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IMBUING PLACE WITH MEANING: THE PERSONALIZATION OF OUTDOOR SPACE

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ABSTRACT: This project explores ways in which people have personalized space imbuing it with meaning, emotion, beauty, and often humor. Examples of spatial personalization, including folk and visionary art will be used to demonstrate to design professionals how the built environment can be enriched with personal and cultural identity.

STATEMENT OF GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Imbuing Place with Meaning: The Personalization of Outdoor Space

In Mountainair, New Mexico there is an unusual fence. Old Pop Shaffer built the fence in 1957 by embedding concrete rails with bits of colored stone, forming an array of whimsical creatures. There are fat turtles, frolicking dinosaurs, a red-tongued fox, snakes and serpents of all colors, and a horned devil's face which grins menacingly from the top rail of the gate. In the northern peninsula of Michigan the rolling landscape is abruptly punctuated by a cylindrical tower, a local landmark made entirely of colored pop bottles which have been cemented together. In central Kentucky someone has used bottles to give their area a special character by intertwining their wire fences with thousands of colored bottles. The Milk of Magnesia bottle section has an especially magnificent blue glow when the sun shines. On the island of Maui an older couple display their extensive collection of whirligigs and weather vanes which decorate almost every inch of fence, lawn and roof line; some of them even whistle when the wind blows.

These are just a few examples of how people have personalized space, imbuing it with meaning, emotion, beauty, and often humor. Spaces can be personalized by emphasizing cultural heritage, local style, symbolic images or the direct involvement of community members. Outdoor spatial personalization may involve the work of folk artists or visionary environmental artists. Folk art in the landscape includes those naive artistic expressions created by people unfettered by design training, and which collectively express cultural values which are passed on to succeeding generations. Examples include the chain-saw carvings found in lumbering areas, the sunburst designs painted by the Pennsylvania Dutch on their barns, and the fanciful mailbox stands created out of old farm implements, machinery and chains.

Visionary environmental artists personalize space, not by replicating an accepted art or craft of their culture, but by creating unique personal expressions. They too are untrained in formal arts or design, and their work often has the naive charm of other folk arts. Elinor Horwitz, in her book "Contemporary American Folk Artists" (1975) devotes

a chapter to visionary environmental artists. Included are a man who makes giant, brightly painted whirligigs and windmills; and a man whose yard is filled with his giant concrete creations of both animal and human form; and Simon Rodia, an Italian immigrant who created the soaring Watts towers- a whimsical spaceframe with spires, gates and fountains all decorated with broken glass and pottery pressed into concrete. Herbert W. Hemphill, Jr. and Julia Weissman in their book "Twentieth-Century American Folk Art and Artists (1974) include 17 different examples of outdoor spatial personalization including exterior wall murals, carvings out of wood and stone, concrete sculptural creations and several intricately detailed gateways and fences.

The purpose of this presentation is threefold :

- 1) To show examples of outdoor spatial personalization from throughout the country and to assess the special qualities of these examples.
- 2) To demonstrate the use of outdoor spatial personalization as a way of imbuing the built environment with greater meaning and emotion.
- 3) To help bring together two important groups: the architects, landscape architects and urban planners who design our built environment, and the folk and visionary artists, and local people who should have an integral and active role in the creation of our built environment.

Design professionals can incorporate the work of folk and visionary artists and local people, thus creating personalized spaces, such as a city park whose unusual benches are crafted by local back-country woodsmen, or an urban plaza whose walls are decorated with the names and handprints of its' noon-hour visitors. If we study how people treat outdoor space, or even if we look at what a family does when they move into a new house, or what a student does when they move into a new dorm room, we see that people like to personalize space; to impart a place with a special identity.

Spatial personalization however, has too often been ignored by design professionals who have allowed broad sweeping design principles to superceed the need for cultural and personal expression. The result is that we have a country filled with generic landscapes, sterile urban plazas, bland housing developments and so on--places with little or no identity or meaning.

Yet the development of emotionally responsive places becomes increasingly important in a highly technological society. Author and lecturer John Naisbitt (1984) affirms that people need to offset the cold and calculating aspects of technology with an emphasis on the more humanistic and spiritual aspects of mankind. The National Endowment for the Arts has targeted 1987 as the year to search for ways to create a more humane city. Spatial personalization and the inclusion of folk and visionary art in the built environment can be fostered by design professionals, thus making places more humane and more meaningful and memorable.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH:

This project is an extension of the authors study of New Mexican cemeteries called " Camposantos", which are an excellent example of spatial personalization. The handmade gravestones in the camposanto are a form of religious folk art which reflect the culture and history of the hispanic Catholics. The paper resulting from this study also reviewed cemetery history, indicating that grave personalization was once popular in anglo cemeteries as well, but that cemetery owners restricted grave personalization with the advent of the lawn mower and the desire for simplified maintenance. Recent activities related to spatial personalization research include:

- Paper submitted to Landscape Journal: "Camposantos: Sacred Places of the Southwest." January 1987
- Paper presented at Recursos Conference on Historic Preservation and Acculturating Architecture. Sante Fe, New Mexico. January 1987.
- Abstract submitted for the 1987 Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture Conference, Rhode Island School of Design, entitled "Personalizing Space: Folk Art in the Landscape."
- Travel grant received from USU Women and Gender Institute for presentation of camposanto paper at the Works by Women: National Sculpture Conference, Cincinnati, Ohio. May, 1987.
- Paper presented on camposantos at the 1986 Council of Educators of Landscape Architecture Conference, Athens, Georgia. September 1986.
- Invitation to present paper on camposanto research at the American Society of Landscape Architects' Utah Chapter annual meeting. Salt Lake City, Utah, February 1987.