

March 23, 1992

Dear Seymour:

Howdy. I've enclosed a bit of more-or-less impromptu research I did on my latest jaunt to Mexico. Some of the information (and much of the video I shot at the site) is a little fuzzy, but—as we say in the volunteer research biz—it's better than nothing.

Last week my friend Cathy and I flew to Monterrey, Mexico, rented a car (an adventure in itself, considering my not-so-buena Spanish), and drove to the little hamlet of Xilitla, in the hope of seeing the Surrealist palace of Edward James (you know me—I have a thing about Surrealist palaces). I'm pleased to say that we accomplished our mission, and I've enclosed a report for your archives.

So how are you doing? I suppose I'll get a chance to ask you that question in person at the Art of the Insane conference next month (yep, I'm actually planning to attend the thing), but I figure you'll probably be mobbed by fans and admirers and assorted groupies at that time, and might not have much time to talk. (If you do have any spare time on either side of the conference, you're always welcome to drop by Fentonia.) Anyway, I'm looking forward to seeing you.

I finally got around to visiting the Creative Growth Center a few months ago. I was quite taken with the place, and stayed for several hours chatting with the staff and looking through stacks of drawings. I even got to meet a few of the artists. Even though Fentonia has just about run out of wall space, I ended up purchasing three drawings and a wall hanging.

Your Pal/Researcher,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Erfert", with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Erfert "Airfreight" Fenton

3-22-92

Status Report on Surrealist Palace of Edward James, Xilitla, Mexico

On March 8, 1992, a friend and I visited a site constructed starting in the 1950s by Edward James (b. 1907, d. ≈1983). [See pp. 32–35, *Fantastic Architecture*, Schuyt, Elffers and Collins, 1980, for photos and brief description of the site.] The site is located a mile or so from the town of Xilitla, in the state of San Luis Potosi, Mexico (see accompanying map #1). There is also a house built by James in the town itself; the house is now occupied by one of James' heirs.

To get to the site from Xilitla, take highway 120 east (downhill, heading toward highway 85) out of town, and turn left at the first large dirt road; there's no sign—ask a local how to get to “el castillo del Señor James” if you get lost. Stay on the main part of the dirt road (not that you could do otherwise without a jeep) and bear left when the road forks. The road takes you to the main structure (see photo, p. 33, *Fantastic Architecture*). Park anywhere. (See map #2).

The site covers several acres; I was unable to take any precise measurements, since I neglected to bring my surveying tools or a small reconnaissance aircraft. It consists of dozens of structures, connected by stone paths, steps, and bridges (see map #3). One could easily walk around for two or three hours without seeing everything. The site is well maintained, in that it has a caretaker, restrooms, and a small refreshment stand. On the other hand, the buildings and sculptures are very much overgrown by foliage, since the site is located in a lush, subtropical jungle. The structures are in fairly good shape, since they were constructed of cast concrete with metal reinforcing bars. A few have traces of brightly-colored paint, but most are concrete-gray. (Some of the structures appear to be falling apart, but it's hard to tell, since many were never completed in the first place.) The place is remarkably free of litter, vandalism, graffiti, and so on.

Visitors can walk through a gate by the refreshment stand/restrooms, and along a path that skirts the main structures and leads to a series of pools and waterfalls (James reportedly kept alligators and flamingoes in the pools). There is a “No Trespassing” sign by the entrance to the main grounds, but this can easily be circumvented by presenting “una propina” (a tip) of a dollar or two to the caretaker, who will then allow you to wander anywhere you like.

According to *Fantastic Architecture* and a local source, James did not construct the buildings himself, but rather hired locals to do the actual construction according to his plans. And his plans apparently changed frequently, as he would go to Europe, talk to his Surrealist colleagues, and return to Mexico with a new set of ideas.

If you're looking for more information on James or the structures, I can suggest a good source. An English-speaking couple, Wayne and Kehuia (sp?) Ford, live in a house on part of the property (right next to a structure called

Homage to Max Ernst). Wayne is an American, and his wife a Mexican; they renovated the house and have been living there for about two years (I believe they now own the house). Wayne seemed to know a good deal about the history of the site. [I'm afraid my interviewing skills were not at their peak when I talked to Wayne, since I was fairly ill at the time, as well as suffering from fatigue and heat exhaustion from scrambling around the palace—but at least I got the Ford's address, in case anyone has questions about the site.]

Wayne and Kehuia Ford
Zaragoza #124
Xilitla, S.L.P. (C.P. 79900)
México
Phone (91-136) 5-01-58
5-02-27

According to Wayne, the James property is now owned by his heirs, who live in the aforementioned Surrealistic house in Xilitla. The relationship is a bit complicated, but here goes. Wayne said that James took a young Mexican man as a lover when he was in Xilitla. The Mexican and his wife had one son and three daughters, who inherited James' property when he died. The son received most of it (80% or so), and the daughters the rest. [I'm sorry to report that I neglected to get the owners' names, due to my aforementioned feeble state, but I'm sure the Fords have that info.] I don't know what will happen to the property when the heirs pass on, but I would surmise that it would fall into a state of benign neglect, at worst. Since Xilitla is off the beaten track (it's on a winding, two-lane road, and several hours from any populous area), I doubt the area will fall prey to developers.

A note to photographers: it's difficult to photograph most of the structures, since they're overgrown by the surrounding jungle. Also, the area's layout (hills plus thick vegetation) makes it difficult to stand back far enough to get an entire structure in view. I took a few color slides and some 8mm video (both rather mediocre, if you ask me), which I'll be happy to copy for SPACES or any other interested parties. According to Wayne Ford, at least three documentary films have been made at the site (he didn't know the titles or who made them), and there was an article in *House and Garden* magazine (!) several years ago.

A note to the squeamish: the \$5-a-night hotel we occupied in Xilitla was, perhaps, not up to the standards of many Americans—especially those who are not partial to heat, noise, and large spiders (what do you want for \$5?). It did, however, have electricity, hot water, clean sheets, and a very nice owner. I heard there was another hotel, but I imagine it was pretty similar.

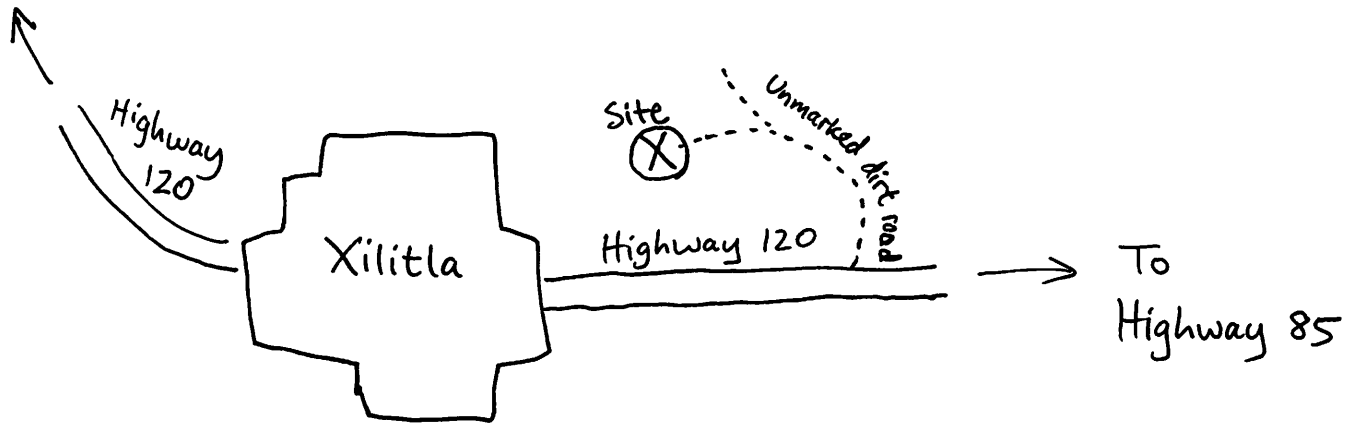
Erfert Fenton
2556 Marsha Way
San Jose, CA 95125
408/448-2373

Edward James site - Map 1



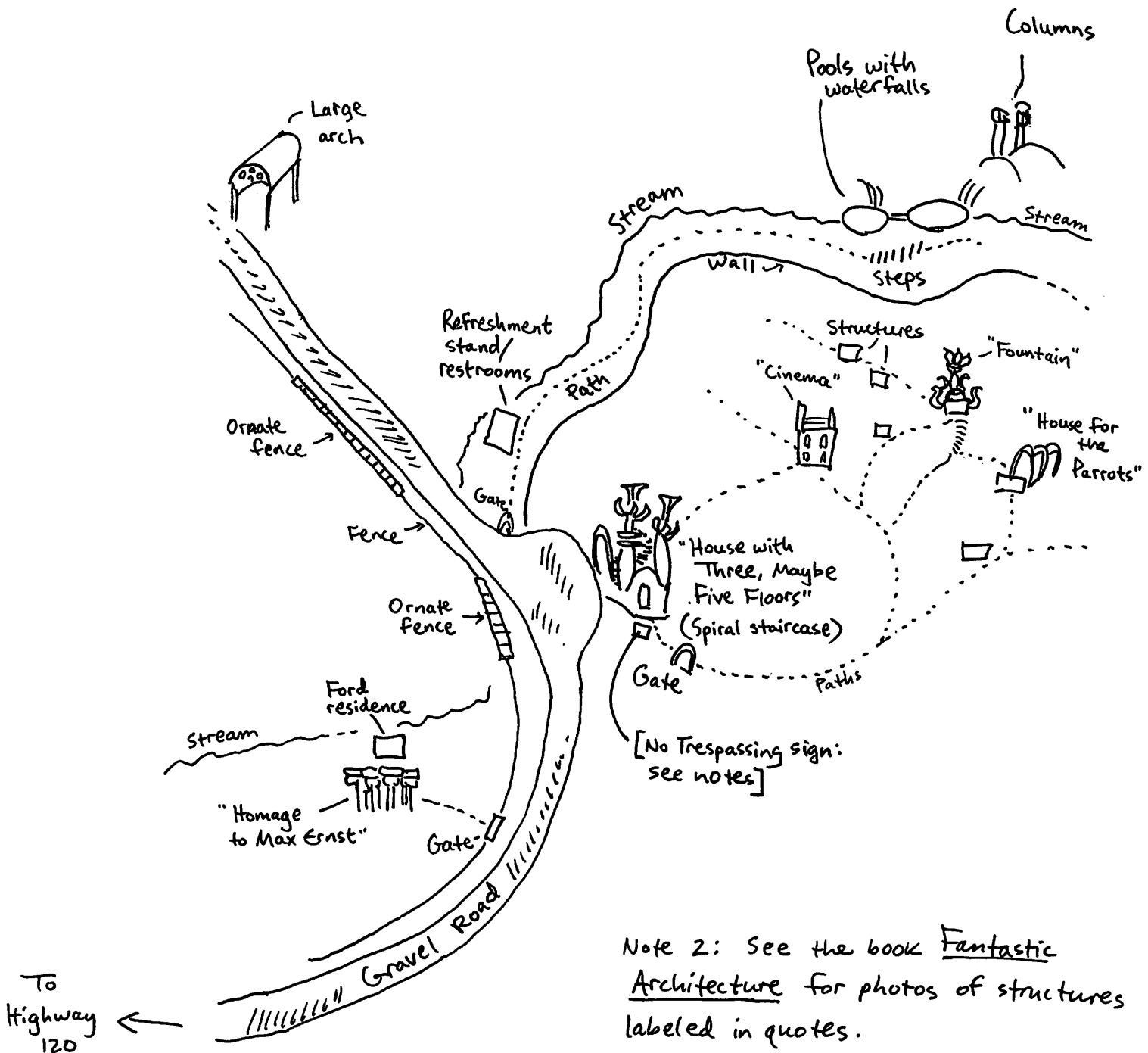
Edward James site - Map 2

To Queretaro,
San Luis Potosi



Edward James site - Map 3

Note: This is drawn from memory, and shows only the general layout of the site - it is not accurate as far as scale or direction are concerned.
(Your intrepid researcher did the best she could in thick jungle vegetation, with no compass.)



Note 2: See the book Fantastic Architecture for photos of structures labeled in quotes.