



News

May 10, 2001

Meru-sic City USA

Local author claims Bicentennial Mall is a cosmic coincidence

By Heather Johnson

On a recent sunny Sunday afternoon, groups of children giggled with delight as they jumped through the fountains at the Bicentennial Mall, the expansive civic attraction that celebrates its fifth anniversary on June 1. While the youngsters tried to guess which circular disk would produce the next vertical stream of water, adult visitors were walking their dogs, lounging on blankets, or—yes—chanting a mantra with a shaman and his quartz crystal skull.

The ceremony, which attracted the attention of a handful of bewildered sightseers, was part of a tour conducted by William Henry, a self-proclaimed, self-taught investigative mythologist. The 38-year-old researcher published his ninth book, titled *City of Peace: The Holy Grail Secrets of Ancient and Modern Nashville*, last year. In his 120-page volume, Henry claims that the Bicentennial Mall is a recreation of Mount Meru, an ancient Hindu temple that, according to Tibetan Buddhist mythology, resides in Mongolia's fabled land of Shambhala. A second-century diagram of the temple, Henry believes, bears a striking resemblance to Tennessee's Capitol Mall. "Meru is considered the seat of cosmic powers, an axis that connects the Earth with the universe, the super-antenna of the inflow and outflow of the spiritual energies of our planet," he writes.

As with any work of art, each visitor leaves the mall with his or her own unique interpretation, although not many have compared it to a religious temple. "It is an outdoor space that has many sorts of abstract elements in it, so I think it is normal for people to draw different meanings to the place," says Kem Hinton of Tuck Hinton Architects, the principal architect for the Bicentennial Mall. "I think it's great that [Henry] wants to bring people to visit the place, although I think the reasons are a little strange."

Gene Teselle, an emeritus faculty member of Vanderbilt University's Divinity School, adds that many civic spaces maintain a connection to the past. "Any time people share a space, you'll find elements of a ritual celebration of heritage," he says.

Historians, mythologists, and other Nashvillians can agree that the Bicentennial Mall is an impressive space that provides a grand, unobstructed view of the state Capitol. Henry, however, believes the mall is also a \$55 million temple of synchronicity. Weather permitting,

he conducts monthly tours of the park. During an introductory lecture at Magical Journey bookstore, he explains that the Bicentennial Mall not only celebrates the collective identity of Tennessee, but also mirrors our own human makeup.

The mall, he says, is a detailed model of our complete chakra system, a Tantric teaching referring to the seven energy centers of the human body. “The Bicentennial Mall is an accumulator of healing energy,” Henry says of the 2,200-foot-long gathering space. “When you walk through this or any temple, you’re walking inside your human body and learning about yourself internally. When you know how this works, theoretically, you can activate your inner healing powers.”

A visit to the Bicentennial Mall, or the “Tennessee Meru Temple,” as Henry calls it, begins at the Tennessee Plaza, distinguished by one of the largest accurate renditions of a geographic area ever produced, according to Hinton’s book, *A Long Path: The Search for a Tennessee Bicentennial Landmark*. Engraved in granite, a 200-foot-long map of the state denotes the mall’s main entrance area, but according to Henry, it is a symbol for the “root” chakra, the beginning of our energy system, which corresponds to the body’s foundation at the base of the spine.

From there the tour travels north to chakra two, which corresponds to the lower back near the kidneys and is theoretically related to water. That point of interest is the Rivers of Tennessee monument, which contains 31 fountains representing the state’s dominant waterways. “The kidneys’ job is to refine blood, but in mystic anatomy, the kidneys transform water—the higher vibrational healing energies of which we are made—into wine, which is our blood,” Henry explains.

At the center of the Pathway of History, which Henry says represents the spinal cord, a polished black granite wall is cracked to indicate the trauma of the Civil War. Henry believes this area is the center of the heart chakra. “The heart marker is at the exact point where the Civil War is referenced,” he says. “The Civil War battles were between upper and lower America. The heart of America was split in two. It’s just a coincidence, but it’s a perfect coincidence.”

After winding its way through other locations in the park, the journey draws to its conclusion at the Third Eye chakra with a stop at the Court of Three Stars, a circular plaza marked by a trinity of white stars set inside a circle of blue. A carillon of 25-foot-tall columns containing 95 large bells chiming everything from “The Tennessee Waltz” to “The Chattanooga Choo-Choo” surrounds the symbol from the Tennessee flag. “On the ground of the Tennessee Temple, the three stars form pentacles,” Henry says, suggesting that the Capitol Mall is a pagan temple. “This is a symbol of witches. Who are the witches this was intended for?”

The final energy center, the crown chakra, is said to bring knowledge and wisdom when developed. Henry suggests that this portion of the mall is unfinished, and in a way, he’s right: Over the last two years, the Tennessee State Museum and its board have been working with the Building Commission of Tennessee on the construction of a new building along the east side of the Bicentennial Mall. According to Hinton, although the project is in the funding stages, it would represent the final piece of the mall project. “I think it would be enormously beneficial for the Tennessee State Museum to relocate,” he says. “It would give a year-round

option to the park. Also, the state museum is the place where our heritage is kept, guarded, and handled as an archive, so I think putting that near the park is a wonderful idea.”

But before tourism officials change the city’s souvenir refrigerator magnets to read “Meru-sic City,” it should be noted that the layout follows a basic geometric design used by civic designers worldwide. “Any time you have a linear park, you can have great vistas,” Hinton says of the mall’s aesthetic purpose. “I think you find rectilinear spaces in many places because there’s great spatial significance when you have a distant view of something.”

Henry admits that if a Mount Meru replica exists in Nashville, it is a difficult theory to prove, mainly because the temple he discovered in ancient Chinese manuscripts may be nothing more than fantasy. “Mount Meru is in Mongolia, but that exists on the edge of history and myth,” he says of the fabled structure. “You can’t actually go there today. It’s gone.” In his book, the author also compares the shape of the Bicentennial Mall to temples in Teotihuacán, Mexico; Beijing, China; and the Temple of Luxor in Egypt, noting their similar geometric shapes.

Teselle says that the shape of the space serves a certain purpose. “Greek temples were situated to geographically fit into their setting, and even Chinese and Egyptian cities were laid out with temples as the focal point,” he says. “The Bicentennial Mall points toward the Capitol. On aesthetic grounds, you want a long vista and then a focal point. Yes, there are certain religious-looking traits about it, but those same traits could be interpreted in a strict aesthetic sense. Whenever you are talking about accommodating a large group of people, you have to give a sweetening to the eye leading to a focal point.”

Henry agrees but continues to look for a deeper meaning in the spiritual realm, and plans to guide tours through a passageway that he believes can convey more than just Tennessee history. “Nashville is a hospital center,” he says. “It’s supposed to be about healing. But should we limit it to just the medical context, or should we say that by sheer luck, it just so happens we have a re-creation of a temple of humanity? We spent \$55 million just so that we can have an unobstructed view of the Capitol, and that’s it? What if there’s something more? I’m not talking about getting a license and bottling sacred water, but I am saying that if any of this is true, then we do have something special here and we should treat it as such.”

All contents © 1995-2006 City Press LLC, 2120 8th Ave. S., Nashville, TN 37204. (615) 244-7989.

All rights reserved. No part of this service may be reproduced in any form without the express written permission of City Press LLC, except that an individual may download and/or forward articles via email to a reasonable number of recipients for personal, non-commercial purposes.

NASHVILLE SCENE: [Home](#) | [Advertising](#) | [Jobs @ the Scene](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

SISTER SITES:

[City Pages](#) | [LA Weekly](#) | [OC Weekly](#) | [Seattle Weekly](#) | [Village Voice](#)

[Westword](#) | [Broward New Times](#) | [Cleveland Scene](#) | [Phoenix New Times](#) | [The Pitch](#)

[SF Weekly](#) | [East Bay Express](#) | [Houston Press](#) | [Dallas Observer](#) | [Miami New Times](#) | [River](#)

Front Times