

HAWAII ISLAND
Into the Onion

Inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright, the American architect Kendrick Bangs Kellogg gained international recognition during the 1960s and 1970s for his innovative work in organic architecture. Some of his designs resembled rolling waves, flowers, seashells and wings.

In 1961 Kellogg came to Kailua-Kona and built a house without walls. The inward curves of its three domes suggest the furl of the hāpu'u fern, while its lava terraces resemble Hawaiian heiau (temples). Its arched, multilayered roof panels are translucent, letting light into the house during the day and glowing at night like a lantern.

It was the odd roof that prompted one disapproving neighbor to sniff, "The

damned thing looks like an onion!" The criticism got back to the home's owner, Elizabeth von Beck, who had an *aha!* moment. She loved onions. And as the niece of the founder of the McCormick spice company, she felt dehydrated onions had been good to her family. From that point onward, the house von Beck commissioned Kellogg to build for her has been commonly known as the "Onion House."

As her taste in architecture might suggest, von Beck had an eccentric streak. She lost interest in the house when she took off to sail the South Pacific. The property fell into disrepair. Eventually she stopped paying the mortgage. When her niece Elizabeth McCormick bought the house in foreclosure in 1984, it was in sorry condition. Trees had sprouted from the planters, tearing up the masonry. Holes in the roof

allowed the rain in. Vines threatened to swallow the house whole. It was "like a ruined Mayan temple overtaken by the rainforest," McCormick says.

For the past three decades McCormick has been gradually restoring the property, making a big push in the last few years. It's still a work in progress, but today the Onion House looks new again. McCormick has moved out and turned it into one of Hawai'i Island's most unusual vacation rentals. "It's been said that this place is like walking into a piece of jewelry," she says. "My work of stewarding the Onion House is a tribute to the sense of flamboyant joy that inspired its creation."

—Tom Bentley / Photo by Jack Wolford

onionhousehawaii.com



Built in Kona in the 1960s by the American architect Kendrick Bangs Kellogg, an innovative proponent of organic architecture, the "Onion House" was named after a neighbor complained that "the damned thing looks like an onion." Its roof, translucent like onion skin, lets sunlight in by day and glows like a lantern at night. Over the years the house fell into disrepair, but it's now been restored and made into a vacation rental.