. The Cedar fire sped the process, and the Hubbells have granted use of the property by the foundation through a long-term lease.

Last year Hubbell published a small book containing water color prints inspired by the fire.

"So, at least in this place," the prologue of the book says in part, "I choose to celebrate this time and try in my work to give voice to this shadowed world, not because it will green again, but because we have been given a winter, an opening by fire, of a still, dark space, an insight whether we wish it or not into a world full of . . . awe and beauty."

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