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DEMOCRAT

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In a search for enlightenment, two natural-food entrepreneurs develop a sprawling meditation center for their leader, Gurinder Singh

Guru's followers build vast Petaluma complex



Tom Rosen, left, founder of Fantastic Foods, and Andy Berliner, president of Amy's Kitchen, donated land in Petaluma for the Science of the Soul study center. They then built the 2,500-capacity meeting hall and surrounding complex, where devotees follow Indian guru Gurinder Singh.

Science of the Soul followers come for lectures, inspiration

By **RAYNE WOLFE**
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Two Sonoma County vegetarian food entrepreneurs have created a church complex the size of a shopping center in east Petaluma for the Indian guru they have followed since the 1970s.

The Science of the Soul center was launched in 1996 after Andy Berliner, 56, president of Amy's Kitchen, a leader in the frozen natural foods industry, and Jim Rosen, 54, who founded Fantastic Foods, purchased 77 acres on the outskirts of Petaluma.

SERVICES FOR THE SOUL
Followers gather at center for weekly spiritual discourse / A6

Over the past five years, with the help of volunteer workers on the same spiritual path, gleaming silver barnlike structures including a mammoth hall, four linked buildings, two barns and two caretaker homes have risen from a flat parcel surrounded by rolling green hills dotted with cow, sheep and llama corrals.

Behind a tree-dotted berm off Old Adobe Road, a religion and a

complex unlike any other in Sonoma County has become a reality almost without notice.

"We have created a spiritual oasis. This is where people come to listen to lectures, to be inspired," Berliner said.

They have just completed a complex valued at \$3 million that will serve as a gathering place in winter, and again in spring, for thousands of seekers of enlightenment through daily meditation and a disciplined lifestyle.

The center will be empty for most of the year except for small

TURN TO CENTER, PAGE A6



CENTER: Religion was founded in 1861 as an offshoot of Sikhism

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meetings Thursdays and Sundays that attract no more than 150 to 200 members, one reason why it generated virtually no opposition during the county approval process.

Groups centered on a charismatic leader are nothing new to Wine County. There was Thomas Lake Harris' center at Fountaingrove at the end of the 1800s and, in the 1960s, Lou Gottlieb's Morningstar Ranch off Graton Road.

Like those groups, the Science of the Soul center is a product of its time: Its founders built wealth in a business that was once out of the mainstream. And they have put their time into finding spirituality in a religion outside of the Western tradition.

The Petaluma site is one of four in the United States and Canada that serve 15,000 members of the religion. The current India-born guru is Gurinder Singh. Science of the Soul followers are vegetarians, abstain from alcohol, drugs and sex outside of marriage, believe in reincarnation and are required to meditate for more than two hours each day on an intense spiritual journey toward enlightenment.

The centerpiece of the Petaluma compound is a cavernous 29,000-square-foot meeting hall — two-thirds of a football field under one roof. The center and its parking lots can accommodate up to 2,500 people, nearly twice the capacity of the Ruth Finley Auditorium at the Burbank Center for the Arts.

At its first major gathering over the three-day Martin Luther King Jr. weekend, more than 1,000 followers came to Petaluma. This summer, several thousand are expected to come to the center for a visit by Singh.

No permit obstacles

Sonoma County planners who reviewed the application for the complex expressed no major concerns over traffic for the two or three special events permitted each year.

"It may seem like we'll have a lot of people, but compared to the 100,000 people at Sears Point Raceway" on a single weekend, Berliner said, "it's not really so big."

The center encountered no obstacles during the county permitting process that began in 1996. Only one neighbor voiced concern over possible noise and traffic problems, county records show.

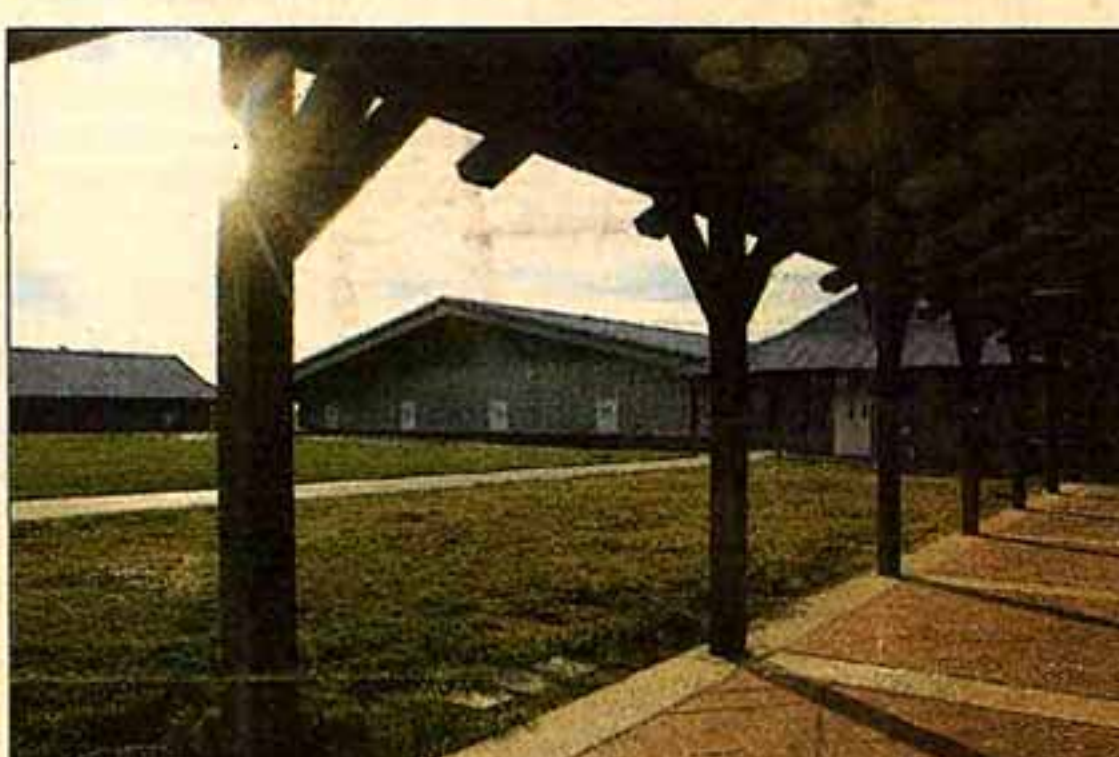
By comparison, in planning for the Fayetteville, N.C., center, which opened in 1995, more than 150 neighbors turned up at a public meeting to voice their fears that a possible cult was locating in their area. The North Carolina complex has since accommodated up to 6,000 visitors without major controversy.

"My understanding is that it's a spiritual group, following an Eastern religion," said Supervisor Mike Kerns, whose south county district includes the center. The project did not require board approval.

"Unless someone brings concerns to the board, which they haven't, we have no reason to investigate them," Kerns said.

The Petaluma center is the manifestation of a spiritual commitment by Berliner and Rosen, old friends in the natural foods business, who have shared a 30-year commitment to the Science of the Soul organization.

Berliner, whose Petaluma company, Amy's Kitchen, employs 650 and



At 29,000 square feet and with a 2,500-person capacity, the Science of the Soul study center's meeting hall is the largest in Sonoma County.

had revenues last year of \$80 million, said that half of the land was deeded this year as a gift to the Science of the Soul Church. Before the center became a reality, the Berliner family held meetings in their own home for more than 20 years. A handful of Amy's Kitchen employees have joined the church over the years.

The rest of the center's land is owned 50-50 by Berliner and Rosen. Rosen founded Fantastic Foods, a Petaluma-based maker of prepackaged natural soups, vegetarian burgers and grain and bean mixes. He sold the company two years ago and has since dabbled in real estate development.

Today, someone driving along Adobe Road might think the Science of the Soul study center is an equestrian center, with large silver metal barns, an expansive green lawn and multiple outbuildings.

From the East Washington Street entrance, the meeting hall, four adjoining buildings, two barns, caretaker homes, parking for 500 cars and a 500-tree olive grove are revealed.

The buildings, linked by terra cotta tile paths, surround an immense rectangular lawn. The symmetry of the buildings' layout suggests a foundation of order.

If the lawn sprinklers are off, visitors can hear the thumping of the occasional rabbit running by or the ping of a loose golf ball from the adjacent Rooster Run golf course.

The center received permits early this year to begin holding events in the main hall, which is less than half filled with folding chairs bought wholesale for \$2 each. Members have sewed red clay-colored, padded slip covers for each one.

Berliner said the center will be empty more than 75 percent of the time, and there are no plans to make it available to other groups.

"Of course, if there were an earthquake or a disaster, we'd open our doors. We have a large first-aid station. But short of that, we have no plans to open our doors to nonmembers," Berliner said.

Ready for guru's visit

The new facility is viewed by members as just one of the guru's many houses on earth and is kept ready for the spiritual leader whom thousands view as a living saint.

Singh visited the Petaluma center last summer when he conducted a one-day inspection tour.

Science of the Soul followers, in-

cluding 15,000 U.S. members, of which 5,000 reside in California, follow the teachings of past gurus and Singh, who assumed his role in 1990. Followers are called "Satsangis."

While people of any age are allowed to study the teachings, members are not initiated until they are at least 24 years old.

"Because the endeavor is very demanding, it makes sense to only accept people who are somewhat established in their lives," Rosen said.

In the western United States there are 34 Science of the Soul enclaves listed in the most recent newsletter, including groups in California, Oregon, Nevada, Hawaii, Arizona, Utah and Washington.

The spiritual leader, Singh lives in Beas in northern India. He is the nephew of the previous guru, Charan Singh. Before becoming a guru, Charan Singh was an attorney and is credited with building a hospital, home to an eye clinic that treats thousands of Indian citizens each year for diseases such as cataracts without charge. Charan Singh died in 1990.

Founded in 1861 as an offshoot of Sikhism, a 500-year-old Indian religion based on Hinduism, Science of the Soul took root in America in 1911. The organization has grown to 2 million followers worldwide, most of whom live in India, although there are groups throughout Europe and Asia as well as North America.

Critics of the current guru describe Singh as a "control freak" who often plans visits, then fails to show up, disappointing his followers. Formerly director of production for Orient Peninsular S.A., a watch manufacturer in Spain, he banned followers from using the Internet to spread the word about Science of the Soul in 1996.

Last year, Singh directed caretakers of church properties to remove all photographs of him, saying that devotees shouldn't look at his image as they endeavor to progress on their own spiritual development. He also banned note-taking during lectures.

While the previous guru allowed dozens of his photos to be taken and sold, only two Gurinder Singh photos exist and they are not supposed to be displayed, followers said.

Branching out

Since becoming guru, Singh has launched an extensive building drive — especially in North America — using volunteers to build study centers on donated properties.

In 1990, the church owned 23 properties in 14 countries in addition to large holdings in India. By 2000, after altering, expanding or selling properties, the church held 44 properties in 19 countries, according to Vince Saverese, the Western representative.

Members across the United States heeded the call to expand, building their own churches one weekend at a time. Today, the Petaluma property, bought for about \$1.2 million in 1996, is worth at least \$3 million, according to Berliner. The complex is smaller than the first American Science of the Soul center in North Carolina, which can hold 6,000 people.

The church has plans for two more North American centers: one outside Vancouver, British Columbia, and one near Toronto.

In the United States, Science of the Soul is led by four regional representatives. They are: Saverese, a Palm Springs chiropractor; Gene Ivash, a former physics professor who manages the Southwest region; Northeast and Central representative Frank Vogel, a Harvard Law professor; and architect and retired Georgia Tech professor John Templar, the Southeast sector representative who has designed most of the group's buildings for the past 25 years.

The American branch of Science of the Soul is considered a church by the Internal Revenue Service and has tax-exempt status.

Is it a cult?

Leaders of the church acknowledge that some people see the lifelong dedication and contributions of land as signs that Science of the Soul is a cult. The Yahoo Internet site where former Science of the Soul members post disparaging messages about church practices averages 1,200 visitors a day.

But cult experts did not express serious concern about Science of the Soul on the scale of Jim Jones' People's Temple, which was based in Mendocino County in the 1960s. "Nobody joins a cult. They join a group, then find that they can't leave or question or criticize as one can in a healthy organization," said Dr. Steven Hassan, an authority on religious cults. "Science of the Soul is not high on my radar right now, although they're on my list."

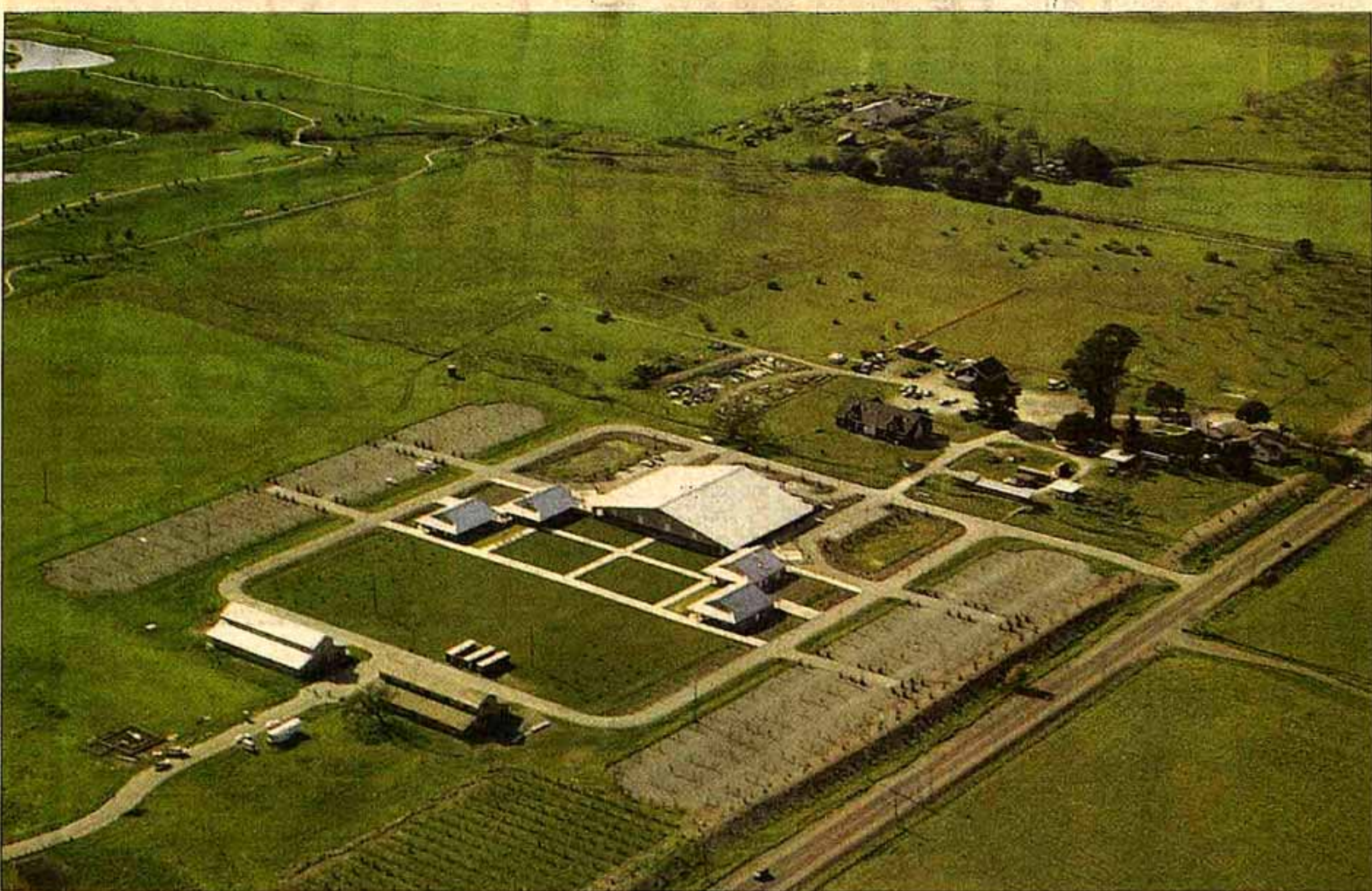
Berliner emphasized that unlike many groups viewed as cults, Science of the Soul does not solicit or encourage donations, although private donations, including money, real estate, or time on work crews are common. Members do extensive volunteer work, from pulling weeds to pouring concrete.

"Although we used professional engineers and architects, all of the work was done as 'seva,' or volunteer work, said Berliner, who has traveled to India several times over the past three decades to meet with the former guru, Charan Singh. "We accomplished a lot at about 25 percent of normal cost."

And these given gifts of time and possessions are part of a healthy spiritual journey, said Rosen, who also donated a holiday house in Hawaii. "I believe that a good deal of my success comes from my spirituality. To me, giving is a sign of humility."

New researchers *Vonnie Mattheus and Teresa Meikle* contributed to this report. You can reach Staff Writer *Rayne Wolfe* at 521-5240 or *rwolfe@pressdemocrat.com*.

CENTER OF THE SOUL



OVERHEAD SYMMETRY

From the front: Approaching the compound from the East Washington entrance, on the left is the foundation for the second caretakers' home.

Matching barns: Two two-story barns flank the road leading to parking groves on the east and west sides of the compound.

Quartet of buildings: The four smaller buildings in the center include a reception center, a kitchen, a first-aid building and a smaller meeting space with a library.

Giant meeting hall: The large hall, which can accommodate 2,500 people, faces the lawn, which offer outdoor meeting space.

In the back: Behind the new complex is the original farmhouse and water tower, which have been completely restored.

The surroundings: An orchard with 500 olive trees has been planted on the southeast corner of the property. To the east is Rooster Run golf course. To the south is the Petaluma Airport. The land that shares the northern property line is owned by the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, or Mormons.