



## CALIFORNIA ISSUE

### The SPACES Story

There is something out there. Sometimes it takes the form of a Watts Towers and sometimes it takes the form of a miniature village in a backyard. It has been called unconventional, naive, idiosyncratic, outsider, primitive, art brut, grassroots, bricolage, and non-traditional. But none of these terms suggests the scale and complexity of the phenomenon to the broad public or elicits enthusiasm from the makers themselves. SPACES has found that "folk art environment" is a recognizable term for both the viewer and the artist.

Folk art environments are handmade personal spaces. They may be buildings, gardens, decorated walls, or accumulations of objects. No two folk art environments look alike, but they are all similar in their disregard of the traditional materials, forms, and methods of architecture, painting, and sculpture. Such environments are often composed of discarded materials juxtaposed in unorthodox ways. They are almost always developed organically, without formal plans, in association with their creators' homes or places of work, and tend to be monumental in scale and multiplicity of components.

Folk art environments are created by people who have not formerly been thought of as artists and who have not generally considered themselves to be artists. Most environments represent a lifetime of work by people who are now in old age. They are the result of individual vision rather than formal training. They are art as an expression of personal joy.

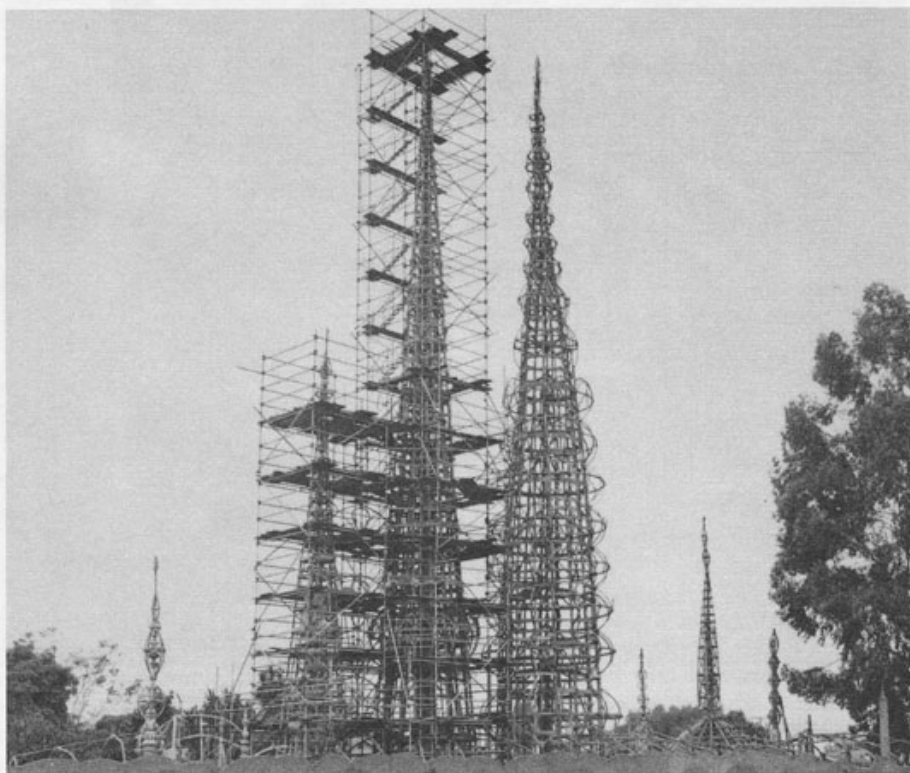
SPACES, Saving and Preserving Art and Cultural Environments, is a nationwide organization concerned with the recognition and preservation of America's monumental folk art environments.

SPACES estimates that there are approximately two hundred folk art environments located across the country. Virtually all of them are threatened by urban sprawl, vandalism, commercialization, natural erosion, or bureaucratic neglect. SPACES hopes to catalyze efforts to preserve these fragile environments through a five-fold program:

- 1) Identify and document all sites.
- 2) Encourage state and local organizations to assume responsibility for preservation of sites within their regions.
- 3) Provide resource information related to the documentation, preservation, restoration,

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### \$1,000,000 For Watts Towers Preservation



Through SB990, the State of California has appropriated one million dollars for work on the Watts Towers.

Simon Rodia, an Italian immigrant, began building his Towers in 1921. Without formal plans, he spent thirty-three years filling his back yard in suburban Los Angeles with a complex of towers, walls, benches, and sculptures composed of seashells, bottles, broken glass, plates, embedded tiles, and wrought iron fencing embossed in wet concrete over an armature of bar metal and pipes.

Rodia deeded his property to neighbors and left Southern California in 1954. In 1958, following the property's third change of ownership, the City of Los Angeles filed a demolition order; city engineers felt that the Towers were unsafe. A Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts was formed. The committee developed a method of testing the stability of the

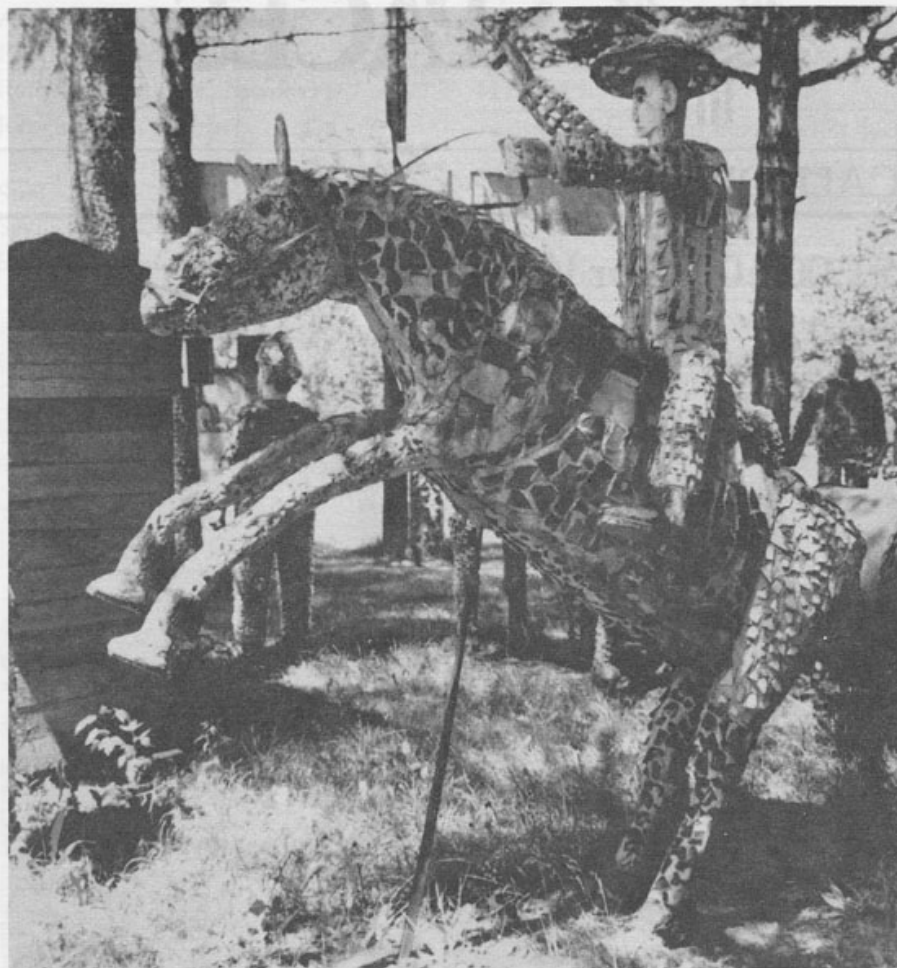
Towers and proved to the city that the structure was safe. For the next sixteen years, the committee ran the Towers, opening them to the public, constructing an art center, offering free art classes to the community, and performing appropriate maintenance as specified by the city.

In 1975, the committee assigned the Towers and the art center to the City of Los Angeles. The city agreed to maintain the Towers, staff and fund the art center, and regularly open the Towers to the public. The committee retained the right to approve structural changes or major work on the Towers.

The city performed no maintenance for three years. Complaints from the committee went unheeded. By March 1978, the Towers had deteriorated so badly that pieces were falling to the ground, and the committee demanded that the site be closed to the public.

(continued on page 3)

## Wisconsin Concrete Park Restored



Courtesy Walker Art Center

A two-year restoration project of a grass roots environment was recently completed at Fred Smith's Wisconsin Concrete Park in Phillips, Wisconsin. With funds from the Kohler Foundation, Inc., the Wisconsin Arts Board, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Anne-Marie Foundation of Phillips, the park, containing 250 concrete and glass statues depicting northwoods animals, folk heroes, patriotic figures, and local events, was totally restored by conservators Don and Sharon Howlett and will be maintained by Price County as a county park.

The success of the project is amazing inasmuch as a severe storm nearly destroyed the Wisconsin Concrete Park on 4 July 1977, five months after restoration had begun. The barn, studio, and over three hundred pine trees in the heavily wooded park were blown down, causing extensive damage to the statues as they fell and drastically altering the environment. Extensive landscaping was thus added to the task

of actually restoring the statues.

The storm did, however, have positive results as well. Because almost every figure was broken open, the conservators had complete access to the rotten wood armatures and were able to correct this major structural problem by replacing wood with steel. The Howletts worked with Sika Chemical Corporation's engineers and products, using a variety of bonders and epoxies to reassemble the shattered and cracked pieces. Matching colored mortars were donated by Medusa Cement Company. Early photographic documentation was obtained from Him Zanzi and Robert Amft, both of Chicago.

The cooperation of federal, state, and county agencies, business and industry, and private organizations and individuals, rare in projects of this kind, helped to ensure the success of the restoration. The Fred Smith Wisconsin Concrete Park project sets a precedent for the restoration of other grass roots environments throughout the United States.

## News Briefs

The Kohler Foundation, which was instrumental in the restoration of Fred Smith's Wisconsin Concrete Park, has undertaken the restoration of the Painted Forest, another important Wisconsin environment. Ernest Hupenden, a self-taught itinerant artist, created the Painted Forest between 1887 and 1889. The environment consists of a floor to ceiling diorama painted on the walls of a forty by seventy foot lodge hall that belonged to the Modern Woodmen of America, a fraternal order. The mural depicts the secret rites and superstitions of this once popular order. Recently, the entire building was removed from the original site and relocated nearby. Don Howlett, who helped restore Fred Smith's Wisconsin Concrete Park, is in charge of the restoration.

The National Museum of American Art-Smithsonian Institution (formerly the Natural Collection of Fine Arts) has acquired a sculptural piece made by Walter Flax, who filled his yard in Virginia with concrete and wooden ships. The museum already has in its collection James Hampton's Throne.

A 150 page book on Fred Smith's Concrete Park will be published early in 1982. It will include an introduction by Ruth Kohler, a statement by Michael Hall, a description of the restoration process by Don and Sharon Howlett, a biography of Fred Smith by Dawn Bellau, and a bibliography. Each piece will be illustrated individually with a description. For more information, contact Ruth Kohler, Sheboygan Art Center, Wisconsin. The project was sponsored by the Wisconsin Arts Board and the Sheboygan Art Center.

**What It Is: Twentieth Century Black Folk Art** includes several folk art environments among three hundred works by twenty artists. Corcoran Gallery of Art, 17th and New York Avenue NW, Washington, D.C. 20006, January 16 through April 4, 1982. J.P. Speed Museum, Louisville, Kentucky, April through June 1982. Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles, California, November 30, 1982 through January 6, 1983. Catalog available.

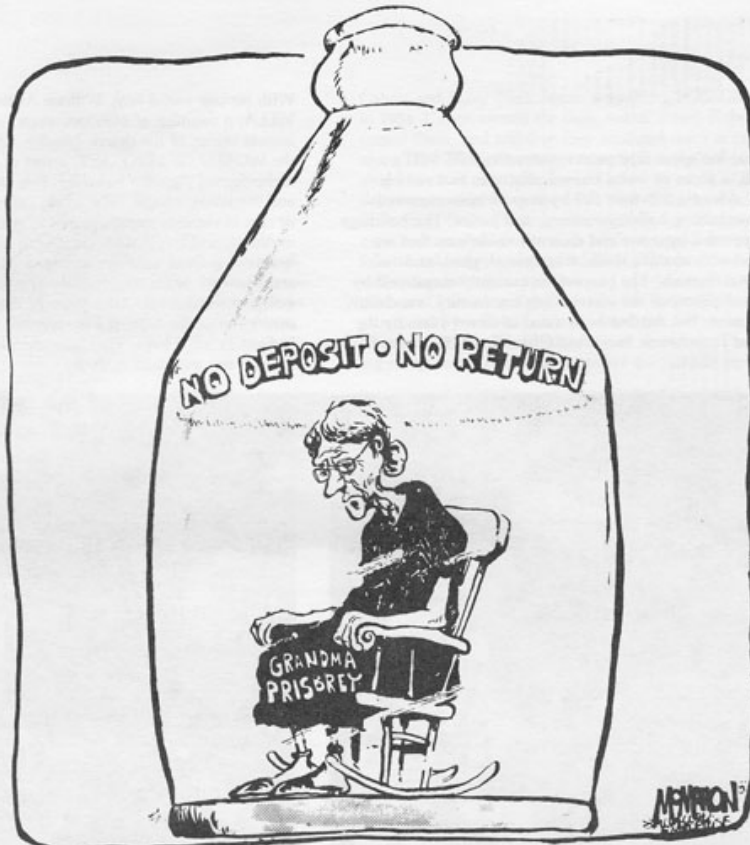
An exhibit of "non-traditional" folk art curated by Gregg Blasdel will include four Vermont folk art environments. Robert Hull Fleming Museum, Colchester Avenue, Burlington, Vermont 05401, June through September 1982.

The National Register of Historic Places has accepted a sixth folk art environment, Pap Shaffer's Rancho Bonita in New Mexico.





## Bottle Village Threatened



©Simi Valley Enterprise/ Cartoon by McMahon

Bottle Village is again endangered. Unless \$80,000 is raised by the end of the year, this unique "village" built of bottles, a California State Historical Landmark and Ventura County Cultural Landmark, may fall victim to the latest of a long series of crises.

Tressa "Grandma" Prisbrey moved to Simi Valley, California in 1955 and began building Bottle Village with found materials from the city dump. In 1972, after constructing twenty-two buildings of bottles set in mortar, she sold her property to a local doctor for \$10,500 and moved to Oregon with her son.

Grandma returned to Simi Valley in 1973 and was allowed to live at Bottle Village rent free. When the doctor sold the site to a local realtor for \$14,500 in 1976, Grandma stayed with the property. During this period, the city attempted to condemn the village as unsafe and unsightly. Interested residents came to Grandma's defense, and SPACES generated hundreds of letters of support from around the world. Demolition was prevented.

In 1977, it was discovered that in her enthusiasm, Grandma had built a large part of the village on a twelve foot strip of an adjoining property. City

representatives, the owners of the two properties, Jeff Wack, a concerned citizen, and SPACES met and reached an agreement whereby the strip of land was added to the Bottle Village lot, the contiguous property was given a zoning variance, and the owner of Grandma's site agreed to grant the city or local interested persons first refusal if the property were to be sold. By 1980, the village had seriously deteriorated. In that year, SPACES located funds to provide a site and preservation plan for the environment and helped form the Preserve Bottle Village Committee. The owner offered the property to the committee for \$77,000, a price based more upon the village's new renown than upon the value of the land. The committee was unable to raise sufficient funds and declined the offer.

This spring, a local reporter discovered a notice of default and public sale of the Bottle Village site. The owner had borrowed more than \$38,000 using the property as collateral; because he had defaulted, the agreement of first refusal was nullified, and no notice had been given to the city or the committee. Both the new owner and the agent of the sale

## Watts Towers

(continued from page 1)



Later that year, the Towers were deeded to the State of California and leased back to the City of Los Angeles for fifty years. A grant of \$207,000 was appropriated by the state to repair the Towers. The contractor chosen by the city proved unsatisfactory. By the time the state regained the remaining funds, the Towers had deteriorated so badly that they were insufficient to complete even immediate stabilization.

One million dollars in state park funds has now been appropriated for preservation of the Towers. The state has recently accepted a proposal for the development of a preservation plan for the Towers. For more information, contact the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts, Post Office Box 1461, Los Angeles, California 90028.

refused to negotiate with the Preserve Bottle Village Committee for the purchase of the property at the default price. They advised the committee to make a cash bid at the public auction. The committee, with only \$6500 in its treasury, instead invited news teams from the Los Angeles affiliates of the three television networks and radio and newspaper reporters to attend. The only cash bid received was that of the agent; his bid was only \$3000 more than the default price. The agent told reporters that he was aware of the historic and aesthetic importance of Bottle Village and that he would not evict Grandma. He agreed to promptly notify the committee of a price for the property. Two weeks later, he sold the village to a friend of the former owner for approximately \$47,000 without contacting the committee.

The new owner has demanded \$97,000 for the Bottle Village site. The committee has appropriated \$13,700 as a non-refundable deposit and has until August 1982 to raise the balance. Various fund-raising activities are planned. To aid in the preservation of this unique environment, contact Preserve Bottle Village Committee, Post Office Box 573, Simi Valley, California 93065.

# Ten California Environments

## Sites in California

In 1978, SPACES sponsored a thematic proposal, Twentieth Century Folk Art Environments in California, consisting of ten sites, for nomination by the State of California to the National Register of Historic Places. After two years of deliberation, nine of the ten environments were rejected because they were less than fifty years old, because their creators were still alive, or because they were merely "junk artistically arranged." One site, Desert View Tower, was accepted. It is the fifth folk art environment to be placed on the National Register. Two of the other three sites, the Watts Towers and the Underground Gardens, are also located in California. The State of California has subsequently listed nine of the environments in the thematic proposal—the Enchanted Garden had been destroyed in the interim—as State Historical Landmarks. SPACES has located forty sites in California.



Art Beal has spent fifty years constructing NIT WIT RIDGE, a series of wood framed structures that ramble up the side of a 250-foot cliff by way of interconnected balconies, stairs, hallways, rooms, and patios. The buildings are supported by stone and cement foundations that are adorned with abalone shells, scrap metal, glass, and industrial discards. The property is currently threatened by the development of the surrounding community, vandalism, and erosion; but Art has been aided in recent years by the Art Beal Foundation, Inc., Post Office Box 418, Morro Bay, California 93442.



With his one useful arm, William Averett built HAPPY VILLA, a complex of plaques, maps, and tableaux in a remote region of the desert. Nearby, Charles Kasling created the WORLD OF LOST ART, a sort of above-ground archeological dig with bas relief, free standing sculpture and miniature villages. The work, carved from local stone or cast in cement, depicts patriotic, religious, Old West, mythical, and travel scenes in a wide variety of styles and techniques. Once carefully arranged with decorative boulders and low rock walls, much of the site has recently been stolen or vandalized. After years of dispute over the ownership of the land, it has reverted to the Quechan Indians as tribal land. They have no plans for either site and are not maintaining them.



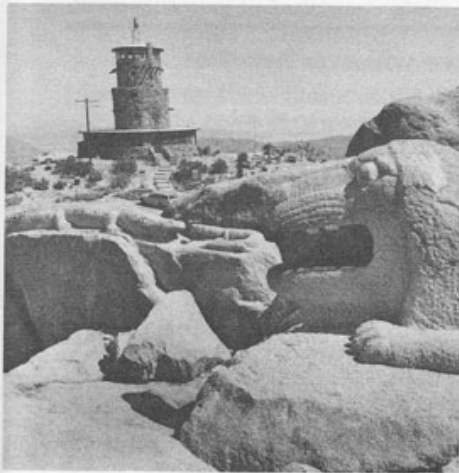
Miles Mahan retired from the carney business in 1956, bought a half-acre lot in the desert, and settled down to practice his putting game and write poetry. Eventually, he painted his poems on boards and posted them along the front of his property facing the highway. In addition to the poem signs, Miles posted discarded commercial signs that include a diving girl, a stallion, a thunderbird, and his famous hula girl which inspired the name of his environment, HULAVILLE. The poems recall his days in the carney business as well as colorful desert characters.

*Once I found her in an old scrap heap  
A lonesome hula girl, so sound asleep  
How long she slept there, no one knows  
Only seen from the pile were her toes*



ENCHANTED GARDEN was the fourth environment Albert Glade created after immigrating to America in 1911. In the span of ten years, Albert assembled tens of thousands of small shells and pebbles, as well as pieces of broken glass, plastic, ceramics, and metal, that covered walkways, benches, posts, and walls, encircled trees, and climbed the sides of his house. The assemblage was surrounded by concrete walls that resembled stacked mud pies. The site has been destroyed.

For more than thirty years, Emanuel "Litto" Damonte has decorated his driveway, house, garage, and yard with miniature houses, wooden pinwheels, bottles, statues, commercial signs, and toy figures. But the dominating element of LITTO'S PLACE is hubcaps, which cover trees, fences, walls, and gates. Litto is still active, adding to and maintaining the environment.



DESERT VIEW TOWER began rising in the 1920's as Bert Vaughan's memorial to the pioneers who had passed through the desert on their way west. The tower, eventually completed by Dennis Newman in the 1950's, is a three-story circular structure of native stone with four-foot thick walls. It presently contains a collection of western relics. Surrounding the site are large boulders that, in the 1930's, attracted an engineer-turned-sculptor, M.T. Ratcliffe, who transformed many of them into statues of real and mythical animals. The site is in good condition and is a tourist attraction. Desert View Tower—Box 301, Jacumba, CA 92034 Interstate '8—approximately 40 miles E. of El Centro.

Calvin and Ruby Black began assembling POSSUM TROT in 1954. Calvin carved the dolls out of wood, Ruby costumed them, and together they arranged them in tableaux along the highway to attract travellers to their desert rock shop. Some of the dolls were attached to crude windmill devices, moving when the wind blew. Others were housed in the Bird Cage Theatre, where Calvin would don a black cape and manipulate the dolls while a tape of his voice in falsetto told stories of the Old West. The environment suffered greatly from weather and vandalism after Calvin died, and following Ruby's death, the doll collection was purchased by a California folk art dealer who is attempting to organize a travelling exhibition of the work. The remaining components of the environment are for sale.



The front yard of John Ehn's motel provides a mythical history of the Wild West. OLD TRAPPER'S LODGE consists of sculpted characters and wooden tombstones—often combined in a single image—that John modeled after moving from the East in the 1940's. The statues are vividly painted and the tombstones and surrounding plaques vividly inscribed. The site is maintained by the family.

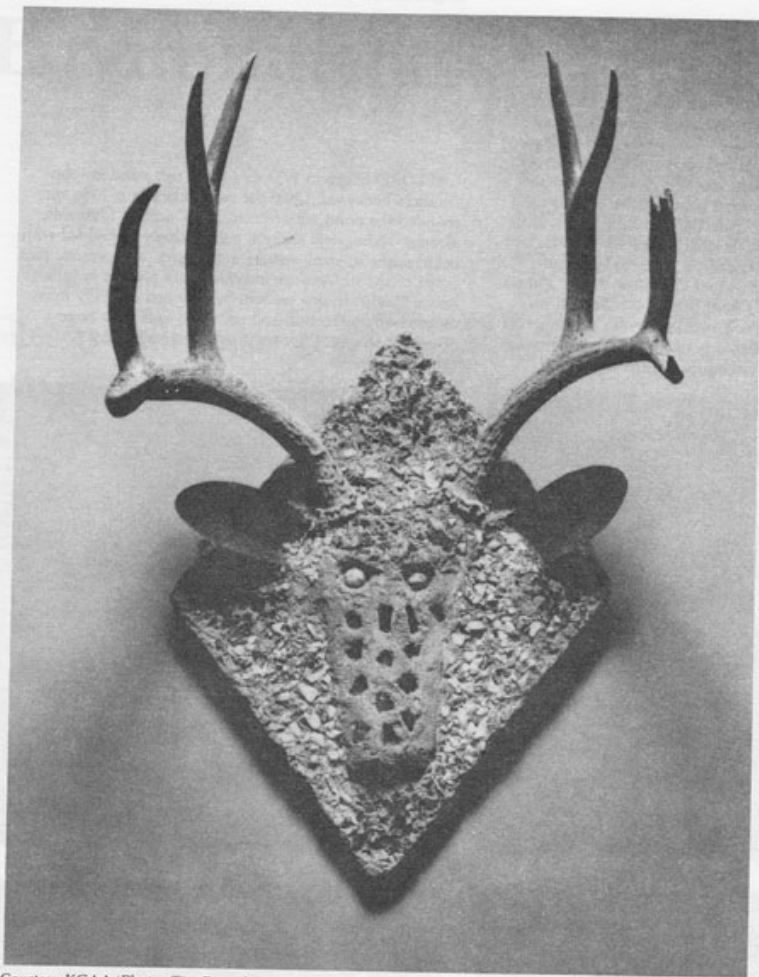
CAPEDRO began in 1932 as a small fish pond in John Giudici's backyard. Over the next forty years, John surrounded the pond with cement walls, arches, fountains, alcoves, niches, and shrines, painstakingly embedded with pebbles, shells, small statues, toy figures, and ceramic tiles. Some of the surfaces are inscribed with phrases in John's native Italian. In one section, he departed radically from detailed ornamentation and painted a wall with large geometric shapes. Capedro is well maintained by John's family.



Grandma Prisbrey began BOTTLE VILLAGE in 1956, eventually completing twenty-two structures. Bottles set in mortar form the walls of the houses and five hundred feet of fence. Grandma connected the structures with cement walkways embedded with thousands of items: broken crockery, old tools, license plates, and bits of chrome. Each of the major structures is uniquely decorated and filled with accumulations of discards. Some are thematic in nature; the Pencil House is filled with pencils, the Doll House with dolls. Although Grandma still resides on the property, Bottle Village is threatened by redevelopment by the owner, vandalism, and the elements. A local group is attempting to save the site.



## Kansas Grassroots Art Association



Courtesy KGAA/Photo: Tim Forcade

The Kansas Grassroots Art Association exists to document and preserve the work of naive artists in Kansas, a state which abounds in significant environmental grassroots art. During the early 1970's, several of these sites were in danger of destruction. The KGAA had been, up to that time, a group of people informally encouraging and assisting artists and recording their work. The group incorporated when it became apparent that a formal organization would be advantageous in obtaining funds for preservation and documentation.

Members work on KGAA projects as an avocation, since there are no salaried employees. They donate their expertise in areas such as photography, carpentry, masonry, museum administration, and commercial art.

Since incorporation, the association has cooperated with other state agencies to exhibit naive art. Two recent exhibitions, "One of a Kind" and "Hansen-Eyman-Mozet," were installed at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. KGAA has recently opened their

own museum in Vinland, Kansas, near Lawrence, and now are exhibiting photo murals and objects from various Kansas grassroots environments.

KGAA has developed a library of photographs and information on grassroots art throughout the world. This library has served as a resource for many individuals and groups with interests similar to those of the association.

Ongoing activities include educating families and communities as to the worth of the monuments in their midst and encouraging artists to plan for the future. KGAA is committed to on site preservation, but members are currently working to obtain a storage facility for work which must be moved.

Contributing memberships in the Kansas Grassroots Art Association are available to anyone interested in naive art. Dues are ten dollars annually. Information may be obtained by writing to the Kansas Grassroots Art Association, 500 Louisiana Street, Lawrence, Kansas 66044.

## The SPACES Story

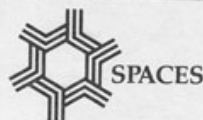
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and maintenance of the environments.

4) Compile a reference library of photographs, oral histories, maps, printed materials, and related documentation.

5) Develop public education and information programs such as lectures, exhibitions, and publications to support local programs.

Although all of these activities are inter-related, SPACES believes that the artists should be apprised of the merit and value of their work and that the sites should be stabilized and secured before they are heavily publicized. Most sites are currently too fragile to sustain an influx of visitors. Unsecured sites have been vandalized or commercialized in the past. Therefore, as a general policy, SPACES does not indiscriminately identify such sites by location until their security has been guaranteed by their creators or by local preservation organizations. In this manner, it is hoped that the gradual destruction of a rare and important part of America's culture, its folk art environments, will be halted.



### Join us now!

Use the enclosed application envelope to mail your membership

### Have you ever heard of...

SPACES is constantly searching for sites which are known to exist but whose location has been lost. Rasmus Peterson's Rock Garden is one. Can you help us? The photo is from an old postcard print.



## Gardens May Go Under

Baldasare Forestiere spent forty years carving a complex of living spaces fifteen feet below ground in Fresno, California. In 1908, discovering that neither his soil nor the climate of the mid-Central Valley were suitable for cultivating the oranges that he had moved west to grow, he began creating the Underground Gardens. With a pick and a wheelbarrow, he carved out rooms and tunnels beneath a fifteen acre site. He furnished the rooms and ran in water and electricity. Baldasare's dream was to open a subterranean restaurant, but he died in 1946, before his project was completed. The Underground Gardens are maintained by Baldasare's nephew and his wife, Rick and Lorraine Forestiere.

Though the Underground Gardens were placed on the National Register of Historic Places in October 1977 and became a California State Historical Landmark in January 1978, their integrity has not been guaranteed. The property is maintained at the family's expense and through a modest income from guided tours. These funds have proven insufficient to properly stabilize, restore, and secure the site and to meet the high taxes created by the urban development of the surrounding area. The Forestiere's have repeatedly sought aid in the form of loans, grants, and loan-grant combinations from both the state and federal governments without success.

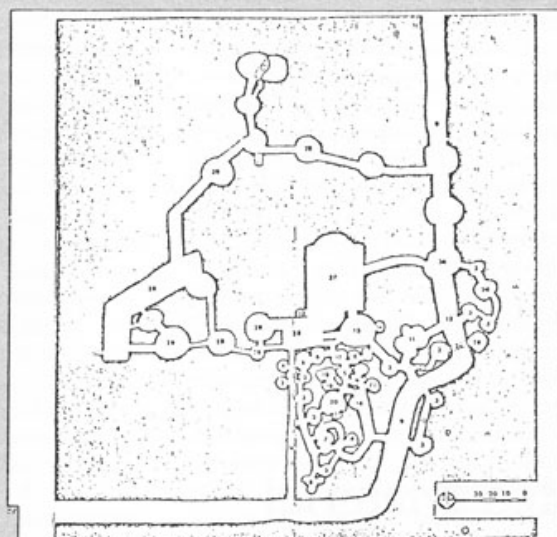
Lorraine Forestiere recently commented, "God only knows what has kept the Gardens this long. I think truly if it were not for the visitors, we would not have been able to reach 1981. How can one destroy or exploit the work this man has done? Can not the strength and purity of a person's work survive in our age? Certainly, we, at this period in history, desperately need examples of man's simple capacity to achieve with only the mind and body that God has given us."

The Underground Gardens are located at 5021 West Shaw Avenue, Fresno, California 93711, east of the Highway 99 Shaw Avenue exit. Phone (209) 485-3281. Tours daily 15 June to 6 September, 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM. Tours weekends and holidays, weather permitting, 1 May to 14 June and 7 September to 31 October, 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM. Closed November to April.



Courtesy Underground Gardens

Site Plan of the Underground Gardens



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**During the past twelve months, SPACES has:**

Conducted a national survey of folk art environments.

Contacted every state office of historic preservation, state arts council, and many interested groups and individuals to make them aware of and involved with SPACE's survey.

Assisted local groups interested in the preservation of individual sites.

Assembled information for a national handbook to aid in the documentation and preservation of folk art environments and the organization of local interest groups.

Established a format for collecting pertinent information on every site.

Documented and mapped several significant environments.

Presented lectures at universities, conferences, and to interested groups.

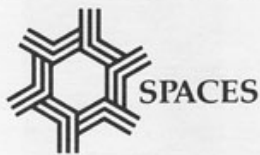
Initiated the successful nomination of ten folk art environments to the status of California Landmarks and of one of the ten to the National Register of Historic Places.

Produced a traveling exhibit of photographs of the Watts Towers.

Sponsored the proclamation of Simon Rodia Day by the City of Los Angeles.

Doubled membership.

*These efforts were supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the L.J. and Mary C. Skaggs Foundation, and various corporations and by volunteers.*



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