

The Dallas Morning News

February 9, 2001

HOT SAUCERS

Futuro homes' retro kitsch design still piques interest

Jeff Mosier Staff Writer

It's a long way from Area 51 and Roswell, N.M., but Rockwall County can also claim flying saucers as part of its mystique.

The two UFOs that landed here - and have taken root in local lore - are from an alien world, but don't peer through a telescope for answers. Instead, look to the mind of Finnish architect Matti Suuronen and a long-defunct manufacturing plant in Pennsylvania.

The two spaceship homes, so called because they resemble flying saucers, have established themselves as roadside landmarks, rural oddities that mark Rockwall County as one home to a 30-year-old fad from northern Europe.

One saucer sits abandoned on State Highway 276, barely inside the county line. The other, perched near a pasture outside McLendon-Chisholm, is home to a teenager. Both are examples of a late-1960s and early-'70s design called Futuro.

"It's nice except when people ask if it flies or other stupid questions," 19-year-old **Rachael Parker** said with a sigh.

Shaped like a cartoonish spacecraft, her 26-foot-wide flattened oval of a house stands on spidery legs that hold it about four feet above the ground. A set of stairs drops from the front door as if waiting for E.T. or Mork from Ork to step off.

Ms. Parker, a Rockwall High School graduate, said she wouldn't be living in a spaceship if not for a former used-car salesman named Jerry Moore. Mr. Moore died last summer of Parkinson's disease, but it was his office, and later his home, that put Rockwall County on the Futuro map.

He and his brother Terry opened a used-car business years ago on a small plot of land on Highway 276 at South Munson Road. Terry Moore said he couldn't remember when the pair started their business, but he remembered that his brother saw a Futuro in Garland and bought it for \$10,000, about what it would have cost new.

Terry Moore said he didn't know why his brother was fascinated with the 9,000-pound fiberglass house ringed with 16 oval windows.

"He just liked it," Terry Moore said. "I didn't think much of it. I kind of thought it was crazy."

After a few years and a divorce, Jerry Moore turned the orange saucer into a bachelor pad. And by that time, the spaceship had become a landmark in eastern Rockwall County.

Ralph Wylie said he uses the Futuro to give directions to his N&R Grocery, which is across the street.

"When I first called to get Dr Pepper delivered out here, I just told the lady that I was across from the spaceship," he said. "I told her that if any driver had made deliveries out here, he would know what I'm

talking about. My delivery got here, and the woman from Dr Pepper brought her family out to see it."

Mr. Wylie said many passers-by stopped to see Mr. Moore's Futuro, and he often gave tours of his home, which was filled with maps of star systems and books about UFOs.

Now, the house is run-down. The lawn is littered with empty beer and liquor bottles, and an old TV antenna is knocked over into the knee-high grass. The interior is filled with trash left by squatters and vandals.

Mario Santa Cruz of Dallas, who bought the land and spaceship from Jerry Moore, said he's thinking of opening a restaurant or some other business on the spot. The Futuro's future is up in the air.

"We haven't decided what to do with it yet," he said.

When the homes were first designed in Finland and manufactured by a Philadelphia company, Mr. Suuronen envisioned Futuro as a vacation home that could be taken anywhere by helicopter, according to magazine articles. The 500-square-foot homes were touted as a "portable playhouse" in a 1970 Playboy article. Science & Mechanics magazine said the Futuro carried advances in mass production and prefabrication to their "logical conclusion."

But the Futuro faded into obscurity by the mid-1970s. Finnish filmmaker Mika Taanila, who has also tackled such kitschy topics as Muzak, directed a short documentary about the history of Futuro and how the 1970s oil crisis torpedoed the dreams of cheap plastic homes, according to his Web site, www.sci.fi/phinnweb/circle/ektroverde/futuro.html.

It's unclear how many Futuros still exist. But there are sightings all over the country.

There is one on a hill beside Interstate 75 in Covington, Ky., overlooking motorists who cross the Ohio River into Cincinnati. Another sits behind the Design Center in San Diego.

A photo of Mr. Moore's old house even found its way into Dallas record stores in the late '90s.

Drummer Jerri Parkhurst drove past the house several years ago with a friend in the now-defunct Dallas band Juno Specter and snapped a picture of the spaceship with its front yard dotted with junk cars and a doghouse.

"It was just plopped down in the middle of nowhere," she said. "It looked like some alien landed there and turned into white trash."

That picture was the cover for Juno Specter's self-titled CD. Ms. Parkhurst, a fan of roadside curiosities, said she might even try to use the photo for the first release from her new band, Viva Maxitone.

The sight of the spaceship hunkered down on a rural highway also inspired Ms. Parker. When her family moved into their current home in 1995, there weren't enough rooms for all the children, and Ms. Parker, who previously had had a room of her own, balked at sharing with her siblings.

"She knew that the orange one [Mr. Moore's saucer] wasn't for sale, so she said, 'Buy me a spaceship, and I'll move,' " said her mother, Patty Allen. "She didn't want to move, so she gave what she thought was the impossible goal."

But Mrs. Allen did find one, and moved it to the back yard from the East Texas town of Marshall, where it had been used as a snow cone stand. Her daughter said she quickly became accustomed to the Futuro, which is filled with posters and display cases of dolls.

Friends didn't believe that she lived in a spaceship until they saw pictures or stopped by.

Ms. Parker said she's still pleased with her saucer and is glad she chose the Futuro rather than the renovated train car once used by her twin brother.

"It's fun to have people over," she said. "It scares the crud out of them."

Staff writer Jeff Mosier can be reached at 972-771-5191 and at jmosier@dallasnews.com.

Copyright © Dallas Morning News. All Rights Reserved.