



1996

# Fixing Dreams: Preserving America's Folk Art Environments

Jay Laurence Platt  
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Historic Preservation and Conservation

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FIXING DREAMS  
PRESERVING AMERICA'S FOLK ART ENVIRONMENTS

Jay Laurence Platt

A THESIS

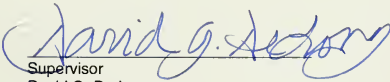
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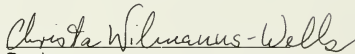
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MASTER OF SCIENCE

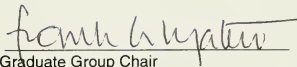
1996



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is dedicated to the makers of folk art environments – past, present, and future. The joy and inspiration and head-scratching wonder that their creations provoke is boundless. This alone makes the task of preserving their works vital, but it is also daunting. Therefore, I extend this dedication to include those who take up the challenge and work to ensure that the beguiling power of folk art environments will continue to be experienced by our successors.

I would like to thank both David De Long, my thesis advisor, and Christa Wilmanns-Wells, my thesis reader, for their gentle guidance and infinite patience. Many thanks go to Seymour Rosen, who gave me access to both the SPACES archive and his own vast knowledge of the subject – his help was invaluable. Thanks are also due to Beth Secor of the Orange Show Foundation, who happily let me rummage through its archive for a couple of days. Finally, I must thank Leonard Knight, creator of Salvation Mountain, and Louis Lee, builder of Lee's Oriental Garden, whose graciousness in making time for interviews with me is far surpassed by their graciousness in offering their works to the world.



## I. THE FOLK ART ENVIRONMENT

*I will make the poems of materials, for I think they are to be the most spiritual poems*

Whitman, *Starting from Paumanok*

Poems of materials, transformed from things at-hand into things from deep inside, improbable and fragile as dreams. In the California desert, Leonard Knight is single-handedly building a technicolored mountain dedicated to the proposition that 'God is Love'. Using straw-reinforced adobe and donated paint, Knight is besting nature with his reworking of a low desert bluff into what he calls Salvation Mountain. [Figure 1] This huge, hallucinatory work rises above the desert floor like a primary-colored mirage. It is emblazoned with sculpted and painted quotations from the New Testament as well as bas relief representations of flower-bedecked meadows, waterfalls, and an as-yet unfinished wave-strewn lake. The continued existence of this gigantic artistic non sequitur is currently threatened, not so much by the infrequent rains that could wash it all away as by state agencies that would like to see the entire site bulldozed and hauled off to a toxic waste dump. Many oppose this



1. Leonard Knight. *Salvation Mountain, Niland, California.*





possibility and would like to see it saved so that Knight can continue his work there; Knight would like it to last forever.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in the 1920s, Latvian immigrant Edward Leedskalnin began working on a project in Florida that, in contrast to Salvation Mountain, could very well last for centuries. [Figure 2] Working under cover of darkness to guard his construction techniques from potential prying eyes,

Leedskalnin carved large pieces of local 'coral rock' (actually oolitic limestone) into a group of objects which anticipated in vain the arrival of 'Sweet Sixteen', the young girl who had jilted him at a Latvian altar years before. He sculpted stone beds for his 'family', love seats, and a heart-shaped table. Another table was shaped like his adopted state while a tall obelisk was topped with the Latvian star. He later moved all of this by truck to a larger site south of Miami where he continued to quarry stone and single-handedly built a large walled compound, using blocks that could weigh several tons apiece,



2. Edward Leedskalnin. Coral Castle, Homestead, Florida.

to house his creations and await his idealized love's return. Leedskalnin died in 1951 without ever seeing his love again. Since then what is now called Coral Castle (he called it Rock Gate Park after the nine ton gate that could be turned on its pivot with the lightest touch) has become a minor



tourist attraction. Unlike Salvation Mountain, its continued preservation is, for the present, not an issue – it even stood fast against Hurricane Andrew which devastated the area around it in 1992.

Based upon the descriptions above and even upon further examination, these two sites seem to have little in common. The intention of their creators, their use of materials, their locations and relation to their environs, and their impact upon visitors are quite different yet the sites are linked with hundreds of others throughout the country that some observers call folk art environments. Many of these sites are recognized as important artworks that stand as testament to the power of individual initiative and the indomitable urge to create. Many others remain undiscovered or merely unrecognized; all of them have been dismissed by some as "junk". Regardless of their level of exaltation or disdain, these environments are all potentially endangered by the forces of development, neglect, poverty, and ignorance. While these are the forces that threaten most elements of our built environment, their impact on folk environments can be especially severe as these sites are often rather fragile creations and tend to quickly succumb to such destructive forces. Salvation Mountain and Coral Castle represent the extremes of the durability of folk art environment with the latter being the exception and the former the rule.

The purpose of this discussion is to suggest that the historic preservation movement in the United States become more involved with the fate of this country's folk art environments. By learning to recognize these sites despite their idiosyncrasies, coming to understand their common bonds, and by becoming familiar with their special needs, preservationists have the chance to be among their most effective advocates. This has been proven in a number of individual situations but a nationwide awareness of the sites and the problems they face will help ensure that important examples are maintained that otherwise might be lost. The focus herein is solely on American sites not because folk art environments are unique to this country – there are probably hundreds of them in other countries<sup>2</sup> – but because the tools and techniques of the American preservation



movement are specific to this country's political and social climate and are not necessarily internationally transferable.

The relatively secure fate of Coral Castle is a rarity in this country; environments tend to face a wide variety of problems which make them difficult to preserve though there is now a growing interest in saving them. If this interest is to be successfully capitalized upon, it is critical to study these environments and the preservation efforts that have been made on their behalf over the years. Such study will enable the establishment of a framework that can help guide future efforts to save the best examples of these often misunderstood landmarks of creativity from the needless destruction that is too often their fate.

Folk art environments have a tremendous amount of power – they are sources of joy and wonder, awe and mystery, amusement and sadness, beauty and ugliness. They share this power with all forms of artistic expression, but until quite recently, they have been shunned by those who place (or perhaps more as decorators, arrange) objects in the art world's pantheon. The world of museums and galleries is not alone in failing to embrace environments or reaching out to them only tentatively; academia, government agencies, and the general public can also be faulted when important sites are lost to neglect and ignorance. These sites – be they rock gardens, concrete towers, bottle houses, sculptural ensembles or wildly decorated front yards – are works that fall between many cracks and suffer because of it. They are part architecture, part sculpture, and part landscape design and thus have trouble finding one discipline that will claim them as its own and work to assure their continued existence.

Part of the problem is that environments are inherently difficult to define. Some of the qualities that lead to this difficulty include the fact that their forms and materials vary widely, they are not regionally or culturally specific, and they are built for as many reasons as there are environment-



makers. With such variation between sites, it is difficult at first to understand exactly what links exist between sites such as Salvation Mountain and Coral Castle. It is only through the actual experience of various sites, accompanied by research into their origins, that the common links between them are perceived. In an attempt to overcome these difficulties, an inclusive and usable definition has been developed by Seymour Rosen, who has studied environments at length and founded the first group dedicated to their preservation:

Folk art environments are handmade, personal places containing large-scale sculptural and/or architectural structures built by self-taught artists generally during their later years. These environments usually contain a component of accumulated objects, often those discarded by the larger society, which have been transformed and juxtaposed in unorthodox ways. The spaces are almost always associated with the creator's home or business and have developed without formal plans. The sites tend to be immobile and monumental in amount of components or in scale. Owing less allegiance to popular art traditions and more to personal and cultural experiences and availability of materials, the artists are motivated by a need for personal satisfaction rather than by a desire to produce anything marketable or to gain notoriety. Most sites in this country have been developed by people who are in middle age to old age, and represent a substantial and sustained commitment of time and energy.<sup>3</sup>

Developing a definition for environments is a tricky business because a compelling linkage must be established between diverse sites without overwhelming their strikingly individual characteristics. The definition above, though long and a bit unwieldy, is the most successful proposed to date; its elements will be analyzed in greater detail in Chapter 3. The utility of this definition is displayed by its applicability to the following four environments which represent a small sample of America's major folk art environments. Though these site differ widely in terms of





their appearance, construction method, location, and message, the above definition applies to each of them.

St. EOM's Land of the Pasaquan (generally referred to simply as "Pasaquan") stands as one of the most improbable and mysterious of all folk environments.<sup>4</sup> [Figure 3] It was built on a cleared plot of rural Georgia pineland by Eddie Owen Martin, who dubbed himself St. EOM after a visionary experience. Martin's self-beatification is but one element of his colorful life. Running away from an abusive home (where Pasaquan would later rise) at age fourteen, Martin ended up in New York City where he supported himself by hustling, performing in drag revues, dealing pot, gambling, and later by telling fortunes and reading tea leaves. His visions led to the development of a personal religion that blended Pre-Columbian, Native American, and oriental



3. St. EOM. Land of Pasaquan, Buena Vista, Georgia.

beliefs that he called Pasaquoyanism. After the death of his mother and the inheritance of her house, St. EOM returned to Georgia and began building Pasaquan which he worked on from 1957 at age forty-nine until his death in 1986.



He created an amazing grouping of brightly painted and geometrically decorated temples and pagoda-like buildings which are highlighted with scalloped tin gingerbread trim. Connecting these are a series of cement-covered masonry walls with scalloped tops that are mounted by undulating sculpted snakes. The walls possess the same geometric mandala designs as the buildings as well as bas-relief torsos and faces and totem-pole flanked gateways. These walls break the site up into a series of outdoor rooms that have a ceremonial and processional feel. To wander through these spaces is to truly step into another world; the rural South, itself a powerful place filled with associations, disappears and one is enveloped by the coherent vision of one man's private world. EOM built Pasaquan to, "...have somethin' to identify with, 'cause there's nothin' I see in this society that I identify with or desire to emulate. Here I can be in my own world, with my temples and designs and the spirit of God."<sup>5</sup> EOM had rejected this place early in his life, when he came back, he did so purely on his own terms. The sense that EOM chose to retreat from the world-at-large in order to create his own solipsistic universe is palpable to Pasaquan's visitors. It is one of America's most powerful and poignant environments.

Pasaquan represents an extreme of the folk environment-as-personal statement. Most of the artists discussed here, while creating very personal spaces, are more responsive to and reflective of the world around them. An example of this is found in Fred Smith's Concrete Park in Phillips, Wisconsin.<sup>6</sup> [Figure 4] In 1950 Smith, age sixty-four, began his environment on the site of his house and the tavern he had built of local stone fourteen years earlier. By 1964, when he was crippled by a stroke, Smith had filled three acres of land with 203 concrete sculptures covered with colorful shards of glass – many of which conveniently came from his tavern next door. The sculptures represent persons and scenes from local history (for example a notoriously drunken double-wedding from early in the century) as well as figures from folklore (Paul Bunyan) and popular culture (the Lone Ranger's Silver). These are all grouped in various ensembles and





4. Fred Smith. Concrete Park, Phillips, Wisconsin.

are linked by their common materials, technique, and placement in a park-like setting to which Smith welcomed visitors. Smith's park bears some relation to a building tradition found throughout the Upper Midwest. Roadside "colossi" – monumental sculptures of things such as locally-prized fish, produce, and legends (Paul Bunyan being especially popular) – dot the region's landscape. Though found in every part of the country, there is a preponderance of them in Minnesota and Wisconsin.<sup>7</sup> The Concrete Park's inclusion of a Paul Bunyan statue and an ensemble piece depicting a giant muskellunge being dragged by draft horses tie the site to this regional interest in myth and tall tales, but materials and technique used by Smith, along with the consistency and extent of his vision, place his environment squarely within the focus of this discussion.

Where the Concrete Park is filled with whimsical tributes to the lives and legends of its region, Ed Galloway's Totem Pole Park in Foyil, Oklahoma, carries a broader, more serious message.<sup>8</sup>

[Figure 5] This collection of concrete structures and sculptures that Galloway, a woodworker and fiddle-maker by trade, built between 1937 and 1962 (when he died at age eighty-two) stands as a



tribute to the American Indian, particularly those who resisted the forced settlement of their lands. The site is dominated by a sixty-foot high concrete "totem pole" that rises from the back of a turtle, the world's symbolic support in tribal cosmology.<sup>9</sup> This structure was molded around an armature of scrap metal and

local sandstone which were scavenged by Galloway. More reminiscent of a strangely foreshortened limbless tree than a traditional totem pole, the structure is covered with painted busts of Indians in varying tribal dress as well as totemic symbols such as fish, salamanders, and arrow heads. The pole is crowned with nine-foot tall standing figures representing the chiefs of the four tribes (Apache, Sioux, Nez Perce, and Comanche) which Galloway believed put up the best fight against westward expansion.



5. Ed Galloway. Totem Pole Park, Foyil, Oklahoma

Other elements of the environment, including an eleven-sided 'Fiddle House', reflect the same theme. The Totem Pole Park represents a type of environment that is overtly expressive of the artists beliefs and values; in other cases, these sites can be much more inscrutable.

Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village [Figure 6] is an example of an environment where meaning is more obscure and hidden, if indeed any meaning was intended by the artist (Prisbrey covered a







6. Tressa 'Grandma' Prisbrey. Bottle Village, Simi Valley, California.

door at the site with small signs bearing aphorisms one of which reads, "Don't Tell Us What We Mean – Let Us Figure It Out For Ourselves").<sup>10</sup> Built in what is now Simi Valley, California, this environment consists of thirteen structures with walls made completely of coursed bottles of varying colors arranged in different patterns. Various shrines, planters, walkways, and fountains made also of bottles and a host of unusual building materials such as fluorescent tubes, headlights, and electrical insulators fill the rest of the site. The first structure on the site was ostensibly built to house Tressa 'Grandma' Prisbrey's enormous collection of artistically arranged and mounted pencils (most accounts report a total of 17,000); obviously inspired, she continued to build, each structure different from its predecessors. Prisbrey began work in the mid-1950s when she was in her mid-fifties and kept building until the early 1970s when she stopped because she had run out of room, though she stayed on, tending her creation, until illness forced her to move on in 1982. Of the sites described thus far, Prisbrey's is the only one that is best experienced from its interiors rather than its exterior. From inside, the walls provide a luminous, colorful background for the various tableaux arranged by Prisbrey from her collection of dolls, figurines,



and bric-a-brac which she embellished with everything from sequins to pop-tops. Bottle Village is one of the most overwhelming folk art environments in terms of the density and variety of its materials; like all major environments it stands as a testament to the powerful creativity and immense dedication of its maker.

The foregoing examples display just a segment of the range of expression encountered in folk art environments. These sites know no boundaries; they are found in urban, rural, and suburban settings throughout the world.<sup>11</sup> They are built by people of diverse backgrounds for equally diverse reasons. In the United States, there are over four hundred known environments – large and small, major and minor – with examples found in every state.<sup>12</sup> There are regional pockets that some observers find particularly rich in environments, notably the Deep South and California. Tom Patterson, who studies Southern environments, claims that, "No other region contains such an amazing wealth of them as the south." He goes on to qualify this assertion by adding that, "At any rate, this has certainly appeared to be the case over the last decade...."<sup>13</sup> The reasons he cites for this include the fact that, "the Protestant work ethic is still taken seriously by most traditional Southerners," and that they tend to share a "spirit of self-sufficiency."<sup>14</sup> The region's warm climate, which allows year round work, is also mentioned. Similar claims are made for California, with its, "...mild climate, the availability of wide open spaces [in the 1950s], and the state's traditional attractiveness to pioneers and free spirits."<sup>15</sup> While it is possible that these boosters of regionalism are onto something, the existence of folk art environments in every corner of the country – from the Puritanical Northeast to the frozen Midwest, the rainy Northwest to the wind-whipped Plains – makes it more important to focus on their universality rather than on the possibility that some areas may have more environments per capita than another.

The motivation for and meaning of many of these folk art environments may seem obscure, but the artists who build them clearly choose to express themselves in a very public way – these sites



can be considered to be examples of uncommissioned public art. Each example has a story to tell or allows imaginative viewers to create their own. The finest environments should be allowed to take their places alongside the artworks and elements of the built environment that are routinely preserved in the name of maintaining a physical link with our artistic and cultural heritage.

It should be noted here that the label 'folk art environment' (and its variations 'folk environment' and, in context, 'environment') is used throughout this discussion despite some controversy over the use of the word 'folk'. Those who oppose its use, primarily anthropologists and folklorists, believe that the word implies a communal tradition, handed down through the generations.<sup>16</sup> To them, folk art includes items such as quilts, duck decoys, and 'naive' paintings by untrained artists who use traditional representational formats. Others, often from the art community, use "folk" as a synonym for "untrained" and include the work of both tradition-based and idiosyncratic artists within the "folk art" rubric.<sup>17</sup> Some, heeding the claim on "folk" awarded to (though rarely made by) tradition-bound artists, use a variety of terms to fill the void – 'visionary', 'grassroots', 'self-taught', 'intuitive', and 'outsider' can all be used alongside "art" or "art environment". Each has its own shade of meaning, but ultimately they all refer to the same works.<sup>18</sup> The author of the introduction to a 1974 exhibit on folk art environments complained that, "...we have no adequate name for them."<sup>19</sup> The most recent book on the subject, published in 1995, similarly holds that, "no one, it seems, will ever be able to name it accurately."<sup>20</sup> Clearly, two decades of debate have not been able to resolve this issue.

As the preservationist's first responsibility is to the sites themselves, it becomes pointless to get too involved in the semantic morass that has developed around them. "Folk art environment" is the preferred term herein because it has the most currency for preservationists. Interestingly, it was coined by members of the first nationwide organization dedicated to preserving environments<sup>21</sup> and is still used by them after more than a decade of watching the popularity of



other terms wax and wane. Its use to designate the sites that are listed on the National Register and many of those that are on various state and local registries is also a compelling argument for its use here. Rather than worrying about using an inadequate title, it is important to follow the debate surrounding the genre's terminology. We must be prepared to be fluent with new terms which may come into general use, even those that are only partially successful, so long as they adequately encompass the rich diversity of folk art environments.<sup>22</sup>

The professional preservationist can expect to play an increasingly important role in the process of preserving folk art environments as more attention is paid to these sites and their importance becomes more widely recognized. This paper is intended to provide some of the basic information regarding environments and their preservation that a person with little previous knowledge of such sites should have in order to make educated decisions. The environments mentioned within this paper were selected from the hundreds of possibilities for several reasons. Because of the preservation focus of this discussion, most sites included have received some attention from the preservation community or from scholars in other fields (and often both). This automatically limits the number of sites to choose from. Also, most of the sites included have been visited by the author, an important consideration as it facilitates an understanding of the aspects of a site that contribute to its designation as a folk art environment and of that site's role in its community. After reviewing, and in many cases exploring, scores of environments, it appears that the sampling of sites discussed here does not deviate significantly from the range of examples that are documented elsewhere or have been discovered in the field.

The preservationist will generally encounter folk art environments individually – often as the provider of a site's preservation plan or conservation treatment, or as an arbiter of funding or historic designation requests. The remainder of this paper is designed to provide a macro-to-micro view of environments in order to help the preservationist understand aspects of a site





ranging from its cultural context to its specific preservation needs. Chapter 2 focuses on the development of interest in folk environments. Various approaches to their study are explored, some of which turn out to be more fruitful than others. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth analysis of the various elements which contribute to the designation of a site as a 'folk art environment' and then goes on to suggest certain of the qualities that these sites can possess which make some seem more significant than others (while acknowledging the problems inherent in the designation of significance). Finally, Chapter 4 explores the preservation movement's unique suitability for the protection of environments and details some of the efforts that it has made on their behalf.



## II. THE STUDY OF FOLK ART ENVIRONMENTS

Tracing the historical development of the folk art environment is difficult at best. Almost without exception, the creators of these places work without knowledge of each other's creations and outside the framework of any communal tradition that could be construed to connect them. There are occasional examples of environment-makers being inspired to begin their work after seeing another environment, but this is apparently a rare situation.<sup>1</sup> Generally, this form of inspiration results in rather minor environments such as those that are occasionally discovered down the street or in the neighborhood of major ones. In most cases these are probably directly inspired by, though not necessarily similar to, the neighboring work. None of these small "flower bed" environments have been discovered, however, which take on the qualities and importance of the majority of the works discussed here.<sup>2</sup> If it is not possible to trace patterns of influence between sites, what might the best approach to studying the history of folk art environments be?

The lack of overt causal links between sites has led some to suggest that individual works stand alone as purely idiosyncratic expression. In 1979 a British art exhibit entitled *Outsiders* included several environments. It claimed to document an "art without precedent or tradition."<sup>3</sup> The catalogue's essays suggest that the artists discussed therein were isolated from all outside influences and that their work sprang full-blown from their heads. Roger Cardinal, curator of the exhibit and the person who coined the "outsider" label, wrote of the exhibit's artists: "They seem to work on their own, for themselves, for the fun of it. They know nothing of the trends and snobberies of the cultural centre, with its beflagged museums and smart contemporary galleries. They work to no commission, without links or debts to the establishment. Many are social misfits; all prefer the rule of the imagination to the strictures of officialdom."<sup>4</sup> He goes on to claim that these artists turn not just from the world of art but from the world itself: "The Outsider thus loves to be enclosed in the radiant space of his own creativity. It is a self-sufficient domain. While the



world outside may be alien and unmanageable, this world within is reliable and accommodating."<sup>5</sup> Statements such as these may be true for a very few autistic or schizophrenic artists who have been institutionalized for much or all of their lives, but they do not apply to any of the artists discussed here. While these people are often viewed as eccentric by those around them, they are still no more or less beholden to the world around them than anyone else. The artists who make folk art environments are inevitably responsive to precedents and traditions that are the unavoidable birthright of members of any society. They are not, however, typically aware of the past or contemporaneous activity of their fellow environment-makers. It is correct to suggest that there is no single historic thread, no precedent and tradition, tying these environments or their creators together – environments are truly personal creations. If folk art environments are culturally responsive, but not directly linked to each other, are there broader patterns that can help explain their development?

No one knows when or by whom the first folk art environments were built. The earliest extant examples that we have date to the nineteenth-century, but it is clear that the impulse to create them is rooted in a basic human need for outward expression. That this expression often takes a form, as it does with environments, to which we attribute aesthetic values is not surprising. Franz Boas found that, "All human activities may assume forms that give them aesthetic values."<sup>6</sup> The human desire to manipulate the environment in ways that can be evaluated (at least in hindsight) aesthetically goes back to the earliest known cave paintings. At this basic level, folk art environments can be placed on a continuum of human expression that runs directly from pre-history to the present. One observer sees folk art and environments as reflections of, "...the attempt to make beauty, or meaning, or perhaps just connections [in a society that is constantly evolving]."<sup>7</sup> This impulse has undoubtedly been with us as a species for a long time.



Certain parallels can be found between many of the environments discussed here and other forms of built expression, both ancient and modern. The Mississippian people's mound-building tradition that flourished between present-day Georgia and Illinois between A.D. 700 and 1000 can be compared to Leonard Knight's sculpting of the landscape at Salvation Mountain.<sup>8</sup> The Kwakiutl, and other neighboring tribes along the coasts of today's Vancouver Island and British Columbia, have long embellished their buildings with sculptural elements and painted motifs that bear great formal resemblance to many folk art environments.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Italian Renaissance gardens, such as the one at Bomarzo or the Villa Medici's in Pratolino, can evoke the otherworldliness and improbability of modern environments.<sup>10</sup> A more recent example finds the work of Antonio Gaudi in urban Barcelona reminding one of both the Palais Idéal in rural France, and the Watts Towers in suburban Los Angeles.

For the purpose of developing an historic lineage for folk art environments, these resemblances are ultimately superficial, however. No linkage, either in terms of communal tradition or direct influence, exists between the examples above and the environments that are reminiscent of them. Whatever similarities they do possess leads one to speculate that the creators of these places are all drawing from a creative wellspring that is neither culturally nor temporally specific. We may never know if any sites that we would now define as folk art environments predate those that we are aware of today. We do have reason to believe, though, that the creative impulse behind them is timeless and universal.

Wherever and whenever they are built, environments are sure to be known by, and become a part of, their communities. No matter how personal the meaning or form of a site and in spite of its rationale, it is still knowingly placed before the public and is subject to the scrutiny and judgment of others. For most environments, this represents the extent of the discourse. Neighbors and passersby comment on the work, the artist's family and friends do the same. Reaction may range





from ecstatic to hostile, but it generally does not extend far beyond the site's immediate surroundings. This was especially true thirty years ago when folk art environments were completely unrecognized as a groupable phenomenon that extended beyond individual sites. Prior to their characterization as a related group, only a few sites had received any widespread recognition which, for the most part, came from the art world. The attention given to these sites by artists, critics, and scholars gave them their first validation as "art" and set them on the path toward the present concern for their preservation as important cultural artifacts.

Folk art environments received their first nudge into the spotlight when a French site, the Palais Idéal in Hauterives (near Lyon), came to the attention of the Surrealists. This amazing structure was built by Ferdinand Cheval between 1879 and 1912. While on his rounds as the postman of several local villages, Cheval stumbled over a stone that he described as "so bizarre and at the same time so picturesque" that he kept it and began to collect tens of thousands more like it.<sup>11</sup> With only cement, wire, and these stones he went on to build the fantastic agglomeration of grottoes, temples, columns, and fountains that remains today one of the most elaborate and important environments anywhere. The importance of the Palais Idéal for this discussion stems from its discovery in 1931 by André Breton who found that this local oddity confirmed many of the notions of automatism and "convulsive beauty" that he was developing as theoretician of the surrealist movement.<sup>12</sup> Breton went on to include the site in several of his works in which it was viewed as an artistic representation of the unconscious and an example of the transformative power of the imagination. Though they used the Palais to their own ends as evidence favoring their theories of creativity, the Surrealists brought the site to a new level of attention. They helped establish the awareness that expressions such as the Palais represent high-level creative output rather than simply being the whimsical diversions of naive countryfolk. The existence of other, generally less elaborate, environments in France and elsewhere proved that Cheval's was not a lone voice.<sup>13</sup>



As with the Palais Idéal, American folk art environments lay in relative obscurity for years – very little is known about their early history. Two sites are known to have been built during the last half of the nineteenth century but neither remain today. Any other sites from this, or an earlier, period can be presumed to be either destroyed, so decayed as to be unrecognizable, or still undiscovered. More research, mixed with a lot of luck, may turn up information about the location, extent, and variety of early American environments but, at present, only a scant amount of documentation of early sites has been uncovered. A "Father Bliss" was reported by an 1870 newspaper to have surrounded his Kansas home with "buffalo skulls, empty tin cans, and other assorted trash items [that he] collected in his tireless campaigns against waste."<sup>14</sup> Sometime late in the century, a Florida woman called "Queenie" created a 'boneyard' of animal (and, some said, human) bones which became a popular enough tourist attraction to support the printing of postcards.<sup>15</sup> Obviously, these two sites had the power to draw attention to themselves; this is true of all environments. It was not until much later when these began to reach a broader audience, however, that their importance as cultural artifacts became apparent. For this reason, tracing the historiography of folk art environments becomes the most fruitful approach for gaining an understanding of why so many of these sites are believed to be worthy of preservation.

Academics and artists in the United States took longer than their French counterparts to recognize the importance of their native folk art environments. The first site to receive any national critical attention was the Watts Towers in Los Angeles. [Figure 7] This soaring group of mosaic-encrusted towers and other structures formed from a latticework of concrete arcs and rings is the product of one man's thirty-three years of labor – the same amount of time it took Cheval to complete his *palais*. The towers were created between 1921 and 1954 by Sam Rodia<sup>16</sup>, an Italian immigrant, who built them next to his house in the quiet working-class neighborhood of Watts that is now synonymous with urban poverty and social unrest.



Throughout most of their period of construction, the Watts Towers remained unknown to all but its neighbors and to commuters on the Big Red Car trains who could watch the spires gradually rise as they passed by on their daily commute in or out of downtown.

This status changed somewhat in 1951, when the Los Angeles-based journal *Arts & Architecture* published an article that considered the towers as an artwork – the earliest known consideration of an American environment as such.<sup>17</sup> Being Los Angeles, the next step was a film; in 1952 a USC student produced a documentary on the towers that, through its interviews with Rodia and shots of him at work, is the source of much of the information that is known



7. Sam Rodia. Watts Towers, Los Angeles, California.

about Rodia's work methods and his thoughts on the towers.<sup>18</sup> Europeans also recognized the towers' importance. In her 1953 book *Follies and Grottos*, Barbara Jones held the towers to be, "...superior to all but the finest work of the eighteenth century [in Europe]...Rodillas [sic] is a genius..."<sup>19</sup> None of these works had a wide impact, however, and the towers were still known to a relative few art world cognoscenti.

This status changed in 1959 when the city of Los Angeles declared that the Watts Towers were unsafe and ordered their demolition. The story of the battle to preserve the towers will be briefly



related in Chapter 4, here it is important to look at the fallout from the fight. The Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts was formed by a small group of local aficionados intent on preventing the loss of the site. They quickly recognized that they would have to garner significant support to justify their stance that Rodia's creation was anything more than what the city's engineer called a "pile of junk."<sup>20</sup> To this end, they put together a high-powered list of authorities who were more than willing to suggest not only that the towers were art, but a highly important work as well. The publicity generated by the Committee and its group of experts – which included Buckminster Fuller, Kenneth Clark, Philip Johnson, Carl Sandburg, Clement Greenberg, and James Johnson Sweeney – brought the Watts Towers to a nationwide audience, albeit a fairly educated one, for the first time. Today, the site remains the most widely known, and for many, the most important, folk art environment in America.

Beginning in the 1960s, some members of the art-world of museums and galleries began to react to the social protest of the period by calling for an opening up of the rather entrenched, academically-oriented practices of the majority of arts institutions.<sup>21</sup> The ivory tower was seen as undemocratic and unresponsive to the presence of concrete towers like Rodia's. Slowly, attempts were made to rectify this situation. A 1961 exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art entitled "The Art of Assemblage" included several photographs of the Watts Towers.<sup>22</sup> In 1962, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art featured an exhibit on the Towers that was curated by Seymour Rosen,<sup>23</sup> who had recently been involved in the fight to save them and later went on to found a preservation group, SPACES (Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments). This non-profit group, founded in 1978, continues to function as one of the nation's most vocal advocates on behalf of folk art environments.

Artists too began to pay attention to forms of expression, such as the newly-appreciated environments, that had previously been unknown or marginalized. Allen Kaprow, an artist who





was a main instigator/auteur of the Happenings of the early-to-mid 1960s, drew attention to a monumental environment created by Clarence Schmidt in Woodstock, New York. Schmidt's House of Mirrors was a constantly growing and changing structure, built between 1948 and 1971, that at its peak was seven stories high. [Figure 8] Built primarily from discarded building materials, it appeared from the outside to be an elaborate pile of various sized windows. Inside it consisted of thirty-five interconnected rooms containing various shrines and decorative elements, all lit by



8. Clarence Schmidt. *House of Mirrors [destroyed]*, Woodstock, New York

hundreds of small lights. The site was consumed by what must have been a spectacular fire in 1971, but the many photos of it taken prior to this reveal an environment of amazing scope and complexity. Kaprow included it in his 1965 book *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings* which detailed through photographs some of the performance and site-specific pieces put together by a circle of artists, including Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, and Kaprow, who merged elements of the traditional art scene together with the budding counterculture.<sup>24</sup> Schmidt had no



direct personal or artistic ties to this group but was adopted by them as a kindred spirit – just as Ferdinand Cheval had been posthumously embraced by the Surrealists.

The first published suggestion that environments such as Rodia's and Schmidt's were part of a more widespread phenomenon came in 1968 when *Art in America* printed Gregg Blasdel's photo-essay, "The Grass-Roots Artist."<sup>25</sup> Blasdel was at the time an artist in New York, but his first exposure to the subject came from the wealth of examples he knew from his native Kansas. Blasdel included fourteen environments and their creators in the article and was the first to apply the term "grass-roots" to describe them, emphasizing the self-taught skills of the artists and their distance from traditional art channels. Several of these environments, including S.P. Dinsmoor's Garden of Eden and Fred Smith's Concrete Park, are included in the present discussion. Blasdel noted that he knew, "of no collective research published to date on art of this nature in the United States, although such art is widespread..."<sup>26</sup> This turned out to be a correct supposition and his article is widely credited as being the seminal work on its subject.<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to note that this early look at the phenomenon of folk art environments contains a strong preservation subtext that can be gleaned from its emphasis on the fragility of many of the sites it considers.

While not exactly opening any floodgates, Blasdel's article certainly was the impetus for the limited amount of scholarly attention that folk art environments have subsequently received. In general, the literature subsumes environments into broader categories that analyze "folk" or "outsider" art from either an aesthetic or a socio-cultural perspective.<sup>28</sup> The few works that treat environments as a discrete genre take three forms: museum exhibit catalogues, articles in periodicals, and books.

Though nearly three decades have passed since the study of the phenomenon of environments began, there has only been one major touring exhibition of these works – the Walker Art Center's



1974 exhibit *Naives and Visionaries*, which was co-curated by Blasdel.<sup>29</sup> This is not surprising because folk art environments are so site-specific, as well as so physically rooted, that they do not lend themselves to the museum setting. This does not stop museums from trying to give a sense of the feel and meaning of these sites through photographs, moveable artifacts and even the construction of replicas<sup>30</sup>. The catalogue's introduction reinforces certain unfortunate stereotypes regarding environments and their makers, suggesting that the works were not intended for public view and that their makers reject "society's accepted values."<sup>31</sup> The rest of the essays are a marked improvement upon this poor start and include pieces by Blasdel on the Garden of Eden and the House of Mirrors, Esther McCoy's analysis of Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village, and an excerpt from Calvin Trillin's *New Yorker* piece about Rodia and the Watts Towers.<sup>32</sup>

It is more common for environments to be included in broader museum surveys of folk art. A survey conducted by SPACES found that between 1961 and 1986 there were at least fifty-three exhibits that included American environments.<sup>33</sup> These traveled between ninety-eight institutions and were seen by an estimated one-and-a-half million people. It is interesting to note that the highest attendance figures were for the exhibit *America Now*, a piece of Cold War propaganda – see how free *our* artists are! – sponsored by the U. S. Information Agency and seen by almost a quarter-million Yugoslavians, Hungarians, and Romanians in 1979.<sup>34</sup>

Periodicals provide the best forum for current information about folk art environments; unfortunately, only one is currently published that offers any regular coverage of the subject. *Raw Vision*, a London-based magazine published since 1989 and now issued triannually, bills itself as the "International Journal of Intuitive and Visionary Art." Though its focus is wide-ranging, the magazine's "Raw News" column always contains information about both American and international environments, and its book review section is quite comprehensive. Articles about regional or individual environments are also regularly featured. *The Clarion*, published by the



Museum of American Folk Art, has been called a "glorified antiques journal"<sup>35</sup> and is geared primarily toward the collector. It does not generally discuss environments although the Winter 1988 issue contained a special section on the subject. The newsletters of SPACES and the Kansas Grassroots Art Association (KGAA) were once excellent sources of up-to-date information, keeping members informed about the discovery of new sites, alerting them to the needs of familiar ones, and keeping them abreast of publications of interest. It has been five years since the last new issue was printed by either organization and the KGAA has since folded – representatives from both organizations believe that *Raw Vision*, with its broad audience, fills the void left by the loss of their newsletters.<sup>36</sup>

A number of books have been published which make mention of folk art environments. Often, these are less-than-scholarly works that fall into the "Crazy House" or "Kooky Americana" category.<sup>37</sup> Only two books have been published to date which treat environments as a subject worthy of serious study.<sup>38</sup> *Personal Places: Perspectives on Informal Art Environments*, published in 1984 by a small university press, was the first work to focus solely on environments.<sup>39</sup> This solid book contains essays that tend to focus on specific sites – some well-known (Watts Towers, Garden of Eden) and others obscure (the upstate New York site built by Veronica Terillion). The coherent overview that a genre as wide-ranging and complex as folk art environments demands did not arrive for eleven years. John Beardsley's *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists*, published in 1995, provides the benchmark against which all subsequent works will be compared.<sup>40</sup> Its combination of readable scholarship and coffee table-quality format and photography have made it very popular. It was glowingly reviewed by the artist Red Grooms on the cover of the *New York Times Book Review*, complete with a color photograph of the Garden of Eden.<sup>41</sup> It went on to become one of its publishers fastest-selling new titles ever.<sup>42</sup> The book provides a detailed look at over thirty American environments (as well as several foreign ones) while also analyzing them within broader historic and thematic frameworks. The book's popularity





and the focused attention that it places on folk art environments are likely to bring a new audience to the sites. It is still unclear, however, whether this has begun to affect individual sites and the efforts to preserve them.

The gradual growth of interest in folk art environments over the last three decades has led to an increased concern over their fate. The importance of many sites often goes unchallenged today and the level of popular interest in them continues to grow but, despite this, their ongoing existence is never assured. These sites face the problems typical of all elements of the built environment – development pressures, weathering, lack of funds, lack of interest/knowledge – but are more susceptible to them. Beardsley writes that, "...the survival of visionary environments is a particularly pressing issue....Our difficulties in reading the language of these environments, along with our general inability to accept them into the canons of fine, folk, or garden art, only compounds the problem. While we fiddle, Rome burns."<sup>43</sup>

The tenets and practices of the historic preservation movement are ideally suited to the needs of folk art environments that are threatened by decay, dismantlement, or outright destruction. There are many cases in which the principles and techniques of preservation have rescued sites that seemed on the verge of loss,<sup>44</sup> in many of these, professional preservationists were not even involved. Despite the successes, sites continue to be lost – sometimes with surprising suddenness and other times through a gradual process of attrition that slowly strips them of elements that give them their historic and aesthetic integrity.<sup>45</sup> Often this is unavoidable as the ephemerality of the materials and the ill-suited construction techniques of some sites make their *in situ* preservation unrealistic. Other times, however, losses can be prevented or forestalled if only the right steps, which vary from site to site, are taken. It is critical that more preservation professionals and like-minded lay people become aware of the folk art environment as a type of construction that falls within their jurisdiction and come to understand the special needs of these



sites. An increased awareness is not enough, though. It must be accompanied by the ability to actively recognize environments in any of their vast number of permutations and then assess their significance. These steps are vital precursors to any successful preservation effort.



### III. RECOGNIZING AND ASSESSING FOLK ART ENVIRONMENTS

For preservationists to successfully advocate on behalf of folk art environments, it is vital that members of the profession first learn to recognize these environments in their various manifestations. While it is clear that environments share any number of qualities that make them distinct from other genres of artistic expression, the wide variation between the appearance of different sites can be confounding. This can lead to problems in establishing what should be considered a representation of the genre and, just as importantly, what should not. The visual links between the concrete and crockery of the Watts Towers and the painted desert landscape of Salvation Mountain are few, yet it is expected that both be recognized as folk art environments. To understand the commonality between diverse sites such as these requires an understanding of not only their visual language, but also the biography and intent of their creators.

A number of criteria can be distilled from the experience and study of various environments that can be used to assist in the recognition and accurate labeling of new sites as they are encountered. These criteria can also be used to double-check the accuracy of others whose application of the label "folk art environment" (or its equivalent) may or may not be correct.<sup>1</sup> A site does not have to reflect each criterion to be considered a true folk art environment and some of the criteria are more critical than others in this determination. All environments will, however, include a majority of the items listed.

These are not offered as a checklist to be ticked off but rather as a means to help approach a site holistically through the analysis of its component qualities. After a few diverse environments have been personally experienced, this process becomes easier. The following discussion is intended to augment rather than replace the actual experience of the folk art environment, which is still the best gauge for determining the nature of a site. The inherent subjectivity of any labeling process



must be noted here; with folk environments, the inevitable grey areas that result from differences of opinion are compounded by the sheer diversity of the sites in question and by the potential responses that different people might have to them. The literature on the subject suggests, however, that overall there is more agreement than disagreement regarding the labeling of sites, and it can be expected that the inclusion or exclusion of a site would usually be met with general acceptance.<sup>2</sup>

Using the definition proposed in Chapter 1 as a basis, some of the primary qualities shared by folk art environments are listed below and are then discussed individually:

1. Creation of self-taught artist who works primarily alone
2. Large-scale, immobile works
3. Elements of architecture, sculpture, and/or landscape design are incorporated
4. Found or readily available materials are used, often in unexpected ways
5. Built over extended period, often in the artist's later years
6. Sense of permanence
7. Often expressive of artist's personal beliefs or experience
8. Adjacent to or incorporating artist's home
9. Not commercially motivated

#### 1. Creation of self-taught artist

All folk art environments are the ipso facto creations of self-taught artists. As discussed previously, their creators are neither participants in the dialogue of the art world with its trends and theories nor the recipients of culturally-specific skills or traditions. This, of course, does not mean that they are socially and/or culturally isolated as is too often suggested. The source of their creativity is internal and highly personal and therefore generally precludes their working with





others. Sam Rodia said, "I do it all myself. I never had a single helper, I have no money. Not a thing. If I hire a man he don't know what to do. A million times I don't know what to do myself."<sup>3</sup> Edward Leedskalnin built Coral Castle single-handedly, moving stones weighing up to nine tons using just a block-and-tackle.<sup>4</sup> St. EOM provides a rare divergence from this criterion as he hired assistants to help build the walls of Pasaquan that he would later personally cover with concrete and then decorate.<sup>5</sup>

While the creators of folk environments may be self-taught artists, it is obvious that they are not unskilled. There is evidence that nearly all of them knew that they were 'good with their hands' before they undertook their environment. Usually these skills were demonstrated, and perhaps developed, in their professional lives. Rodia was an itinerant laborer and, some say, tile setter.<sup>6</sup> Grandma Prisbrey, one of the few women environment builders, worked as a parts assembler for Boeing and helped her second husband build a cement block house which gave her masonry experience which she used for her Bottle Village.<sup>7</sup> This list goes on – there are very few cases of environments being built by someone with no prior experience doing some sort of physical labor which gave them the skills and confidence to undertake their monumental art works.

## 2. Large-scale, immobile works

"I had it in my mind to do something big and I did."<sup>8</sup> What Sam Rodia said of himself and his work is true of other artists and sites. Folk art environments are monumental in scale, though they do not necessarily overwhelm the viewer. The group SPACES included only large-scale sites when it compiled a list of over 400 environments nationwide.<sup>9</sup> The fact that this survey was based on information submitted to the group by others and that scale is a relative concept may skew the results a bit, and some sites may be either included or excluded erroneously. A solid attempt was made, however, to separate out small-scale sites which do not have the impact and meaning of the environments discussed here. A site that might be excluded under this criterion would be



something like the suburban house that has a front lawn filled with grazing concrete deer, frolicking concrete squirrels, and a miniature concrete wishing well – a phenomenon that architectural historian Reyner Banham labeled "plaster-gnomery."<sup>10</sup>

Some sites sprawl over large areas, while others attain a monumental status by efficiently using a small area. St. EOM's Land of the Pasaquan covers four acres with walls, gateways, pavilions, and ceremonial areas which are all united by repeated design motifs. Romano Gabriel's Wooden Garden (now dismantled) occupied only the very narrow sliver of his front yard, but it achieved monumentality through its sheer profusion and density. [See Figure 11] The scale of these sites often leads to the repetition of impressive but meaningless (and probably inaccurate) statistics about the materials used such as the number of sacks of cement a site required or the number of its component pieces – the number of tons of earth moved or the number of hundreds of gallons of paint used become pointless pieces of information in the face of the monumentality of a creation like Salvation Mountain.

### 3. Elements of architecture, sculpture, and/or landscape design are incorporated

Most folk art environments combine elements of both architecture and sculpture while all of those discussed here manipulate the landscape around them. Many artists actually design and build structures that are completely architectural in scale and function. S. P. Dinsmoor built a house for himself out of limestone cut and notched to resemble logs before going on to build the Garden of Eden. St. EOM embellished an existing house, built an addition to it, and built many outbuildings at Pasaquan. Howard Finster built his Folk Art Church alongside Paradise Garden. Prisbrey's village consists of thirteen individual buildings along with their accompanying shrines, planters, and fountains. In some cases, Dinsmoor's for example, the structure built would be considered an eccentric habitation and not included in this discussion were it not for the rest of the site. In



others, Prisbrey's and EOM's for example, the architecture is integral to the site's designation as an environment.

Sculpture plays a major part in most sites. To be labeled a folk art environment a site must be distinguished from one which merely contains a group of sculptures which are placed near one another. The sculpture of a folk environment is rooted to its site and is often physically connected to other of the site's elements via walls, walkways, or through their common use of materials. Sites such as Fred Smith's Wisconsin Concrete Park and John Ehn's Old Trapper's Inn contain individual sculptures which are tied together thematically more than physically, but their placement is not random – they are bound together as surely as if they were physically connected. The problem with environments that are primarily sculptural in nature is that they are subject to dismantlement more readily than primarily architectural environments are. Ehn's site was recently moved and much of its power and meaning has been lost (the fate of this site will be discussed in the next chapter).

All environments incorporate elements of landscape design if only by virtue of being placed outdoors and thus affecting their surrounding landscape. Most of the artists considered here, however, have paid considerable attention to the placement of the elements of their site and to the effect of the composition as a whole just as any designer of more traditional gardens would. Few go as far as Edward Leedskalnin at Coral Castle who not only carefully placed the elements of his environment but also created a lush planting scheme that displays a much greater emphasis on the horticultural aspects of the site than is typical of most environments.<sup>11</sup>

4. Found or readily available materials are used, often in unexpected ways

Found and recycled materials play a part in almost every environment and account for some of the visual links found between otherwise unrelated sites which utilize mosaic or assemblage



techniques. The list of items used runs from the typical rocks, glass, and ceramic shards encountered at so many sites to more esoteric items such as television picture tubes, oatmeal containers, guns, and doll heads. In some cases the use of these objects is overt and sometimes it is hidden. The Watts Towers are covered with bits of found glass, ceramic, and shell but their armatures are also made of sections of whatever kind of iron and wire Rodia could find on his regular forays along the railroad tracks.

In *Gardens of Revelation*, John Beardsley posits that many environments "crystallize" around the found object which frees the artists' creative impulses.<sup>12</sup> This may be true in some cases, but it is also true that many artists use found materials to fulfill their artistic concept for more prosaic reasons – often for lack of funds. Clarence Schmidt said of his now-lost House of Mirrors that, "...I can't buy a lot of things and there are things I get for nothing, and I capitalize on it."<sup>13</sup> Many artists express surprise at other people's wastefulness and seem to want to show them up by making use of their discards. Herman Rusch, who built an environment called Prairie Moon Garden, found it natural to use the detritus around him; he said, "Peculiar thing is, whatever I want, I can find it."<sup>14</sup> Architectural historian Esther McCoy found that Grandma Prisbrey, who probably utilized a wider variety of found objects than any other artist discussed here, had "...a passion for all discarded objects and shows a willingness to provide for all, equally, in her scheme."<sup>15</sup>

Some sites do not incorporate found objects at all, but certain trends can be seen in their creator's use of materials. Concrete and/or stucco are almost universally used for environments and are typically inexpensive enough for the artists to buy in quantity. When cut stone is used, it is invariably local and, generally, of a soft variety that is easily dressed. Both Leedskalnin and Dinsmoor worked with the local limestone available around their sites. Worked metals are rarely





used, with the notable exception of the Orange Show in Houston which was built by Jeff McKissack, a former welder (as well as postman and hairdresser).

The widespread use of these found materials can become a problem for sites at the time that preservation issues arise. First, critics of environments tend to consider them to be agglomerations of junk. To counter this, it is important to emphasize the cultural and personal conditions that led the artists to choose their materials and to place this choice in a broader historical context with reference made to more validated expressions such as Duchamp's readymades and the "junk aesthetic" that developed during the 1960s. Also it is worth noting the ecological benefits realized through the use of recycled material. A second problem arises when a site requires conservation treatment, as conservators tend to have little or no experience with many of the non-traditional materials used and may have difficulty devising a treatment methodology.<sup>16</sup> This problem should subside as more sites receive preservation attention nationwide.

#### 5. Built over extended period, often in the artist's later years

Major folk art environments are never spontaneous, overnight creations. They are the result of many years labor and can often be viewed as a work-in-progress that is finished only when the artist either dies or is unable to continue working. Their monumentality and often obsessive detailing are evidence of the large amount of time spent on them. The construction history of most environments spans at least two decades. Some can be dated with fair precision; the thirty-three years that Rodia spent building the Watts Towers can be established by the both physical and documentary evidence – Rodia inscribed what is generally accepted as the starting date of 1921 in a section of wall, and he is known to have worked on it constantly until giving it to a neighbor in 1954. The dating of other sites may have to rely on the testimony of the artist or



recollections of neighbors, which may be imprecise measures in some cases but sometimes can be verified by evidence gleaned from the site itself.

## 6. Sense of permanence

Folk art environments exude a sense of permanence, even though this is often belied by their materials and construction techniques. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to address the artist's intention for the various sites under consideration, it is worth considering the possibility that the quest for a certain immortality might motivate the artists considered here.<sup>17</sup> The conventional wisdom has it that as we age, we grow more aware of our mortality – we take out insurance policies, write wills, and go through mid-life crises. There are many indications that many environment-makers, building in their later years, do so to leave a lasting record of their existence. Nowhere is this better displayed than at the Garden of Eden in Lucas, Kansas. Among the sculptural groups that depict stories from the bible and make concrete (literally) the Populist anti-trust beliefs of the artist, S. P. Dinsmoor, stands a limestone ziggurat. Built by Dinsmoor as his own mausoleum, his well-preserved visage can still be seen through the window that he thoughtfully placed in the top of his self-built concrete coffin. Other artists also expected or hoped their sites to outlive them. St. EOM said of Pasaquan, "When I die it will be destroyed. Ah, the ignorance of the world."<sup>18</sup> Thankfully he underestimated the world, at least so far. Herman Rusch, builder of the Prairie Moon Park may have put it best, "...A fellow should leave a few tracks, and not just canceled welfare checks."<sup>19</sup> The knowledge that the artist intended their site to outlive them can be of great use for a preservationist who is trying to make a case for a site.

This temporal dimension of the folk art environment removes certain more transient environmental expressions from being considered here, particularly where preservation is concerned. Examples of these types of sites would include the Corn Palace in Mitchell, South Dakota, the environments



made of ice created for winter carnivals, and the elaborately decorated houses that every neighborhood seems to spawn at least one of around Christmas.

#### 7. Often expressive of artist's personal beliefs or experience

Many of the environments discussed here convey an overt message that is readable by the average visitor. When present, this message is typically of a religious or social nature. Salvation Mountain's message that "God is Love" could not be plainer, other sites such as Galloway's Totem Pole Park and Dinsmoor's Garden of Eden require some historical knowledge, but not necessarily any knowledge of the artist's views and background, to be understood. Finally, some sites are very personal texts which can only be read with a detailed knowledge of the artist's biography. Leedskalnin's Coral Castle and Jeff McKissack's Orange Show, a failed amusement/education park devoted to the healthful qualities of the orange, are examples of this type of site. In *Gardens of Revelation*, John Beardsley displays a firm belief in the importance of biography in order to understand the meaning of folk environments. Clearly choosing to ignore the attempt by current cultural theory to diminish or negate the input of the author, his book provides an interesting, but by no means definitive, analysis of the rhetorical dimensions of folk environments.

#### 8. Adjacent to or incorporating artist's home

Practically every known environment is built on the site of the artist's house. Generally, the house may be embellished on the exterior, but its interior is intended to remain as personal space and seems to be differentiated from the public aspects of the site. The most extreme example of this, ironically, is displayed at one of the most architecturally-oriented sites. Though she built thirteen small buildings for her Bottle Village, Grandma Prisbrey always chose to live in a trailer on the site rather than in a structure of her own creation. One of the key defining features of folk art environments is their lack of functionality. For this reason, eccentric habitations designed and



used primarily as residences should not be considered to be folk art environments unless they are accompanied by other elements which conform to these criteria.<sup>20</sup>

#### 9. Not commercially motivated

Finally, folk art environments are only rarely built out of commercial motivation. This criterion allows the exclusion of the programmatic architecture – the ducks, donuts, and hot dogs – that once defined the American roadside.<sup>21</sup> These are often lumped in with folk environments by the casual viewer. Though they are important and often highly worthy of preservation, these sites fit few of the foregoing criteria for defining the folk environment. Sometimes the interest and visitation that environments generated gave their creator's the idea of charging small admission fees – both Dinsmoor and Prisbrey did this – but most environments are built for reasons other than financial gain.

Two types of sites that are often considered to be folk art environments and meet the above criteria have been excluded from this discussion. Religious grottos, a fairly common type of environment in parts of the mid-west are not included here because, unlike all of the environments herein, they appear to have strong ties to a communal tradition – one that extends back hundreds of years to the religious and decorative grottos of Europe.<sup>22</sup> The exclusion of interior environments, such as James Hampton's well-known Throne of the Third Heaven for the Nations Millennium, is based more on expediency. This is rationalized by the fact that interior spaces are often out of the reach and jurisdiction of the preservationist and the treatment, both political and physical, that these environments require can be considerably different than that of the exterior sites under discussion here.

"Significance" is the most problematic word to fall with any regularity from the mouths of preservationists. When applied to folk environments, as it inevitably must be, it has the same two





uses as it does for any other element of the built environment. There is the significance of a site in a broad historic-cultural context and there is the significance of a site in relation to its own kind. The former type of significance has already been discussed in relation to the folk art environment. It is one of the most critical designations when attempts are made to validate a site and justify its preservation. The second, comparative type of significance also comes into play when a determination must be made of a site's relative worthiness for preservation. With limited preservation budgets being the rule today, choices must often be made between competing sites. Though it is unlikely that two environments would compete head-to-head for preservation attention, a site's chances in any case are significantly enhanced when it can be described as one of the best of its kind. There are no firm bases for determining the significance of environments and again no checklist of criteria to run down. The inherent subjectivity of this sort of designation makes it important to approach these sites on a case-by-case basis. If a site that seems only moderately significant has an active volunteer group associated with it and is something of a local landmark, preservation dollars may be better applied there than on a more 'significant' site that, for whatever reason, lacks popular support.

When an environment's significance must be assessed, certain criteria can be used to determine relative levels of importance.<sup>23</sup> Environments gain significance when:

- they are on their original site
- they are in the configuration intended by their creator
- their original materials are for the most retained (although the necessity of patching and replacing materials at these sites must be considered)
- they clearly display the amount of time and effort that went into their creation
- they display an unusual or ingenious use of materials
- the presence of the artist is felt through his obvious manipulation of materials or the repetition of distinct forms



- their elements are grouped meaningfully and any change would affect the meaning of the site
- they possess a message of interest due to its local importance and/or its originality

The following three sites, which represent environments that fall under the general sub-category of "yard art", are presented as a case study for the determination of levels of significance. [Figures 9 - 11] These environments represent three relative levels of significance that can be assessed somewhat objectively using the criteria laid out above. The display of clowns is the least significant of the three sites depicted. None of the materials were manipulated in any way by the site's creator and their regular placement is at odds with the unexpectedness that is found in so many environments. There is also no sense that the environment required much time or effort on the part of its creator. The second site, a true urban yard show created by the Flower Man is something of a local landmark. By and large, its materials are unmanipulated as at the "Clown House", but their use and placement are improbable in the manner of many folk environments. More attention is paid to the placement of the various found objects and there is a sense that



9. Decorated Trailer Home. Truth or Consequences, New Mexico.





10. Home of "The Flower Man" (Cleveland Turner). Houston, Texas.



11. Romano Gabriel. Wooden Garden, Eureka, California. [original site]



various juxtapositions have meaning for the artist. This is a significant folk environment, whereas the first example, which is a slightly more elaborate version of plaster-gnomery, is not.

The third example is the most significant because the artist's hand is evident everywhere. Whereas the Flower Man uses his found materials in much the same condition he discovered them in, Romano Gabriel transformed wooden scraps into a forest of totemic plant life that he called the Wooden Garden. There is a greater sense of effort in this site due to the many components involved – scraps were not only cut and painted but also assembled on the elaborate armatures that are also made of scrap wood. Though the ultimate meaning of a site like Gabriel's may not be evident without doing background research, it clearly represents a statement on his part. The difference in the significance of the last two sites can be summed up as the difference between "look what I found" and "look what I've done with what I found."

The tools provided in this chapter are just the beginning of what a preservationist needs when encountering an environment. They offer a means to approach sites with the balanced perspective that is vital if one is to gain a comprehensive overview of these sites – including their limitations and drawbacks. There will be many cases in which it may be judged better not to enter into what is likely to be a losing battle. Understanding the defining characteristics and relative importance of environments can help preservationists choose their fights wisely and thus become efficient and effective advocates for folk art environments.





#### IV. PRESERVING FOLK ART ENVIRONMENTS

The participation of members of the historic preservation community in efforts to preserve and protect folk environments is not surprising. The entire built environment falls within the field's purview, and it seems as though no type of site exists for which a champion cannot be found. That folk environments have such champions, both lay people and preservationists, is clear. Preservation's combination of scholarship and action is unique. Though folk environments are a fairly recent addition to the field's canon, it appears that their needs cannot be better met by any other discipline.

Other disciplines may actively study folk art environments, but do not know what to *do* with them. Members of the art community – museums, galleries, and collectors – who typically take responsibility for the fate of artworks are stymied by environments. One writer addressing this problem notes that, "...in many ways the large-scale works of self-taught builders defy the mechanisms of art world recognition."<sup>1</sup> Museums are capable of preserving art only when they physically possess it, and it is rare, especially in today's climate of tight budgets, for museums to purchase and maintain off-site artworks of a folk environment's scale. Whether the American Visionary Art Museum, which opened in Baltimore in 1995, reverses this tendency remains to be seen.

When dealers and collectors become involved with environments, the problem of possession is compounded by the problem of commerce. With record prices regularly being set for folk and outsider art, the temptation, even on the part of artists and their families, to sell off parts of environments can be very great.<sup>2</sup> Before Howard Finster became the superstar of folk art, he devoted much of his effort to his environment, Paradise Garden, in Summerville, Georgia. As demand for Finster product increased (call 1-800-FINSTER to order your folk art today!), he



focused his attention on the creation of salable paintings. Meanwhile, pieces of his Paradise began to disappear – into the hands of both legitimate collectors, who purchased their works from the all-too-obliging family, and into those of vandals, who helped themselves. The site today bears little resemblance to the densely built environment seen in early photos.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas the art world may be too intrusive in the fate of environments, the anthropologists and folklorists who also study them have a more removed approach. Their interests are almost purely academic, and they take a rather scientific approach to the sites and the artists who create them. These academics recognize that any direct involvement on their part in the fate of a site could alter its relationship with the mechanisms that created and sustained it up until the point that they entered the picture.<sup>4</sup> If the course of events leads to the loss or significant change of a site, another chapter in its history is written – even if it is, regrettably, the final one.

The field of preservation straddles these two positions. Its practitioners become active participants in the fate of sites without (it is hoped) substituting their vision for the artists'. This potential for disrupting the intent of the makers of environment provides a challenge to the preservationist. The rapid growth of preservation as a professional field that has occurred since the mid-1970s has put an ever-growing cadre of trained preservationists into the field.<sup>5</sup> Their training should provide them with practical and ethical standards that will prevent situations such as the one at Paradise Garden from occurring with any frequency.

It is interesting to note here that over the years many environments have been successfully and ethically preserved without a trained preservationist in sight. In some cases, preservation just happens. The Garden of Eden in Kansas is still intact even though it has undergone several ownership changes since the death of S.P. Dinsmoor in 1932. This can be accounted for by the fact that, off and on over the years, subsequent owners ran the site as a tourist attraction as



Dinsmoor successfully had before them. When owners were not up to this business or the tourist trade waned, the soundness of the site's craftsmanship allowed it to lay fallow without significant harm while it awaited a sprucing up by a new owner.<sup>6</sup> Coral Castle has enjoyed similar good fortune, but Florida's high level of tourism has allowed for its continuous operation as an attraction since Edward Leedskalnin's death in 1951.

The first organized attempt to save a threatened environment proved to be a much more complicated affair. The battle fought in 1959 to prevent the demolition of the Watts Towers used many of the tools and techniques wielded by today's preservationists, though this job-title would have been unfamiliar to all involved. This was a true grassroots, though not quite blue-collar, preservation effort, made by people with backgrounds in disciplines such as art, photography, and engineering. None of them had previous preservation experience; they were motivated solely by their love of the site and their steadfast belief in its importance. Public education, fundraising, validation through expert testimony, structural testing, and materials conservation were each employed successfully in what at the time seemed an uphill battle against the bureaucracy.<sup>7</sup> Their instinctive use of elements from the present-day preservationist's repertoire was fortuitous because in 1959 it would have been difficult to find anyone calling himself a preservationist who would have been interested in dealing with a non-traditional site such as Rodia's Towers. It is not coincidental that the preservation field's growing inclusiveness during the 1960s and 1970s occurred during the period during which environments became recognized as both a distinct genre of building and one that was particularly susceptible to loss.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the preservation movement in the United States was focused primarily on preserving relics that were related to the great personages and events that shaped the country's early years. This shrine-making mentality was slowly supplanted by a recognition that the continuity of historical and cultural tradition and expression could be displayed



and maintained through the preservation of a broader spectrum of the built environment. The efforts made during the 1930s to maintain the character of large sections of Charleston and New Orleans through historic districting, while primarily aesthetic in orientation, implicitly recognized the historic and cultural contributions of a more diverse cross-section of society than had been acknowledged previously.<sup>8</sup> Despite this growing inclusiveness, the movement's focus remained fixed on the pre-Civil War era well into the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> The social changes of the 1960s and 1970s fostered in many a new evaluation of and respect for the diversity of American culture and the importance of maintaining a tangible connection to its physical products.<sup>10</sup> The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 created a federal policy that was designed to help stem the loss of elements of the nation's cultural heritage that were succumbing at an ever-greater pace during the post-war years to ignorance, neglect, and often willful destruction. It was designed to, "...ensure future generations a genuine opportunity to appreciate and enjoy the rich heritage of our Nation...."<sup>11</sup>

It is unlikely that the authors of the NHPA envisioned just how rich a built heritage the preservation movement would find. Barns, privies, bridges, steam engines, warehouses, and diners now receive similar consideration to that which was once given to Mount Vernons and Independence Halls. The tools and techniques of historic preservation are remarkably flexible and are almost always able to satisfy the needs of an ever expanding range of projects. Preservation's combination of historical, social, and cultural scholarship with museology and materials conservation offers the best chance to save the types of sites that were not even considered preservation-worthy just a few years ago. There is still a place for dedicated and knowledgeable amateurs in preservation, but complicated problems like those encountered with the Watts Towers (and even less complicated ones) will probably be left to professionals – those who have either been trained "on the job" or at one of the growing number of schools with degree programs in preservation.





Despite preservationists having been involved in efforts to save folk environments for many years now, significant examples are still being lost.<sup>12</sup> Gregg Blasdel's trailblazing photoessay that viewed folk environments as a grouped phenomenon for the first time appeared in 1968<sup>13</sup>. It documented fourteen sites; by 1985, seven of these had been lost.<sup>14</sup> Today, only five are believed to be completely intact.<sup>15</sup> While some sites are always going to be lost, the rate of attrition seen in this example can certainly be slowed.

The role of an individual preservationist in the process of preventing the loss of environments can be either cursory or highly involved. Certain positions will require only a general awareness of the existence, importance, and special needs of environments and the ability to assess their relative significance (as discussed in Chapter 3). These will help a person sitting on a grant-giving committee, a person who may have familiarity or direct access to the site in question, to help make an informed decision when approving or denying requested funds. These qualities can also allow employees of government-based preservation programs which maintain historic registries or are involved in the allocation of tax incentives to make their decisions more wisely.

The preservationist's level of involvement greatly increases when other, more site-specific, roles are taken on. A person providing a full preservation or conservation plan, or one who becomes a site manager, will need to draw upon the full kit of skill areas that form the core of the preservation profession – namely, research, documentation, conservation, and advocacy. The use of the first three for folk art environments is more or less in keeping with their utilization on more traditional sites – though inevitably a few quirks enter into the process. Advocacy poses more of a challenge to the preservationist, particularly when it comes to fundraising.<sup>16</sup>

Researching an environment proceeds much as it does on any other site, though information may be very hard to come by. Its physical documentation may pose some special challenges. A site



such as Prisbrey's Bottle Village becomes incredibly hard to document fully when an inventory list would have to account for the tens of thousands of items, and complete visual documentation would have to track each building's vast number of component parts.<sup>17</sup> The physical conservation of environments can also be problematic, as noted earlier, because of the non-traditional materials and techniques often employed. Here professional preservationists have not made many inroads as of yet. The country's premier conservator of environments has no formal conservation training. Don Howlett, who is responsible for the full restoration of the Wisconsin Concrete Park and is also a consultant for the Watts Towers, got his experience with concrete as the designer and builder of zoo enclosures.<sup>18</sup>

With many environments, advocacy may prove to be the most difficult preservation skill to effectively utilize. The advocate is generally attempting to arrange for the long-term future of a site. Some possibilities that have worked in the past include a site's use as a public park (as with the Totem Pole Park), a profit-making attraction (the Garden of Eden), a non-profit attraction (Watts Towers), an educational facility (one of the uses of the Orange Show), or a private residence (Sunnyslope Rock Garden in Phoenix). Regardless of which direction a site is taken, Seymour Rosen sums the biggest potential problem up as being one of "credibility."<sup>19</sup>

The credibility of a site and the people involved with it must be established early on. There are still many who view environment as "junk heaps," "eyesores," or worse. A site must be viewed as vital and alive, rather than as a nutty trifle. There is also a tendency for there to be a "crackpot" element among some of the people who are drawn to advocate on behalf of sites.<sup>20</sup> With a credibility problem, it can be difficult to obtain the money, people, and validation that are necessary for the successful preservation of folk environments.



The need for money and people in a preservation effort is obvious. Money pays the bills, allowing for proper maintenance and staffing. The involvement of people takes many forms: there are visitors, volunteers, employees, funders, government officials, media contacts, academics and artists. Their support is critical to a site's success, but their numbers will dwindle if a site is allowed to be viewed as too marginal or the people in charge of running it, or planning for its future, seem to be disorganized or unreliable. Rosen suggest that small things, even having professional-looking stationery printed up, can help establish credibility for a site and its advocates.<sup>21</sup>

Validation is a key to success in the advocacy for, and preservation of, environments. Because these sites are so easily misunderstood, they run the risk of being lost due to ignorance. In 1959, the group that saved the Watts Towers recognized this when they sought out the group of intellectuals and artists whose support of their cause was widely trumpeted. While this kind of cultural support is important – it never hurts to have someone like Jacob Bronowski call your site his "favourite monument" as he did the Watts Towers<sup>22</sup> or even have the Beatles place your site's creator next to Bob Dylan on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper* as they did Rodia – other forms of validation can be more important. The most important type is the support of a site by regular citizens. If people show interest in a site for no other reason than that they know it and it means something to them, if they are visiting it even though it is unrestored (as they regularly do at Bottle Village), it becomes easier to convince people to lend their support to the cause of the site's preservation.

The preservation community has also set up its own means of validation – historic registration. To date, eight environments are on the National Register listing of historic sites, and the Watts Towers have attained the additional prestige of being declared a National Historic Landmark.<sup>23</sup> The Register is now more willing to recognize elements of the recent past (the last fifty years) than



it once was.<sup>24</sup> Many environments fall into this time frame and are more likely to be successfully nominated given that the Register's staff in Washington is familiar with environments and is receptive to the inclusion of more of them.<sup>25</sup> Recently Congress even validated environments without realizing it when it declared visionary art to be a "national treasure" in a concurring resolution authorizing the establishment of the American Visionary Art Museum.<sup>26</sup> While validation alone does not guarantee that environments will be preserved, it makes a better case in front of the funders (even the small donor) and the local officials who ultimately have the power to veto an effort to preserve an environment.

Anyone who takes on the challenge of preserving a folk art environment for the future must also look at and analyze the efforts of those who have done the same thing before them. Currently three non-profit groups or foundations are the primary sources for information and assistance for the preservation of environments.

SPACES, based in Los Angeles, is the only group with a nationwide focus, it is primarily a source of information rather than direct assistance. Its database can tell you how many environments are known to exist in, say, Indiana; its archive contains nearly everything ever published on the subject of environments; and its director, Seymour Rosen, has been involved with environments for almost forty years and is an excellent and willing source of advice. SPACES has been amazingly effective in the eighteen years of its existence, but its lack of consistent funding undoubtedly has limited its reach. Rosen and this group are one of the main reasons that environments and their preservation have today reached a level of respect and viability that could not have been imagined twenty years ago.

The Kohler Foundation, a group that does have money (from its connection to the family-owned Kohler Company, a major maker of plumbing fixtures), is limited in its scope, focusing thus far





solely on environments in Wisconsin (though this may be changing<sup>27</sup>). Funded by a member of the Kohler family with a passion for folk art that extends to environments, the Foundation is able to purchase sites in need of preservation outright and then conduct major restoration efforts. The by-laws of the foundation prevent them from maintaining ownership of the properties so they donate them to (hopefully) responsible local agencies. To date, all seven sites (not all of which are environments) that they have restored continue to be well-maintained by their new owners.<sup>28</sup> Fred Smith's Wisconsin Concrete Park, now functioning as a county park, was one of the foundation's beneficiaries.

The final group currently active in the preservation of environments is the Orange Show Foundation in Houston. Like Kohler, this group has a wealthy benefactor; she initiated the foundation and the restoration of its namesake site, the Orange Show. The reach of this group is limited to Houston where, in addition to maintaining their environment as a tourist attraction and art education center, they sponsor tours of various other sites (including the Flower Man's house), and sponsor an Art Car parade through which they raise over \$300,000 a year.<sup>29</sup> The foundation also maintains an archive and has a very helpful and knowledgeable staff. Like the Kohler Foundation, however, their regional focus makes them of little use for projects outside of their area except for their ability to validate the sites and work of others and by the example of their own project.

The current preservation situation of three California environments is discussed here by means of conclusion in order to demonstrate how, within a fairly limited geographic range, a group of sites can encounter a wide range of problems that have been met by an equally wide range of solutions – some successful and some less so. These case studies help demonstrate that there is no one preservation method that can successfully work for sites as diverse and complex as folk



environments sites. This point reemphasizes the need for careful case-by-case examination of the assets and liabilities of a site and the various options that might be pursued.

The Watts Towers must be the envy of every other folk environment in the country. Since they successfully passed the stress test in 1959 that was designed to prove they were not on the verge of collapse, the towers have led a charmed life. Unfortunately, during much of that life they have been off-limits to the public. [Figure 12] Had Rodia built them in another part of the city, it is

unlikely that the towers would still exist. It is their good fortune to have been built in a poor community that got poorer, ruling out threats from the rampant development that has changed the face of much of Los Angeles since Rodia walked away from the site in 1954. The towers are also fortunate to be in what is now one of the city's most segregated neighborhoods where they have been adopted by the primarily poor, black residents as a symbol of their community. For the last twenty years the site has been owned



12. Sam Rodia. Watts Towers with scaffolding, 1995.

by either the city or, as at present, by the state. The towers' symbolic value has not been lost on local and state politicians, and the site has never wanted for money – millions of dollars have been spent on their restoration over the years. So what does this money and attention provide for the



community's voters today? More scaffolding, this time for the slow-paced restoration of damage caused by the earthquake in 1994.

One of the flashpoints of the 1993 riots that followed the Rodney King verdict was not far from the towers. Politicians once again have focused on the symbolic value of the towers just as they did when they established the Watts Towers Art Center in the wake of the riots of the mid-1960s. In 1995, the City Planning Commission proposed the creation of the "Watts Towers Cultural Crescent"<sup>30</sup> that would turn the barren railroad right-of-way where Rodia scavenged for materials into a lush park that would link the towers with performing arts spaces and a restored Watts train station (from which Rodia took the train to scavenge shells on Long Beach). While it is difficult to complain about the quality conservation work and fiscal attention the towers have received over the years, it is hard not to believe that, if they were treated as a work of art rather than as a political symbol, they might be a little more available for the enjoyment of the public.

The Old Trapper's Lodge was built near Burbank between the mid-1940s and 1960 by John Ehn, a retired government trapper.<sup>31</sup> [Figure 13] He completely engulfed the front of the motel he owned with memorabilia, regalia, and mock tombstones that paid comic homage to his experiences in the 'wild west'. The site was dominated, however, by strange monumental sculptures representing gun-slingers and bar maids, savage Indians and strong frontier women. It was a fascinatingly dense collection that at night took on a rather spooky character. As is so often the case with folk environments, trouble began at the site with the artist's death. Ehn died in 1981 and his family, who cherished his creation (not always a given with folk environments), held on to it for several years before being forced to sell for financial reasons. They contacted SPACES and a search was begun for a new site. Finally a location was secured at a local junior college and parts of the site were transferred in 1988. [Figure 14]





13. John Ehn. *Old Trapper's Lodge, Sun Valley, California.*



14. John Ehn. *Sculptures in new setting, Pierce College, Los Angeles*





Bittersweet feelings tend to accompany the move of a folk environment. Only the large sculptures and the tombstones were moved to the new site at Pierce College. The density and strangeness of the original site have been lost because the sculptures are now spread out over a small park and picnic area. The works still hold up as sculpture, but it is hard to consider them to be a folk art environment anymore. As mentioned earlier, preservation solutions such as this should be entertained only as a final option.

Finally, we end where we began, with Leonard Knight's Salvation Mountain. [Figure 15] This case brings up the issue of whether preservation should even be involved with environments in certain situations. Knight continues to paint his sculpted desert landscape with the brightest colored paints he can rustle up. The county government continues to believe that the lead in some of the paint he has used is leaching into the ground, posing a serious health problem. It wants to bulldoze the site and place the soil in a toxic waste dump. Ultimately, the situation seems more political than health-oriented. Salvation Mountain is surrounded by a wintertime RV



15. Leonard Knight. Salvation Mountain, Niland, California.



encampment called Slab City, home to over 5000 "snowbirds" who come to the site because it is on Bureau of Land Management land that they do not have to pay to use.<sup>32</sup> Imperial County wants to take control of the land, improve the campsites, and charge a daily use fee. The battle with Knight is believed by some to be about land-use and not about the threat of lead contamination of the low desert watertable. What can the preservationist do? Knight's mountain is truly amazing and should be considered one of the nation's major environments. But it consists solely of painted dirt; it is by far the most ephemeral environment in a fairly ephemeral crowd. For now it seems the issue is to safeguard Knight's freedom to continue working on the mountain by validating its importance. Of course, if it is truly polluting the ground water, it should be removed (after proper documentation, naturally). The preservation questions raised by this site are intriguing. Should any attempt be made to preserve the site after Knight's death? If so, how could this be done with the overt, and highly personal, religious message that is integral to the site? Who might fund it and is it possible to really preserve it in the first place?

Salvation Mountain serves as a fitting symbol for all folk environments and their potential fates. There is a poetry of innocence about these places, a guilelessness combined with a distinct savvy. Folk art environments seem timeless to us from the present vantage point, but history may prove them unique to their period. If this is so, the preservation of representative examples is even more critical than it seems today. As our culture becomes more and more homogenized, these sites take on extra importance. They reflect the restless spirit of the individual driven to create – not for money or other factors that convey success, but for the sheer joy of doing so – tinged with the poignant possibility of an artist's quest for immortality.

Folk art environments are as improbable as a dream but, like good dreams, they are worth remembering because they can instruct as well as entertain. They are also as ephemeral as a dream because they can so easily be worn away by time or neglect. We must affix these sites to



the permanent record left by our society so that the expressive vocabulary of a group of uniquely talented individuals might be remembered. We must also physically fix the best of these sites, repair and maintain them, so that they will be experienced in person for as long as possible rather than merely being seen through documentation. After all, it is always better to have a good dream of your own than to hear about someone else's second-hand.



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## NOTES

### I. The Folk Art Environment

Leonard Knight, personal interview with author, Niland, California, December 30, 1995.

<sup>2</sup>Seymour Rosen, "The Universality of It All," *SPACES* 10 (1989), 1. [Newsletter of SPACES – Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments]

<sup>3</sup>Rosen, "An Art of Unpretentious Joy: Preserving America's 'Folk Art Environments'," *SPOT* [Houston Center for Photography] 10 (summer 1991), 6.

<sup>4</sup>Information about Pasaquan and St. EOM is taken from John Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation: Environments By Visionary Artists* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 143-151.

<sup>5</sup>Beardsley, 148. Quoting 1977 letter from St. EOM to Herbert W. Hemphill, Jr. [Hemphill Papers, Archives of American Art].

<sup>6</sup>Information about Smith's Concrete Park is taken from Judith Hoos and Gregg Blasdel, "Fred Smith's Concrete Park," *Naives and Visionaries*, ed. Martin Friedman (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center; New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1974), 53-9.

<sup>7</sup>A thorough discussion of these "colossi" can be found in Karal Ann Marling, *The Colossus of Roads: Myth and Symbol along the American Highway* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>8</sup>Information about Galloway's Totem Pole Park is taken from Beardsley, 91-4.

<sup>9</sup>Beardsley, 94.

<sup>10</sup>Information about Prisbrey's Bottle Village comes from *ibid.*, 154-161, and Esther McCoy, "Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village," *Naives and Visionaries*, 77-85.

<sup>11</sup>No English language work contains a comprehensive listing of international sites. See Beardsley for information on sites in France, South Africa, and India. The SPACES archive contains information on additional international sites, but information regarding these comes in sporadically. *SPACES* 10 (1989) contains information on nine French sites.

<sup>12</sup>Rosen, interview with author, December 27, 1995.

<sup>13</sup>Tom Patterson, "Live Wires and Yard Show: Notes on Homegrown Public Art Environments in the American South," *Public Art Review* 7 (Summer/Fall 1992), 17.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>Seymour Rosen and Louise Jackson, "Folk Art Environments in California: An Overview," *Cat and Ball on a Waterfall: 200 Years of California Folk Painting and Sculpture* (Oakland, Ca.: The Oakland Museum, 1986), 63.

<sup>16</sup>The anthropological analysis of folk culture is well-covered in the following works: Henry Glassie, *The Spirit of Folk Art: the Girard Collection at the Museum of International Folk Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989); John Michael Vlach, "American Folk Art: Questions and Quandaries," *Winterthur Portfolio* 15 (Winter 1980): 345-355.; and Vlach and Simon J. Bronner, eds., *Folk Art and Art Worlds* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1986).

<sup>17</sup>A special issue of the *New Art Examiner* [v.19 (September 1991)] contains several articles covering the semantic and philosophical wrangling over the word "folk". See especially: Michael D. Hall, "The Mythical Outsider: Handmaiden to the Modern Muse," 16-21; John





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Michael Vlach, "The Wrong Stuff: A Call for a New Approach to Folk Art," 22-24; and Julie Ardery, "The Designation of Difference," 29-32.

<sup>18</sup>A good overview of the conflicting claims made for the various terms is found in Jenifer Penrose Borum, "Term Warfare," *Raw Vision* 8 (Winter 1993/4): 24-31.

<sup>19</sup>Milton Friedman, "Introduction," *Naives and Visionaries*, 7.

<sup>20</sup>Beardsley, 7.

<sup>21</sup>"The SPACES Story," *SPACES* 1 (1982).

<sup>22</sup>*Raw Vision* provides the best on-going forum for this semantic debate.

## II. The Study Folk Art Environments

<sup>1</sup>For example, the Sunnyslope Rock Garden, built in Phoenix by Grover Cleveland Thompson, was directly inspired by its creator's visits to the Walker Rock Garden in Seattle. Marion Blake [owner of Sunnyslope Rock Garden], interview with author, December 22, 1995.

<sup>2</sup>I have spoken to people on the sites of two of these small works, one near the Watts Towers and the other near the Garden of Eden. Each site was acknowledged to be inspired by its famous neighbor.

<sup>3</sup>*Outsiders: An Art Without Precedent or Tradition* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979).

<sup>4</sup>Roger Cardinal, "Singular Visions," in *ibid.*, 21.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>6</sup>Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955 [1927]), 9.

<sup>7</sup>Eugene Metcalf, Jr., "Confronting Contemporary Folk Art," in Metcalf, Jr. and Michael D. Hall, eds., *The Ties That Bind: Art in Contemporary American Culture* (Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center, 1986), 25.

<sup>8</sup>See Peter Nabokov and Robert Easton, *Native American Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 93-103. Effigy mounds, which in plan view took the form of animals such as snakes and bears, are of particular interest.

<sup>9</sup>Of the environments discussed herein, St. EOM's Pasaquan and Galloway's Totem Pole Park bear the greatest resemblance. See *ibid.*, 226-285.

<sup>10</sup>Beardsley, 14-15.

<sup>11</sup>Beardsley, 35. Cheval, from a letter of 1897, as quoted by Beardsley.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>13</sup>The most widely known of the other French sites is the Maison Picassiette, built in Chartres by Raymond Isidore between 1938 and 1964; see *ibid.*, 45-48. Portions of a late-nineteenth century site, consisting of sculptures carved into coastal headlands, remain near Saint Malo. This work, by the Abbé Fouré, is briefly documented in *SPACES* 10 (1989), 5.

<sup>14</sup>Craig Miner, *Wichita, The Early Years 1865-89* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1982). Quoted in *KGAA News* v. 10, n. 3, 1991 [newsletter of the Kansas Grassroots Art Association, Lawrence, Kansas]

<sup>15</sup>*KGAA News*, v. 9, n. 3, 1990.

<sup>16</sup>For unknown reasons, Simon is often used as Rodia's given name although it seems he never used it.

<sup>17</sup>Jules Langsner, "Sam of Watts: I Had In My Mind To Do Something Big and I Did," *Arts & Architecture* 58 (July 1951), 23-5.

<sup>18</sup>William Hale made the film and many of Rodia's oft-quoted, accent-inflected lines are taken from it. A copy is in the SPACES archive.

<sup>19</sup>Barbara Jones, *Follies and Grottos* (London: Constable and Company), 148.

<sup>20</sup>Calvin Trillin, "A Reporter at Large: I Know I Want To Do Something," *New Yorker* (May 29, 1965), 92. Other information on the Committee and the struggle to save the Towers



- comes from, Seymour Rosen, personal interview with author, Los Angeles, December 27, 1995.
- <sup>21</sup> Joanne Cubbs, "Spontaneous Construction," *Public Art Review* 4 (summer/fall 1992), 11.
- <sup>22</sup> *The Art of Assemblage*, William Seitz, curator (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), 72-73, 77-80.
- <sup>23</sup> *Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts*, Seymour Rosen, curator (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1962).
- <sup>24</sup> Allen Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1965). Photos of the House of Mirrors are interwoven through the book.
- <sup>25</sup> Gregg N. Blasdel, "The Grass-Roots Artist," *Art in America* 56 (September/October 1968), 24-41.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>27</sup> For example: Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation*, 33; Joanne Cubbs, *Public Art Review* 4, 10.
- <sup>28</sup> An excellent overview of the current academic discussion is found in Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr., with Roger Cardinal, eds., *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994). No environments are specifically discussed, but several essayists included in this collection have written on the subject in the past. See Cardinal, *Outsider Art*, and Cubbs, *Public Art Review*, 10-11..
- <sup>29</sup> *Naives and Visionaries* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center; New York: E. P. Dutton & Co.), 1974. Curated by Martin Friedman and Gregg Blasdel
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* A section of fence from Herman Rusch's Prairie Moon Museum and Garden was recreated for this exhibit.
- <sup>31</sup> Friedman, *ibid.*, 7.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*: Trillin, 21-32; Blasdel and Philip Larson, 33-42; Blasdel and Bill Lipke, 43-52; McCoy, 77-86.
- <sup>33</sup> *SPACES*, n. 4, 1986, 2-3.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* Tressa Prsbrey and Howard Finster were among the artists included.
- <sup>35</sup> Julie Ardery, "The Designation of Difference," *New Art Examiner* 19 (September 1991), 29.
- <sup>36</sup> Seymour Rosen, personal interview with author, Los Angeles, December 27, 1995; Ray Wilber (KGAA Board Member), telephone interview with author, May 3, 1996.
- <sup>37</sup> The former exemplified by Jan Wampler, *All Their Own: People and the Places They Build* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1977); the latter by Doug Kirby, et. al., *The New Roadside America...* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986).
- <sup>38</sup> Lisa Stone and Jim Zanzi, *Sacred Spaces and Other Places* (Chicago: The School of the Art Institute of Chicago Press, 1993). Some would include this excellent book on this list, but its focus on the religious grottos of the Upper Midwest precludes it from inclusion here. It should be noted that one of the "other places" is the Wisconsin Concrete Park, which receives a thorough discussion.
- <sup>39</sup> Daniel Franklin Ward, *Personal Places: Perspectives on Informal Art Environments* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1984)
- <sup>40</sup> Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation*.
- <sup>41</sup> Red Grooms, "Backyard Visionaries: Unschooled Artists and their Monuments to God, Love and Country," (*New York Times*, Section 7, August 20, 1995), 1,18.
- <sup>42</sup> Phone inquiry to Abbeville Press by author, March 21, 1996.
- <sup>43</sup> Beardsley, 33.
- <sup>44</sup> Success stories such as the Watts Towers, the Wisconsin Concrete Park, and Totem Pole Park will be discussed in Chapter 5.
- <sup>45</sup> Miles Mahan's Hulaville is the most recent site known to have been dismantled; Howard Finster's Paradise Garden is an example of the latter form of loss (though family



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members say they are in the process of restoring the site – Beverly Finster, personal interview with author, Summerville, Ga., 1/10/96).

### III. Recognizing and Assessing Folk Art Environments

<sup>1</sup>Two California sites, the Desert View Tower in Jacumba and the Underground Gardens in Fresno, are called folk art environments by many (as well as being included in the state register) but do not meet the criteria established here and, in the opinion of the author, should be labeled differently.

<sup>2</sup>The selection of sites for discussion inevitably reflects an author's didactic goals, realm of experience, and personal idiosyncrasies. Given this, a core group of sites emerges that receives attention more often than not. These sites include the Watts Towers, the House of Mirrors, Smith's Concrete Park, Prisbury's Bottle Village, the Garden of Eden, Paradise Garden, and Gabriel's Wooden Garden.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Trillin, *New Yorker*, 73.

<sup>4</sup>Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation*, 133-9.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>6</sup>Leon Whiteson believes Rodia to have training as a cement mason, but not "as some legends claim" as a tile setter. Whiteson, *The Watts Towers of Los Angeles* (New York: Mosaic Press, 1989), 12.

<sup>7</sup>Verni Greenfield, "Silk Purses from Sow's Ears: An Aesthetic Approach to Recycling," in Ward, ed., *Personal Places*, 142.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Trillin, *New Yorker*, 73.

<sup>9</sup>Rosen, interview with author, December 27, 1995.

<sup>10</sup>Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1971), 132.

<sup>11</sup>Beardsley, 137. The landscaping of Coral Castle was badly damaged by Hurricane Andrew in 1992; it is presently being restored.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>13</sup>Gregg Blasdel and Bill Lipke, "Clarence Schmidt: Toward Journey's End," in *Naives and Visionaries*, 46.

<sup>14</sup>Judith Hoos, "Herman Rusch: Prairie Moon Museum and Garden," in *ibid.*, 75.

<sup>15</sup>Esther McCoy, "Grandma Prisbury's Bottle Village," in *ibid.*, 77.

<sup>16</sup>Trained architectural conservators are certainly up to the challenge presented by these sites.

An example of the meeting of conservator and folk environment is found in: John Twilley, "Fabrication, Deterioration, and Stabilization of the Watts Towers – an Interim Report," *AIC Preprints* (Ninth Annual Meeting, May 1981).

<sup>17</sup>See Beardsley; great emphasis is placed on the biographical and intentional aspects of environments.

<sup>18</sup>Bill Boyd, quoting St. EOM, *Macon Telegraph*, April 20, 1986, page unknown.

<sup>19</sup>Judith Hoos, quoting Rusch, *Naives and Visionaries*, 71.

<sup>20</sup>This appears to be a rather grey area. In *Gardens of Revelation*, Beardsley includes sites such as the Chateau Laroche in Loveland, Ohio, a castle-like structure made of stone which has none of the characteristics that mark the majority of his selections and meets few of the criteria set here. Jan Wampler's *All Their Own* is even less precise in its distinctions between functional homes and folk environments.

<sup>21</sup>For more on this subject, see: Kirby, et. al., *Roadside America*; Marling, *The Colossus of Roads*.



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<sup>22</sup>See especially: Naomi Miller, *Heavenly Caves: Reflections on the Garden Grotto* (New York: George Braziller, 1982); Lisa Stone and Jim Zanzi, *Sacred Spaces and Other Places* (Chicago: The School of the Art Institute of Chicago Press, 1993); and Beardsley, 101-31.

<sup>23</sup>These criteria represent an expansion upon those used to define "historic integrity" for National Register nominations. See *National Register Bulletin 16A* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1991), 4.

#### IV. Preserving Folk Art Environments

<sup>1</sup>Cubbs, *Public Art Review*, 10.

<sup>2</sup>Roger Manley, "Separating the Folk from their Art," *New Art Examiner* 19 (September 1991), 25-8 provides a cogent analysis of this problem.

<sup>3</sup>The photos of Paradise Garden in Beardsley, 75-79, depict elements no longer in place today. See also note II.40 above.

<sup>4</sup>Daniel C. Prince, "Preservation of Folk Art Environments," in Ward, *Personal Places*, 156.

<sup>5</sup>Charles B. Hosmer, "The Broadening View of the Historical Preservation Movement, in M.G. Quimby, ed., *Material Culture and the Study of American Life* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1978), 137.

<sup>6</sup>John Hood [partner, Garden of Eden, Inc.], telephone interview, May 3, 1996.

<sup>7</sup>Rosen, personal interview with the author, December 27, 1995.

<sup>8</sup>Hosmer, *op cit.*, 128-129.

<sup>9</sup>Richard Longstreth, "The Significance of the Recent Past," *CRM* [Cultural Resources Management] 16 (1993), 4.

<sup>10</sup>Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-49*. Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia for the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States, 1981. Afterword by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1071.

<sup>11</sup>NHPA sec 1(b)(5)

<sup>12</sup>During the course of research for this paper, a moderately significant site – Miles Mahan's Hulaville in Victorville, California, was dismantled. Relics of the site are now in the possession of the Route 66 Museum in Victorville with plans being made for their display once funding is obtained.

<sup>13</sup>Blasdel, "The Grass Roots Artist," *Art in America*.

<sup>14</sup>KGAA News, v. 5, n. 4 (Fall 1985).

<sup>15</sup>These are: Garden of Eden, Wisconsin Concrete Park, Ave Maria Grotto, Dickeyville Grotto, and Prairie Moon Museum and Park.

<sup>16</sup>Rosen, interview, December 27, 1995.

<sup>17</sup>Daniel Paul, personal interview with author, December 29, 1995.

<sup>18</sup>Prince, in *Personal Places*, 167.

<sup>19</sup>Rosen, interview, December 27, 1995.

<sup>20</sup>This is Rosen's word, but it is corroborated by certain people that I've met during my research.

<sup>21</sup>Rosen, interview, December 27, 1995.

<sup>22</sup>Jacob Bronowski, *The Ascent of Man* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 49.

<sup>23</sup>Desert View Tower, Jacumba, California; Watts Towers, Los Angeles, California; Underground Gardens, Fresno, California; Kaleva Bottle House, Kaleva, Michigan; Ave Maria Grotto, Cullman, Alabama; Coral Castle, Homestead, Florida; Rancho Bonito, Mountainair, New Mexico; Garden of Eden, Lucas, Kansas.





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- <sup>24</sup>Carol D. Shull and Beth L. Savage, "Trends in Recognizing Places for Significance in the Recent Past," *Preserving the Recent Past*, Deborah Slaton and Rebecca A. Shiffer, eds. (Washington D.C.: Historic Preservation Education Foundation, 1995), II-3.
- <sup>25</sup>Jeff Wyatt [Archivist, National Register], phone interview, March 29, 1996.
- <sup>26</sup>102nd Cong., 1st sess. S. Con Res. 81.
- <sup>27</sup>Rosen, interview.
- <sup>28</sup>Two of these site are environments that are not included within the parameters established for this discussion; these are the Painted Forest in Valton and the Wegner Grotto in Cataract.
- <sup>29</sup>Beth Secor [Assistant to the Director, The Orange Show], interview with author, January 4, 1996.
- <sup>30</sup>A copy of the plan is available in the SPACES archive.
- <sup>31</sup>Information on Ehn's environment from *SPACES* n. 6, 8 (1987,9).
- <sup>32</sup>Information on the site and its political situation from: Tony Perry, "Tell It On the Mountain," *Los Angeles Times*, section A (November 15, 1993), A3, 23.



## APPENDIX – Sites and Organizations

### Sites

(\* indicates site visit by author)

Bottle Village\*  
4595 Cochran Street  
Simi Valley, California

Bottle Village is currently not officially open to the public. The resident caretaker does make exceptions for interested visitors.

Coral Castle  
28655 South Dixie Highway  
Homestead, Florida

Located approximately twenty-five miles south of downtown Miami at intersection of US 1 and S.W. 286th Street. Operated as an attraction, open daily.

Flower Man's House\*  
3317 Sampson Street  
Houston, Texas

The environment surrounds the private residence of its creator, Cleveland Turner. It is completely viewable from the street.

Garden of Eden\*  
Lucas, Kansas

At intersection of Second and Kansas Streets. Operated as an attraction; open daily, but also viewable during off-hours.

Land of the Pasaquan\*  
Buena Vista, Georgia

From Buena Vista: North on SR 41, left at first traffic light, left at first stop (SR 40), right at next stop. Continue one mile to fork, bear left (SR 137), right onto second

paved road (County Road 78), site is one-half mile on the right. Tours generally available on weekends, gated site may not be accessible otherwise.

Lee's Oriental Rock Garden\*  
4015 E. MacDonald Drive  
Phoenix, Arizona

Louis Lee, the environment's creator, lives on the property. He welcomes visitors when he is out front tending the site; otherwise, respect his privacy.

The Orange Show\*  
2401 Munger Street  
Houston, Texas

Operated as an attraction; open weekends year-round, daily Memorial Day to Labor Day.

Old Trapper's Lodge\*  
Woodland Hills, California

Part of this environment has been reassembled on the campus of Pierce College. It is part of a park area located near the Animal Husbandry Building.

Paradise Garden\*  
Summerville, Georgia

From Summerville center, north several miles on Highway 27, right on Rena Street, three blocks to site. Operated as an attraction; open daily.



Salvation Mountain\*  
Niland, California

Niland is on Highway 111 between Indio and El Centro. From town, go east on Main Street several miles to Salvation Mountain. Leonard Knight lives on the site and welcomes visitors.

Sunnyslope Rock Garden\*  
10023 N. 13th Place  
Phoenix, Arizona

Open the first Sunday of each month between 1:00 and 5:00 p.m. The owner lives on the site and may welcome visitors at other times.

Totem Pole Park\*  
Foyil, Oklahoma

Three miles east of Foyil on State Route 28A. Operated as public park, always available for visitation.

### Organizations

Kohler Foundation  
104 Orchard Road  
Kohler, WI 53044  
(414) 458-1972

The Orange Show Foundation  
2402 Munger Street  
Houston, TX 77023  
(713) 926-6368

SPACES (Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments)  
1804 N. Van Ness Avenue  
Los Angeles, CA 90028  
(213) 463-1629

Watts Towers\*  
1765 East 107th Street  
Los Angeles, California

Currently closed for repairs, though the towers are viewable from most of the site's perimeter.

Wisconsin Concrete Park  
Phillips, Wisconsin

Just south of Phillips on Highway 13. Operated as public park; always available for visitation.

Wooden Garden  
Eureka, California

A portion of the dismantled site can be seen in a shelter built for it on Second Street between D and E Streets.



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