



In 1971 Charles Ross, sculptor and mathematician, conceived an ambitious and innovative structure meant to transport humans to the stars and the stars to earth. Called Star Axis, the construction has, each year, been documented by photographer Edward Ranney.

Of sky and stone

Long-planned astronomical installation and potential cultural landmark reflects artistic quest for the stars

BY KENDRA TUTHILL

Have you ever imagined Cleopatra, in 26 BC, staring up at the sky at Polaris — the North Star and bright and pointy handle of the constellation called The Little Dipper — and wondered how different it looked to her than it does to you now?

In 1971, Charles Ross, sculptor and physics and mathematics fanatic who likely pondered the same, conceived of an enormous installation in which a visitor could walk through and feel, not intellectualize, Earth's connection to the stars. The project, called Star Axis, required a clear-sky location for this naked-eye observatory, as well as a surrounding sandstone for excavation purposes. Within just a few years after embarking on the project, Ross chose a red-hued Las Vegas, N.M., mesa as the proposed site.

"I wanted it to appear as if it grew out of the ground," Ross recently told *Local iQ* in a phone interview about the ongoing project.

In the years since then, and with the help of grants, donations and a Santa Rosa-based team of workers, Ross has labored through many arduous summers on the ambitious Star Axis project, which has developed into a structure akin to those found in ancient Egyptian ruins.

"I would venture to guess that (the Egyptians) had a similar goal, driven by a desire to feel the star alignments in your body," Ross said of the project. "The thread is the personal feeling you get from the stars, the way they focus you."

To evaluate a dynamic and gargantuan art piece such as this without actually being there, is a rather difficult process.

"You can't really understand it without experiencing it," Ross told *Local iQ*. "It's about the feeling you get when you're grasping your relationship to the stars. Ultimately, it's about the earth's environment — both in time and space — extending out to the stars."

EXHIBIT

The Shape of Time

PHOTOGRAPHS OF STAR AXIS BY EDWARD RANNEY, 1979-2009

Artist talk with Edward Ranney and Charles Ross Through Sep. 20

RECEPTION:

1p, Sun., Aug. 30

Albuquerque Museum of Art & History
2000 Mountain NW,
505.243.7255

staraxis.org
cabq.gov/museum

curious must satisfy their curiosity with the subject through Ross' website, staraxis.org, and Ranney's photographic documentation with the following meditation. But for those with the patience and willingness to grasp such and abstract and uncompleted idea, read on.

Imagine if you will, that you have stumbled upon a remote desert structure far away from civilized society. The foundation of the edifice before looks ancient, but its geometry and precision of design is so modern that it communicates some type of higher, perhaps alien, intelligence. As you approach the odd looking building, you are confronted with a sharply triangular opening, the Equatorial Chamber, angled exactly 90 degrees away from the Star Tunnel base and framing the

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On August 30, Ross, who was one of the originating artists of the LAND/ART Movement, will speak with Edward Ranney, the photographer who annually documented each Star Axis stage, at the Albuquerque Museum of Art & History. The conversation will be presented in conjunction with Ranney's exhibition, *The Shape of Time: Photographs of Star Axis*.

Because Star Axis is not yet open to the public, and won't be until its completion, the astronomically

stars as they draw along the equator. The Star Tunnel, which stretches from seven stories beneath ground to five stories above, aligns itself perfectly with Earth's axis, directing you toward Polaris. As you step up each stair, you find a date written on it, some time between 11,000 B.C. and 15,000 A.D. You look up to the tunnel's sky opening and there it is: Polaris positioned just as it Cleopatra saw it.

"You would see the opening at the top of the tunnel and you would see the circle of sky she would see," Ross explained.

The literal light-at-the-end-of-the-Star-Tunnel from the base is quite small, "about the size of a dime held at arm's length," Ross said. Moving through the tunnel, the opening expands, widening the smile of Polaris' transit, or, from an outer-space-perspective, Earth's top-like wobble.

After having climbed several stories, you have traversed a 26,000-year North Star procession. Once at the top of Star Axis, you are presented with your next celestial discovery: the Solar Pyramid, a solstice-designed structure cutting seasonal shadows across the landscape. Inside, you enter the Hour Chamber, which presents viewers an exact visual hour in time, rotating as stars course through a triangular slit, coming into view in the west and exiting in the east.

The stars' alignments, rather than the builder's imagination, have designed the architecture of this impressive observatory. Future visitors will be able to move inside this fixed celestial sphere, which is broken into arcs and angles like a planet flattened onto a page, which, if the designers of Star Axis have successfully executed their plans, those intangible far-off points will have ostensibly reached you, the viewer, the earthling, the curious resident of the Milky Way galaxy.