

DAVID PATRICK KELLY  
Outsider Architecture and Historic Preservation  
(Under the Direction of MARK EDWARD REINBERGER)

Outsider architecture is a type of architecture that features unique designs made by builders with no formal training. Outsider architecture also functions as the physical/architectural manifestation of the ideology of its builder, which is more often than not “eccentric” by conventional standards. What constitutes outsider architecture is of issue in this thesis, as is the history of outsider architecture and the historic preservation movement that accompanies it. This thesis also suggests ways to improve the outsider architecture preservation situation, and to use outsider architecture as a tool in improving both social welfare and the built environment.

INDEX WORDS: Outsider architecture, Historic preservation, Amateur building,  
Simon Rodia, Pasaquan, Bottle houses, Eccentrics

OUTSIDER ARCHITECTURE AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

by

DAVID PATRICK KELLY

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by

DAVID PATRICK KELLY

Approved:

Major Professor: Mark Reinberger

Committee: Pratt Cassity  
Megan Bellue  
Henry Parker

Electronic Version Approved:

Gordhan L. Patel  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
December 2001

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Erik Satie and Olivier Messiaen, whose music saw me through many unfulfilling hours at the computer keyboard.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTIONS AND DEFINITIONS

*Look! Look! Look! Look!*  
*God Almighty, has anyone living or dead done anything like this?*  
*Would you believe that I done all this?*<sup>1</sup>

In 1968 Clarence Schmidt made the above exclamation about his "House of Mirrors," a complex of structures and gardens on Ohayo Mountain in upstate New York. Speaking proudly of his achievement, he was unaware that he also spoke for a small but significant group of architectural "renegades" dispersed throughout both the United States and the world. Schmidt was right in one sense, no one had created anything quite like his rambling, seven-story, solo-built conglomeration of wood, tar, glass, and aluminum that rose from the hillside like an organic growth of discarded construction materials. Still, there were others elsewhere who were kindred spirits, who worked in a similar manner to equally unique ends.

Schmidt was but one of a group of non-architect builders creating fantastic works of architecture over long periods of time while foregoing the rules and precedents of standard architectural style and practice to forge a distinct "other" in the built environment. What is more, these builders worked alone or, on rare occasion, with only the peripheral help of amateur construction assistants. Along with Clarence Schmidt this group of amateur architect-builders includes noteworthy representatives Ferdinand Cheval of Hauterives, France; Tressa "Grandma" Prisbey of Simi Valley, California; St.

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<sup>1</sup> Clarence Schmidt, quoted in Gregory Blasdel and William C. Lipke, Schmidt (Burlington, Vermont: Robert Hull Fleming Museum, University of Vermont, 1975): 46.

EOM (Eddie Owens Martin) of Buena Vista, Georgia; and Simon Rodia of Watts, California – to name a handful.

These "outsider architects" and their works of "outsider architecture" were only to be linked after the fact.<sup>2</sup> There was no movement from which they arose, no manifestos announcing their agenda, and no school from which they graduated.<sup>3</sup> They were unaware of one another's creations and, as evidenced by Schmidt's quote, believed themselves to be doing something unprecedented and isolated. When the claim is made for the existence of outsider architecture, it is made from a vantage point that allows essential common denominators to be identified within the various examples – a rhyme and reason in what otherwise appears chaotic and, at best, coincidental.

Works of outsider architecture conform to no specific shape or size nor are they governed by any other set of physical specifications. Simon Rodia's Watts Towers features spire-like towers ten stories tall whereas Tressa Prisbey's Bottle Village buildings are squat, one story constructions. Both of these sites occupy lots that are less than one acre while Nek Chand's Rock Garden in the northern Indian city of Chandigarh takes up over twenty-five acres. Outsider architecture appears as tower, castle, pagoda, roundhouse, shack, and everything in between. It is a shape-shifter and a chameleon. The presence of signature features (fanlights or symmetry, for example) as dictates of style has no bearing upon outsider architecture. Indeed the concept of style itself is problematic, as each work of outsider architecture develops its own "style."

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<sup>2</sup> The nature of these terms and the author's choice to use them will be discussed in an upcoming section.

<sup>3</sup> It is frequently argued that outsider architects and outsider architecture do originate from a "movement" of sorts – the folk art tradition. This claim is neither wholly true nor false and will be discussed in an upcoming section.



Figure 1.1 Clarence Schmidt's House of Mirrors. From Maizels.

While the envelope and appearance of outsider architecture are quite fluid, there are characteristics and conditions that govern this architectural realm. First, outsider architecture relies on the outsider architect, its "one-man-band" who serves as architect, funder, and builder. Outsider architecture sites are the sole creation of their architects, from vision to realization. Although some outsider sites have involved the labor of others, their help has been peripheral and certainly not significant enough to contradict the notion that these creations are the product of a single builder. In no instance has anyone other than the relevant outsider architect provided vision or design for these sites. Outsider architecture represents a pure manifestation of the architect's creative vision, free of the inevitable compromise inherent in any partnership and limited only by the outsider architect's talents, resources, and the physical laws of nature.

The "talents" of the outsider architect mentioned above relate to the second characteristic of the genre. Those who create outsider architecture are untrained as architects or builders. Some outsider architects have had relevant experience in other fields (both Clarence Schmidt and Simon Rodia had worked in mechanical, tool-oriented trades at some point), but most come to building inexperienced (Tressa Prisbey was formerly a campaign worker, Eddie Martin a prostitute and fortune-teller) and use intuition and trial-and-error to achieve their goals.

Outsider architecture's creation by individual, inexperienced builders is key to its third defining characteristic. Works of outsider architecture take much longer to build than do conventional works of architecture.<sup>4</sup> Some outsider sites only reach their final

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<sup>4</sup> For the sake of convenience, the term "conventional" is used in this thesis to describe all architecture that is not included in (or very closely related to) the outsider genre, no matter how seemingly "unconventional" it may be. The term has been chosen for its application to architecture that is built for practical purposes

form when their builder dies or becomes too old to continue construction. Others reach completion only after several decades.

The fourth characteristic of outsider architecture is its representation of some theory or ideal espoused by its relative builder. Outsider architects build in part because it is their medium of expressing some deeply-held belief or theory. The eccentricity of these theories varies in magnitude, although this variance is not necessarily directly proportional to the eccentricity of the particular outsider construction. Is St. EOM's Pasaquan, a site espousing the lessons of a mythical, extraterrestrial culture, more visually striking or bizarre than Jeff McKissack's Orange Show, which promotes the more earthbound notion that eating oranges is the key to good health? Only individual taste can answer this question. The individual beliefs of outsider architects have a profound influence on what their particular site will look like and are indeed the reason they build in the first place.

A fifth and final characteristic comes in the building materials used by outsider architects. Outsider architecture is typically composed of discarded materials, on-site resources, or the cheapest commercially available building materials. Usually a mix of the three types of materials is used, with a predominant reliance on found objects steering the plan and final appearance.

Overarching all of these characteristics and conditions is the quintessentially stunning visual impact of outsider architecture. Although no two outsider environments look alike, they are unified in their anomalous appearance relative to the settings they

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(shelter or some other utility) and/or by professional architects and builders – two conditions that are certainly underlying conventions of almost everything in our built environment.

occupy.<sup>5</sup> While it can be argued that many outsider environments have a tremendous organic quality that unifies them with natural elements in their immediate vicinity, their primary visual impression is one of contrast rather than continuity. Our eyes have become accustomed to a certain pattern within the built environment, a certain range of visual information that allows for variance but rarely challenges or shocks us. Outsider sites break this pattern – they are literally outside of our standard realm of visual experience in terms of the built environment.

Several aspects common to outsider sites contribute to their visual distinction relative to the general built environment. The use of non-traditional, often recycled, building materials is one important ingredient of this distinction. Our eyes are used to wood, brick, stone, vinyl, steel, and other standardized, commercially manufactured or produced materials specifically intended for construction, so they are surprised to see something built utilizing materials outside of this pool of ingredients – a house made of bottles or a structure coated in broken crockery, for example.

Another distinction is found in the manner of construction and decoration employed in outsider environments. The amateur building techniques of outsider architects ensure a "human touch" of imperfection – accidental asymmetry, non-plumb

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<sup>5</sup> This assertion is perhaps a bit ethnocentric but is still valid in relation to the majority of outsider sites currently known. The possible ethnocentricity of this assertion lies in my unfamiliarity with the general built environment of non-Western countries. It is possible that the general built environment in these places would afford more visual harmony with what is considered an outsider site in Europe and North America. The limited number (relative to Western countries) of recognized outsider environments in non-Western countries raises several questions. Does the limited number of documented outsider sites in non-Western countries tell us the unlikely story of cultures that do not breed the individualism, eccentricity, or opportunity to produce outsider sites? Could it simply be explained that this number suggests a lack of adequate documentation? Or, relative to the above, is this situation due to the typical built environment of these areas? In other words, are there sites that would meet all the criteria of "outsider" in a Western setting, but do not receive this recognition because of their relative congruity with their surroundings in these non-Western locations? All of these questions are difficult to answer and beyond the scope of this thesis, but are still important items to keep in mind when considering what constitutes outsider architecture and why most of it is found in Western countries.

walls, curves where angles were obviously intended – that is increasingly alien to the built environment of industrialized society. Further, the manner of exterior decoration often employed in outsider sites, commonly referred to as "assemblage" or "bricolage," widens the aesthetic gap between these sites and other structures.<sup>6</sup>

Assemblage calls for an integration of smaller, often random parts into a more cohesive whole. Although cohesion is achieved, the particles retain an essence of their own and tease the eye with an illusory movement and shimmer. The effect is not unlike the use of pointillism (the combination of several small "dots" of paint used to recreate the appearance and effects of light in the natural world) in painting, and could be thought of as a more radical extreme of mosaic technique.

The use of color is also important in this consideration. Outsider architects, in general, use a tremendous amount and range of color in their creations. The materials available often dictate the colors used. If there is a trash dump full of green beer bottles nearby, then chances are the outsider site will have a significant greenish hue.

Although outsider sites may lean toward one particular color due to this reliance on discarded materials, enough gaps must be filled by other discarded materials that polychromy is the usual outcome. Even Pasaquan, the majority of which was built using standard commercial building materials, featured a tremendous range and intensity of color despite the fact that it was not an assemblage of recycled materials. There are outsider sites that are monochromatic or relatively colorless – Edward Leedskalnin's solid

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<sup>6</sup> The term "bricolage" is a French term, adopted by scholars who deal with visual aesthetics, meaning "construction or creation from whatever is immediately available for use; something constructed or created in this way, an assemblage of haphazard or incongruous elements." Definition from: Brown, Lesley, ed. The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 281-81.

grey Coral Castle is a prime example – but these are the exceptions in an otherwise polychromatic theme.

Finally, it is the sheer incongruous presence and location of these sites that put them outside the regular fabric of our built environment. The colorful Watts Towers soars above a flat, monochromatic landscape filled with working-class, vernacular buildings; the Orange Show appears as a Day-Glo playground and maze of fantastic machinery amidst an otherwise ordinary urban neighborhood in Houston; Bottle Village brings a wealth of color and texture to the otherwise bland built environment of Simi Valley, California; Pasaquan vibrates and glows on the rolling turf of Southwest Georgia – a psychedelic temple from outer space whose closest neighbors are shacks, barns, and mobile homes.

Documenting outsider sites is relatively easy once general criteria are established. Identifying them in the real world, and understanding them as examples of a larger artistic/architectural/environmental category becomes second nature once a sufficient familiarity is acquired through intuition, study, or other forms of exposure.<sup>7</sup> The real difficulty with these sites comes in the form of their accompanying and identifying nomenclature and, to some degree, in the effort to succinctly define them.

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<sup>7</sup> In considering outsider architecture a story involving the late jazz musician Charlie Parker is relevant. When asked by a female reporter or fan the question "Mr. Parker, what exactly is jazz?" or "Mr. Parker, how would you define jazz?" Parker aptly responded, "Lady, if you have to ask you'll never know!" This story, while perhaps hearsay, does illuminate something crucial about such art forms as jazz or outsider architecture. After familiarization with enough examples of outsider architecture, one does begin to recognize and understand the form without being able to define it – in fact, one realizes that its inability to be defined is a crucial part of the form. Outsider architecture creates a mood mixture of bewilderment and inspiration to those who understand and appreciate it, which is perhaps the most unifying aesthetic characteristic of all its various examples when considered as a whole.

The Name Game:  
"Outsider" vs. "Folk" vs. "Naive" vs. "Visionary" vs...

In seeking to define or stylistically categorize this group of architect-builders, critics and commentators have employed a vast pool of names – "folk art builders," "brut architects," "outsider architects," "naive architects," "visionary builders," and "amateur architects" for example. The creations have fared similarly, being referred to as "visionary environments," "fantastic architecture," "bricolage environments," "assemblage architecture," and "junk sculpture." One of the leading scholars on the subject admits that, "no one, it seems, will ever be able to name it adequately," but goes on to offer a working definition of the creators and their creations as "handmade environments that express a personal moral or religious vision, typically fabricated of found materials by people who aren't necessarily identified by themselves or by others as artists."<sup>8</sup>

*Raw Vision*, a journal devoted to what it calls "outsider art," offers this definition from Seymour Rosen, director of the organization Saving and Preserving Arts Cultural Environments (SPACES), a California-based non-profit group devoted to the preservation of these hard-to-codify subjects:

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 hand-made personal spaces. They may be buildings, gardens, decorated walls, or

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<sup>8</sup> John Beardsley, Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995): 7.

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.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of defining the outsider phenomenon, the above quotation shows that it can be done easily enough, although it may take a lengthy definition to accomplish the task. The real problem is in the name. The page of *Raw Vision* immediately before this definition solicits reader contributions for a definition to this "art with no name,"<sup>10</sup> making it clear that these builders and their buildings will probably always want for a universally accepted title.

No academic discussion of this phenomenon has gone without a requisite section on the issue of a proper name. What does that say about outsider architecture? It only further highlights its unique nature. These outsider sites are so challenging and issue-laden that our aesthetic perceptions, cultural knowledge, and vocabulary have a hard time working together to conjure an accurate name.

It should be noted that this naming difficulty also says something about those who address outsider architecture. They are passionate about the subject, and the effect outsider architecture has had upon them leads to an opinionated view. Each author, scholar, or photographer who explores outsider architecture has usually had a transforming experience in their initial encounter with the subject; their own concept of

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<sup>9</sup> Seymour Rosen, SPACES director, quoted in *Raw Vision*, no. 19 (Summer 1994): 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Raw Vision*, no. 19 (Summer 1994): 22.

the world is forever altered by the new perspective found via the outsider site and its accompanying message. This experience leads to a very personalized idea of what it should be called and what it means to our culture.

This thesis has chosen to use the term "outsider" to reference these builders and their creations (the reasons behind this will be discussed later in this chapter). Strong cases have been made against this term and for other ones. Knowledge of the different names, and an understanding of the theoretical implications behind the differences, is crucial to an overall understanding of the various perceptions of outsider architecture.

As evidenced by the SPACES definition, many scholars are fond of using the term "folk art" when dealing with this subject. This label, although popular, is misleading in that it implies a connection to other examples of art and craft, such as weaving or folk music, that are typically the province of the lower socio-economic strata of society or of a traditional, often ethnically-distinct portion of society. However true it may be that most, if not all, outsider architects (and outsider plastic artists, for that matter) would occupy this social position, there is little else to link the outsider to the folk. To begin with, "folk" implies a transmission of an aesthetic or manufacturing process from generation to generation, an art that is the property of the masses. Outsider architecture does not share in this process; its creators work from an original vision, not an inherited one.

Nicholas Spitzer from the Office of Folklife Programs at the Smithsonian Museum offers this insight into the problem with using the term "folk" in regard to outsider creations, "Because these people are so individualistic, I would not call what

they do a 'folk art' – which usually involves an aesthetic shared by a group."<sup>11</sup> Spitzer goes on to try his hand at naming the creators and their creations, saying "I might prefer 'folk bricoleurs' which indicates they are from an ethnic, regional or occupational community, but have made a very personal statement in their assemblage of materials. The creations could then be called 'folk bricolage landscapes.'"<sup>12</sup> Besides coining a rather unwieldy name, Spitzer has turned right back around and used the "folk" label, showing just how dependent the scholars of art and culture have become on that term to describe anything that lies outside mainstream culture and beyond the province of the highbrow avant-garde.

Finally, it is necessary to recognize that the folk art tradition calls for a subservience of the individual – no folk art practitioner is greater than the collective art of which they are the temporary torchbearers. In his introduction to the *Naives and Visionaries* exhibition catalog, Martin Friedman addressed this very issue:

Folk art is a collective expression of a culture's values, passed along to succeeding generations. Its basic form is understood by the society and, while these allow for some interpretation by individual craftsmen, its conventions are well established. By contrast, the often chaotic creations of the visionary "environmentalist" artists...are not folk art--they are individualistic, not collective expressions...<sup>13</sup>

Again the outsiders are different, for their art/architecture is dependent upon them not for folk-style stewardship but for each and every element of its existence. Outsiders create

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<sup>11</sup> Spitzer, Nicholas, "What to Call Them," *SPACES* (Number 3, Summer 1986), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Friedman, Martin. *Naives and Visionaries*, An Exhibition Organized by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974): 7.

the "outsider" genre as they work, and when they cease work that portion of the outsider world ceases to evolve is frozen in time.<sup>14</sup>

Gregg N. Blasdel's 1968 *Art in America* article "The Grassroots Artist" was one of the first introductions of outsider works to a mass audience. Even though this article appeared quite early in the context of outsider awareness and documentation, Blasdel is already forced to play the "name game" as he tries to define and categorize his subject matter:

He has no definition in art history; the term "grass-roots" is only the best of a number of inadequate classifications such as "primitive," "folk," and "naive." He has not been patronized by an art-oriented society. He is unaware that he is an artist. I know of no collective research published to date on art of this nature in the United States, although it would be difficult to determine, as the grass-roots artist is reclusive, by choice, circumstance or castigation, from any community group.<sup>15</sup>

Blasdel not only seems timid in his promotion of the term "grass-roots," he also works against common perceptions of the term in his explanation. Blasdel identifies his grass-roots artist as someone quite outside the "community group," and yet the common idea of "grass-roots" is of a communal, equity-based group ethic. The notion that Blasdel is going for is obvious and can easily be inferred, but the "grass-roots" moniker seems flawed. Not only does it work against the "loner" ideal that he stresses, it also invokes notions of a socio-political orientation, which is not entirely applicable to works of outsider architecture.

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<sup>14</sup> A curious exception/deviation from the total link between outsider architects and their architecture, and perhaps a nod toward the folk art tradition, is seen in the David Brown Bottle House in British Columbia, Canada. After Brown's death his outsider work did not cease to evolve. Instead, his son took up work on the site using the same techniques that his father had used. This is one instance in which what started as a work of outsider architecture has now perhaps become part of the folk art spectrum. For more on this issue, see: Wampler, Jan. All Their Own: People and the Places They Build. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Sherman Publishing Company, 1977): 16.

<sup>15</sup> Blasdel, Gregg N., "The Grassroots Artist," *Art in America* (September/October 1968): 24-5.

Lisa Stone, another prominent scholar of outsider art and architecture, has wrestled with issues of proper nomenclature as well. Her solution is the term "art environment," which she defines as "combinations of art, architecture, and landscape elements – made by artists without clear ties to the mainstream realms of art and architecture."<sup>16</sup> Stone has circumvented the "folk" question by removing that word from SPACES's term "folk art environment."

While Stone has solved that part of the problem, her solution is still problematic. There is nothing in the term "art environment" to differentiate the creations Stone intends it to represent from other environmental/architectural works. How does this term encapsulate Rodia's Watts Towers (a work of outsider genius fitting Stone's description) and not Maya Lin's Vietnam War Memorial (a non-outsider work created by an accepted mainstream artist)? The trouble is that, at face value, it does not, except to those who have familiarized themselves with Stone's definition.

### Why Outsider?

For the purpose of this thesis, the term "outsider" will be used in reference to these builders and their buildings. This terminology is not simply for convenience, for both outsider architects and outsider architecture do indeed exist outside of the standard realm of architects and architectural practice. Outsider architects lack the formal training of their professional counterparts, and their motives are generally different from these professionals as well. John MacGregor has written, "architecture has always been the most tradition bound of the arts, reflecting society more than the individual, class more

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<sup>16</sup> Stone, Lisa. *The Preservation of Art Environments in the United States: Towards a Unified Approach*. Masters Thesis--Historic Preservation Program--The School of the Art Institute of Chicago--May 1998: 8.

than psychology."<sup>17</sup> Outsider architecture runs contrary to this principle, reflecting the personalities and visions of its creators more so than it does the stylistic trends or social expectations common to the era of its origin.

Many scholars have argued against the term "outsider," feeling that it applies an unnecessary, incorrect, or negative distinction and distance from other aspects of art and architecture. Lisa Stone feels strongly that "outsider" is the wrong word, saying:

Some curators and critics resolutely maintain the inside/outside dichotomy by conflating artists mental orientation, social conditions, and stylistic or formal concerns into a packaged formula for "outsider." Tangled generalizations like "compulsive visionaries" have been superimposed onto a panoply of "outsider" artists. It has been assumed that vaguely defined "moral" traits such as "sense of focus," "intensity," and "lack of guile" are shared by this same unwitting group. This establishes a curious case for reverse discrimination, assuming that such traits, moral or otherwise, do not apply to "insider" artists. Unfortunately, time-worn agendas are served by constructs like this, and the majority of artists in question, even if they are alive, are not likely to challenge or reject being simultaneously co-opted and disenfranchised, in ways that tangibly affect the acceptance and interpretation of their work.<sup>18</sup>

Here again, Stone's heart is in the right place – she wants to assure that these artists/architects are not ill served as "outsiders." The potential for condescension and disenfranchisement are all too obvious in the term, but the accuracy and value of this name cannot be denied. As outsider artist/architect Howard Finster said of the term "outsider," " I don't mind it – it just means different and I'm different."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> John MacGregor, "Inner Architecture as Outsider Art," *Raw Vision*, no. 21 (Winter 1997-98): 28.

<sup>18</sup> Stone, 20-21.

<sup>19</sup> Howard Finster, quoted in: Minar, Rena "Case Studies of Folk Art Environments: Simon Rodia's Watts Towers and Reverend Howard Finster's Paradise Garden." Masters Thesis--Art History--Rice University, Houston, Texas--1994, p. 32.

There has been no conclusive research to show that the potential negative connotations implicit in the "outsider" title have been realized in any fashion. No evidence of discrimination or imposed marginalization has been uncovered. If anything, the "outsider" label has only attracted curiosity and a subsequent and much-deserved attention – to a degree that "folk," "grassroots," or the plain old "artist" undeniably could not.

The term outsider was first applied to the plastic arts. In this thesis, it is used to discuss works of architecture and landscape design. With this in mind, it is important to explain the reasons for using this label in terms of architecture. As stated at the beginning of this section, outsider architects are "outside" the traditions that have become the norms of architectural practice. Comparing outsider architecture with mainstream architecture, from high style to vernacular and from professional to amateur, reveals that outsider works are infused with an iconoclastic, artistic spirit that is absent from the vast majority of mainstream architectural creations. They are then also "outside" the established traditions of the built environment as much as their creators would be outside any standard consideration of what an architect is.

While it certainly may be argued that some professional architects have worked outside their contemporary architectural or stylistic milieu, such as the pioneering Modernists in Victorian times, it is perhaps more correct to say that these architects, unlike genuine outsider architects, were working "against" rather than "outside" the architectural norms of their times. They were well aware of the rules they were breaking. Their architecture was, in fact, designed as a reaction to whatever the currently held style or design norms were and was therefore governed by them, albeit inversely.

Genuine outsider architects do not formulate their architecture as a premeditated reaction to other architectural principles. While preceding models may inspire their work, it is created in a spirit of relative innocence – a seemingly "pure" architecture that neither conforms nor conscientiously breaks with the architectural establishment of the time. Outsider architecture exists in a parallel and alternate architectural universe outside of the recognized contemporary standard.

Outsider architects also differ from professional architects in that they are both the architect and builder of their visions. Professional architects formulate plans that are then carried out by crews of professional builders. Outsider architects have to perform their own construction labor, and do so without assistance from others in most cases. Simon Rodia's Watts Towers were built entirely by Rodia; there is not a single portion of the entire structure that involved another's labor (unless one splits hairs to consider the 7-Up bottles and bits of broken ceramic tile and crockery used in the structure as the product of another's labor). The same can be said of Ferdinand Cheval's Palais Ideal, Clarence Schmidt's House of Mirrors, Jeff McKissack's Orange Show, and Edward Leedskalnin's Coral Castle, to name a few. When an outsider architect does enlist help it is usually nominal. "Grandma" Prisbey had her sons help hang doors on her glass bottle buildings, for instance.<sup>20</sup> Still, outsider architecture remains ninety-nine percent the product of the outsider architect's singular labor.

Outsider architecture is further distinguished from its professional cousin by the relative amounts of compromise involved in each one's execution. With the rare exception of pure folly or structures built by architects for themselves (such as Wright's

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<sup>20</sup> Esther McCoy, "Grandma Prisbey's Bottle Village," in Naives and Visionaries: An Exhibition Organized by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974): 85.

Taliesin homes), professional architectural ventures are always the result of some compromise between architect and client. Even if the architect is left free in considerations of style, materials, and design, they are still compromised by the client's intended use for the building, whether it is house, barn, or urban office building. Additionally, even if the professional architect is left free on all considerations including the intended use, as in the above example of Wright's Taliesin homes, they are still compromised to some extent by the quality and manner in which the building contractor executes the plans.

In comparison, outsider architects suffer no such burden of compromise. Their only compromise is to the physical constraints of their chosen setting and building materials, their financial resources, and their level of design and construction skill. If they want their creation to be a house then it is a house; if they want a complex of several glass-bottle buildings to enshrine a mammoth pencil collection then so be it. The outsider architect is architect, foreman, laborer, and client in the same person so there is no need for the compromise inherent in professional architecture.

Although it could be argued that outsider architects do have to compromise to accommodate building and safety codes this is generally not the case.<sup>21</sup> Rodia created the Watts Towers before (although it took him over thirty years) the building inspectors of bustling Los Angeles ever noticed the structure; Schmidt built in rural settings beyond the

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<sup>21</sup> The key word here is “generally.” Building codes and municipal regulations have factored in to the world of outsider architecture in a few instances, and always in a negative way. Both Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project and Kea Tawawna's Ark were demolished after failing to pass municipal code review. Simon Rodia's Watts Towers narrowly escaped demolition after the site was initially declared unsafe by city building inspectors. Still, these are all examples of the influence of building codes after the act of building. Outsider architects create free from the compromise that would befall them if they adhered to building codes from the beginning of the construction process. They do not consider building and safety codes in their planning and construction processes, and in cases such as Guyton's or Tawana's, they suffer negative consequences for this very reason.

concern of public officials; "Grandma" Prisbey's outsider architecture was smiled upon by fate, which decided that her son would become the local building inspector. Except for the natural physical laws relative to all construction efforts, outsider architects have worked free from the constraints governing professional architectural undertakings.

The methods and practicalities of both planning and executing a work of architecture afford another major difference between professional and outsider architects. Professional architects develop and submit final plans and then have their buildings built, all usually within the space of a few years. Outsider architects, on the other hand, have neither final plans nor the resources or manpower to swiftly execute their work. Their creations are realized in piecemeal fashion, and although they may have a rough idea of what they are setting out to do from the beginning, they usually allow their architectural plan to develop slowly, in tandem with the construction process. This gradual realization allows for a quality of organicism that, no matter how determinedly strived for, is seldom seen in professional architecture.

The extremely slow realization of outsider architecture also points to further difference from professional architecture. Perhaps unconsciously related to some of the underlying principles behind the post-modern arts, outsider architecture is as much about the event of creation as it is about the final creation itself.<sup>22</sup> Unlike professional

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<sup>22</sup> The "principles behind the post-modern arts" mentioned above have to do with the notion of process versus product in the work of such post-modern artists as John Cage, Jackson Pollack, and Allen Kaprow. In a nutshell, these artists believed that the moment of creating their artwork was in itself the true art. The final product was by no means more important than the events leading to it, in fact some considered it of less importance. Allen Kaprow, father of the post-modern art form known as "Happenings," actually visited Clarence Schmidt's House of Mirrors and was probably influenced by the work. This notion of a post-modernist connection does not, as far as I understand it, extend to post-modern architecture. Although I know little of the subject, it is my understanding that post-modern architecture is, like other styles of professional architecture, geared towards final product rather than process, so a connection to outsider architecture is inapplicable and is not intended.

architects, who have the tangible goal of a final product, outsider architects seem as concerned with the continuation of the building process as they do the end result.

Some have suggested that this immersion in the building process reveals a "therapeutic" nature in outsider architecture. They claim that the process of building is akin to a hobby, allowing the architect to escape the woes of the real world.<sup>23</sup> This issue is debatable, but it is likely that the elongated construction period associated with outsider architecture is not only a practical necessity born of the individual attempting the monumental, but also evidence of the architectural/building process as a labor of love. Outsider architects have finished works; Rodia and Cheval both completed their structures – Cheval completed two works, in fact. Still, the outsider architect's persistent and long-term dedication to their constructions shows more than simply the will to finish; it is evidence of the importance of process when weighed against product by the outsider architect.

In considering outsider architecture as differentiated from professional architecture, it is crucial not to simply think of it as a bizarre manifestation of everyday vernacular architecture. Outsider architecture is similar to common vernacular architecture chiefly in that it is the work of non-academic builders. Without contorting the definitions of both forms, the similarities essentially end beyond this common distance from academic architecture.

Indeed, there are several major differences between outsider and vernacular architecture. The most crucial concerns their respective position on the "style-scale." Vernacular architecture is thought to belong to either one of two stylistic categories. It is

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<sup>23</sup> This notion of the building process as therapy is discussed in several works covering outsider architects, particularly the following: Lipke and Blasdel, Schmidt, 104-110. Verni Greenfield, "The Story of Bottle Village," *Raw Vision*, no. 4 (Spring 1991): 46-51.

sometimes considered the respective lowest formal representation of various styles that have their grandest examples manifest in "high-style" academic examples at the other end of the scale. At other times, vernacular architecture is considered so non-formal as to be off the "style-scale" completely. In this sense, vernacular architecture is the most basic and functional of constructions, showing no pretense to established styles and yet still judged against them.

Outsider architecture does not suffer this same fate. Although not yet a style recognized by the cultural and aesthetic arbiters of such matters, it is certainly not considered as having any solid relation to the established architectural styles against which vernacular architecture is judged. Outsider architecture is the only style that has no vernacular examples, every work within its parameters could, by the nature of the style, only be considered as high style. This not only shows the obvious differentiation from vernacular architecture, but a glaring difference between outsider architecture and all other forms of building that are subject to stylistic categorization.

Vernacular architecture and outsider architecture also differ in their scales. Typically, examples of vernacular architecture are of small scale (sheds, simple houses, etc.) and have an emphasis on function rather than decoration. Outsider architecture, on the other hand, is frequently grand in scale (one hundred foot tall towers, complexes of several buildings, labyrinthine "palaces", etc.) and exhibits profuse ornamentation and often dizzying polychromy. The scale, complexity, and decorative emphasis of outsider architecture easily distinguish it from anything vernacular.

Finally, it is important not to consider outsider architecture as merely larger examples of the "folk" and vernacular art found in relative abundance throughout both the

United States and the world. As Jean-Louis Ferrier has condescendingly written of the supposed connection of the Watts Towers to other, less-monumental examples of amateur creativity, "this (Watts Towers) is a work of genuine creation, far removed from those pitiful attempts at originality, the blue or green concrete giraffes and gazelles that stand in front of the suburban bungalows of retired people, and which all too often pass for works of art."<sup>24</sup> Indeed outsider architecture is of an altogether different stature than vernacular art and building. As outsider art expert John Beardsley states of outsider architecture, its examples distinguish themselves from folk-art and vernacular building "both by their rhetorical dimensions and by an entirely different magnitude of dedication."<sup>25</sup> Outsider architecture is a form with connections to the vernacular in that it is "of the people" and which simultaneously has ties to high-style academic building in that it represents an attempt to create something monumental that contains the highest aesthetic aspirations of the architect.

### Not Quite Outside

Before any in-depth discussion of true outsider works, it seems a good idea to examine some sites that approach outsider status, but fall short for one or more reasons. To reiterate the definition, outsider architecture is represented by buildings or structures conceived and erected by non-professional architect/builders themselves, employing little or no outside help, using found, on-site, discarded, or relatively basic materials to fashion very unique constructions that are infused with some personal or moral vision. As stated earlier, outsider architecture is a form with exclusively "high style" examples. There are, however, many buildings that exist on the periphery of outsider architecture. Although

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<sup>24</sup> Jean-Louis Ferrier, Outsider Art, (Paris: Terrail, 1998): 178.

<sup>25</sup> Beardsley, 19.

somewhat in the manner and possibly the spirit of outsider architecture, these buildings are best left to categorization as architectural curios.

At one end of the "would-be" outsider architecture scale are buildings that possess only one characteristic of the form, the use of non-traditional building materials. One such example is a house in Petersburg, Virginia. The house is made from marble, a traditional building material. The origin of the stone, however, makes the house somewhat of an architectural curio. The stones are actually the gravestones of nearly two thousand Union soldiers killed during the siege of Petersburg. The stones were removed from a local cemetery to cut down on maintenance and were sold to the builder of the house. Originally, the inscriptions on the gravestones remained and faced inward so as to be visible to the house's original occupants. Later owners had this macabre interior "ornamentation" plastered over.<sup>26</sup> Other than the odd choice of building materials, this Italianate style house has no real outsider qualities.

The Paper House in Pigeon Cove, Massachusetts is a bit closer to the outsider concept. Again, it is primarily the interesting building materials of the house, in this case thousands of newspapers that were rolled, folded, and varnished to create walls, that brings it near the outsider domain. The Paper House has other characteristics that partially ally it with outsider architecture as well. It was created by one man, Elis Stenman, and his family over a period of twenty years.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately it is the rather dull and simple vernacular appearance of the building that prevents it from being considered a work of outsider architecture.

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<sup>26</sup> Gwyn Headley, Architectural Follies in America, (New York, John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1996): 110.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-7.

Another building approaching outsider status is Conrad Schuck's "Wonder House" in Barlow, Florida. Schuck alone built this innovative house with found and on-site materials over a period of forty years. The house contains some interesting features such as hollow porch columns that catch rainwater to cool the structure. The visual design is somewhat eccentric, though relatively mild when compared with real outsider works. The real reason this house does not qualify as an outsider work has to do with Conrad Schuck himself, who had been a professional building contractor for several years prior to beginning this house and who therefore cannot be considered the "amateur" builder requisite to outsider architecture's creation.

Location of Outsider Sites;  
Nationality of Outsider Architects

Outsider architecture enthusiasts are quick to describe outsider architecture as a global phenomenon that links individuals in an esoteric, trans-national community. Indeed, outsider sites are to be found in every continent (save Antarctica, of course) and outsider architects come from sundry nations and every race. While the above description may be apt and the facts are there to back it up, there is the interesting footnote that an overwhelming amount of outsider sites and architects are found in either the United States or France.

In the many written works on the outsider field, there is scant discussion of this subject. What little there is consists of little more than an "isn't that interesting" dismissal. Perhaps there is nothing more to this situation than coincidence, but that seems unlikely and the avoidance of the issue by scholars may indicate an unwillingness to link outsider architecture with the hard facts of history, economics, and sociology – an

attempt to keep an otherworldly art form unsullied by the relatively droll facts of the “real world.”

The abundance of outsider sites in America and France is probably the product of historic, economic, and sociological traits that both countries share. To begin with, both America and France are nations that are the product of revolutions, albeit to different degrees. This simple fact points to a populist streak the two nations have in common – a ripe climate for the creation of something with the “folk” leanings of outsider architecture. Whether or not they are conscious of it, outsider architects are engaged in a quasi-rebellion against mainstream architecture and its constraints. The American and French legacy of revolution and rebellion must certainly contribute to this situation and therefore result in a relative abundance of outsider creation.

America and France also share a strong bohemian and avant-garde tradition. The France of the 1920s and the America of the 1950s and 1960s produced avant-garde movements that have certain theoretical ties to outsider architecture (Dada and Postmodernism/Assemblage, respectively). Though these were “high art” movements created by artists quite conscious of their surroundings, influences, and impact, there are elements of congruity (appropriation of found materials, use of primitive techniques, etc.) between these movements and outsider architecture. Dadaism and Postmodernism did not directly influence outsider architects, but it seems that both were the product of sociological factors that were present in America and France. The popularity of jazz, another populist and sometimes avant-garde art form, in both America and France suggests further connection.

Finally, another reason for concentrations of outsider sites may be the affluence and level of industrialization of both America and France. Both are first world, consumer product-based societies. They have the standard of living that allows for the creation of these ephemeral structures and environments. They also generate the building materials of much outsider architecture through their disposable consumer products. The context of these countries makes it possible for outsider architecture to transcend what might be considered folk or vernacular building elsewhere. In America and France, these creations are wonderful incongruities in the built environment. In Ghana or Laos, they might be considered slightly odd but otherwise unremarkable forms of shelter.

Since other countries share many of the circumstances of America and France, it is puzzling why they do not have a similar abundance of outsider sites. This question points back to the “revolutionary tradition” of the two countries for an answer, but that is not entirely fulfilling as an explanation. Perhaps much of the mystery of outsider motivation would be clarified by a thorough examination of the American and French proclivity for outsider creation. The field of outsider scholarship awaits a long overdue, conclusive investigation of this situation.

## CHAPTER 2

### A SURVEY OF OUTSIDER ARCHITECTURE: FORMS AND SITES

Although it is hard to properly define precisely what is outsider architecture, it is obviously a bit easier to determine what is not outsider architecture. It is also relatively easy to divide outsider architecture into the sub-groups that compose its main forms. While no all-inclusive formula can be applied to outsider architecture as an analytical tool of understanding, there are recurring forms that make for better analysis of this architecture. Three forms cover much of the outsider architecture – the castle, the bottle house, and the outsider environment.

#### The Castle

*The distance from the dream to reality is great;  
I had never touched a mason's trowel and I  
was totally ignorant of the rules of architecture.*<sup>28</sup>

Ferdinand Cheval's place as the father of outsider architecture was the result of a common accident that became the source of an uncommon vision. Cheval was a postman in the Drome region of France, making rural rounds by foot outside the town of Hauterives.<sup>29</sup> On his daily trek, Cheval would often dream of marvelous architecture to fill the empty countryside as a means of passing the time. He later commented "what could one do while walking eternally against the same background unless one dreamed?"<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ferdinand Cheval, quoted in John Maizel, Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond, (London: Phaidon Press, 1996): 159-60.

<sup>29</sup> Beardsley, 35. All biographical and technical information on Cheval and the Palais Ideal in this section comes from Beardsley's Gardens of Revelation, 35-42, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>30</sup> Cheval, quoted in Maizel, 161.

One day in April 1879 Cheval tripped and fell over a stone. Picking it up to toss aside, he gazed at the stone and became enraptured by its textures and overall appearance. He decided to keep the stone and began to collect more on his daily rounds. Soon he was convinced the stones were communicating a message for him to build the fantastic architecture he had formerly dreamt of. He commented, "Since nature wants to be the sculptor, I shall be the mason and the architect."<sup>31</sup> Thus the Palais Ideal, the oldest existing known example of outsider architecture, was born.

Cheval began the Palais Ideal in 1879 and completed it thirty-three years later in 1912. The Palais Ideal is a very whimsical version of a castle. Measuring eighty-six by forty-six feet and rising to a height of thirty-nine feet, the Palais is an imposing structure. Cheval constructed the Palais Ideal by trial and error, having no former architectural or construction experience.

Cheval certainly made some intuitive steps along the way, devising a homemade reinforced concrete to give the Palais Ideal its stability. He worked with the porous tufa stone native to the region, along with cement, lime, and metal wire to augment this found material. Wire was shaped and an exterior coating of stone and cement was applied.

Into this mix Cheval would press small shells, pebbles, and fossils as either ornament or simply to create texture. The overall effect gives the Palais' exterior a very granular appearance. The organic quality of the Palais' exterior is striking; it seems to grow from the ground like a natural and gnarled rock formation. An article in *Raw Vision* likens the Palais' exterior to "Art Nouveau before the event."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Cheval, quoted in Roger Cardinal, *Outsider Art*, (London: Studio Vista, 1972): 146.

<sup>32</sup> George Melly "The Postman On His Way To Work: The Palais Ideal of the Facteur Cheval," *Raw Vision*, no. 4 (Spring 1991): 30.

The Palais Ideal appears as a castle lifted from the pages of a fairy tale and made real. The structure is indeed every bit as "fantastic" as a fantasy gingerbread house. There is even a suggestion that Cheval's design expression was influenced by the structure of the abundant desserts on display in a nearby confectioner's windows.<sup>33</sup> This connection is debatable, but the influence of architectural survey picture books is not. Cheval was known to own several of these books and their influence is apparent in the many international forms he sampled for inclusion in his palace.

Hindu and Egyptian temple forms, Swiss Chalet motifs, and even a representation of the United States' White House all found their way into the Palais' exterior ornament. The exterior is also an outsider version of "architecture parlant." Cheval placed many inscriptions upon the Palais' exterior. These inscriptions praise the virtues of "God, fatherland, and work" or relay various messages of self-determination and self-realization. Many of them sing the praises of Cheval himself (who was obviously not a humble man) and of his self-perceived monumental contribution to humanity in the creation of the Palais Ideal.

Little has been written about the interior of the Palais Ideal. Cheval called the crypt-like interior spaces "hetacombs."<sup>34</sup> Their walls are covered with a subtler version of the relief sculpture that coats the exterior facades. That these spaces are crypt-like is no surprise; Cheval intended for his family to be buried within the Palais Ideal but was thwarted by French laws governing burials.<sup>35</sup> At either end of a long central passageway

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<sup>33</sup> Ferrier, 168.

<sup>34</sup> Cardinal, 150.

<sup>35</sup> After learning of the French regulations that prevented his family from being buried within the Palais Ideal, Cheval constructed a smaller and less fantastic crypt in a nearby cemetery. Judged on its own merits the crypt is certainly interesting, but placed in context with the Palais Ideal it is certainly the lesser work of an outsider architect who had put his true heart and soul into his original effort.

are vaulted ceilings that bear stone chandeliers encrusted with hundreds of shells and snail fossils. Of the interior, Cheval said it was "so bizarre that one might think one were in a dream."<sup>36</sup>

The Palais also features three corner stairways, accessed from the exterior, that lead to a rooftop terrace. On the roof a visitor can view the crowning "Tower of Barbary" with its ornamental stone palm trees and cacti. Indeed, visitors do often climb to the Palais roof, as this once-ridiculed piece of outsider architecture has now become a regional and national tourist attraction. The Palais Ideal's fame was originally promoted by the European Surrealist artists of the early twentieth century, particularly Andre Breton who called Cheval's work an example of the "pure psychic automatism" that he felt the art-school educated Surrealists would never fully achieve.

In Southern Belgium, Robert Garcet's "La Tour Eben-Ezer" (also known as the "Tower of the Apocalypse") rises one hundred and eight feet above an abandoned quarry. Made by Garcet between the early 1950s and 1964, the Tower of the Apocalypse is composed primarily of flint stone from the quarry it occupies. Garcet had worked as a quarryman, so he had knowledge of stonecutting, but his validity as an outsider architect rests on the fact that he was ignorant of the architectural process when he began work on his outsider site.

The Tower of the Apocalypse is perfect outsider castle, complete with battlements that support sculptural representations of the winged beasts of the Revelation. The surface of the Tower is rough-hewn and has the look of an assemblage although it is composed of only stone. Garcet meant his tower to communicate his vision of brotherhood and pacifism. The apocalyptic imagery of the castle is a loud and clear

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<sup>36</sup> Cheval, quoted in Cardinal, 150.



Figure 2.1 Ferdinand Cheval's Palais Ideal. From Beardsley.



Figure 2.2 Robert Garcet's Tower of the Apocalypse.  
From Beardsley.

warning about where Garcet thinks warfare will ultimately lead, made all the more expressive by the Tower's location in the region that saw much of both World Wars' worst combat.

The Tower of the Apocalypse enjoys the distinction among outsider sites of having been built based on numerological principles. Garcet claims that "like the Apocalypse, Eben-Ezer is constructed according to the sacred number seven," an assertion that references the seven seals, the seven churches of Asia, the seven plagues, and other "sevens" in Christian legend.<sup>37</sup> The Tower of the Apocalypse is 7.77 meters square and seven stories tall. Garcet intends the floors to represent various levels in the passage from Earth (the first floor) to Heaven (the seventh floor). Other numerological influences involving the numbers four and twelve also feature in the tower's construction.

American manifestations of the outsider architecture castle have sprung up in many locations. Homestead, Florida is the location of the "Coral Castle" built by jilted Latvian immigrant Edward Leedskalnin.<sup>38</sup> When he was twenty-six, Leedskalnin's sixteen-year-old fiancée left him on the eve of their wedding and he never fully recovered from the blow. He built his castle between 1936 and 1951 as a monument to "Sweet Sixteen" (as he called his missing fiancée) in the hopes that she might one day return to him.

Composed of the oolitic limestone (commonly called "coral rock") found in Southern Florida, the Coral Castle is not only a castle but also a complex of various coral sculptures. A large slab of oolitic limestone has been fashioned into a table shaped like the state of Florida. Thrones and altars are in generous supply. One amazing feature is a

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<sup>37</sup> Beardsley, 52.

<sup>38</sup> Beardsley, 133. All information on Leedskalnin and Coral Castle comes from this source (pp. 133-39) unless otherwise noted.



Figure 2.3 Inside the walls of Edward Leedskalnin's Coral Castle. From Beardsley.

nine-ton slab of coral rock that rotates on a single axis and serves as the castle's gate. The gate turns with the slightest push and is an engineering marvel that illustrates the intellectual power of the intuitive outsider architect.

Leedskalnin remained very secretive about his work, so no one is sure how a man of his slight stature (five feet tall and one hundred pounds) was able to move and place the various slabs of coral rock, some weighing as much as thirty tons.<sup>39</sup> What is very apparent, however, is Leedskalnin's inspiration. Created as a "kingdom-to-be" for his missing bride, Coral Castle eventually evolved into a compound from which Leedskalnin would deliver his messages on the ideal woman and the nature of sex to the world. He even wrote a book, titled A Book In Every Home, to transmit his somewhat off-center vision.<sup>40</sup>

As this is written, Jim Bishop is hard at work on "Bishop's Castle" in Beulah, Colorado.<sup>41</sup> Bishop, an untrained builder, has been single-handedly working on his castle since 1969. He gathers the stones for his creation from nearby San Isabel National Forest, and the United States government wants to start charging him sixteen dollars per ton. This federal "interference" is only more fuel for Bishop's ideological and

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<sup>39</sup> Headley, 89.

<sup>40</sup> Although its content is too lengthy and complex to address in this thesis, Leedskalnin's A Book In Every Home is a wonderful exemplification of the outsider mindset. I bought a copy in July 2000 while visiting Coral Castle and was amazed at the manner in which Leedskalnin could transmit bizarre notions so unselfconsciously. The subject matter of the book ranges from hygiene to dating etiquette to magnetic experimentation. Where other outsider architects were content to represent their worldview through architecture, Leedskalnin needed to take the extra step of getting his down in print. The results are bizarre, thought provoking, and quite often comic. There is even the feeling that Leedskalnin knew the comic potential in what he was doing and could poke fun at himself. Although the myriad of books dealing with outsider architecture are essential to anyone interested in the subject, A Book In Every Home is the one book that speaks on the outsider from the inside, making it perhaps the most essential of all outsider-related literature.

<sup>41</sup> Doug Kirby, Ken Smith, and Mike Wilkins, The New Roadside America, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992): 241-42. All information on Jim Bishop and Bishop's Castle comes from this source.

architectural fire, as his castle is simultaneously a monument to the "hard working poor people" and the "fight for freedom to keep the government under control."<sup>42</sup>

Bishop's Castle is an interesting mix of quasi-Gothic and Romanesque styles, although Bishop is untrained on architectural style. The castle features some distinctly "Bishop" touches, particularly in the ornamental ironwork and in the Viking-prow-style dragon that juts from the front gable. Already in excess of seventy feet tall, the plan is for Bishop's Castle to eventually include three towers and an observatory that will raise the structure to around one hundred feet. The interior is presently incomplete, but Bishop vows to finish it as surely as he intends to keep fighting what he sees as the evils of the United States government.

### The Bottle House

*Anyone can do anything with a million dollars – look at Disney.  
But it takes more than money to make something out of nothing,  
and look at the fun I have doing it.*<sup>43</sup>

The outsider castle is perhaps the most abundant manifestation of outsider architecture in both Europe and the United States. Another popular manifestation is the "Bottle House." In this form, outsider architects have taken the common, ordinary bottle and made it part of the fabric of something distinctly uncommon and extraordinary.

The art of bottle construction in the United States is rapidly approaching its centennial. The oldest known bottle house in America was the William E. Peck house in Tonopah, Nevada, dating from 1902 and unfortunately demolished in the early 1980s.<sup>44</sup> Several other bottle houses appeared in Nevada throughout the early twentieth century,

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<sup>42</sup> Bishop, quoted in Kirby, Smith, and Wilkins, 242.

<sup>43</sup> Tressa "Grandma" Prisbey, quoted in Verni Greenfield, "Tressa Prisbey: More Than Money," *Raw Vision*, no. 4 (Spring 1991): 51.

<sup>44</sup> Headley, 99.

possibly due to the lack of local building material in the desert environment. Florida has its share of bottle houses, as does British Columbia, where two of the finest North American bottle houses (the George Plumb house and the David Brown embalming-fluid bottle house) are located. During the 1960s, the Heineken beer company even made squared-off beer bottles expressly for the purpose of being recycled as building materials for third-world areas, but the idea was never fully implemented.<sup>45</sup> In terms of outsider architecture, the most interesting bottle house construction is actually a complex of thirteen such buildings and nine auxiliary bottle structures – Tressa "Grandma" Prisbey's Bottle Village in Simi Valley, California.

Tressa Prisbey was married to a fifty-year-old man when she was only fifteen.<sup>46</sup> She was to later claim that she was "sold" by her family into marriage, the return being an addition to the family's house and some other meager goods. She had seven children over the next twenty years, and she eventually outlived all but one of them. Her family was deeply important to her, and writings from her later life suggest that Bottle Village was built in part to express her ideas about the proper sense of familial obligation.

After being widowed by her first husband, Prisbey moved in with her sister in Simi Valley, California. There she met and married Al Prisbey, and the two bought a third-of-an-acre lot in 1955. In her native Minnesota Prisbey had been a political campaign worker and was fond of keeping the pencils she used on the job. Settled on her tiny lot in California, Prisbey found that her pencil collection took up too much space in her tiny trailer. She decided to construct a shelter for the pencil collection and started collecting bottles at the dump for her effort.

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<sup>45</sup> Linda Baker, "McMansion Mania," *Utne Reader*, no. 95 (September/October 1999): 56.

<sup>46</sup> Beardsley, 154. Information on Prisbey and Bottle Village comes from this source (pp. 154-61), unless otherwise noted.

Prisbey's first building was a six-by-twelve-foot bottle house for her pencils, which was accompanied by a thirty-foot bottle wall. On her frequent trips to the dump she also began collecting discarded dolls, and soon she was obliged to construct an eight-by-nineteen foot, fifteen thousand bottle building to house her new collection of over five-hundred-and-fifty dolls. Homes for her dolls and pencils may not have been Prisbey's only motivations, and refuse from the dump was probably not her only source of building material; some have suggested that Prisbey also used the abundant discarded liquor bottles of her alcoholic husband in an effort to shame him. There is no record of whether or not Prisbey's husband was shamed, but it is known that he did not directly participate in the construction of Bottle Village.

Eventually, Prisbey's pencil collection grew from two thousand to over seventeen thousand and her Bottle Village grew into a complex of thirteen buildings and nine auxiliary structures such as fountains, walls, wishing wells, and small shrines. It took Prisbey roughly fifteen years to build Bottle Village, although some structures were erected at a feverish pace. The "Shell House," made to house a son dying of cancer, was miraculously built in the space of two days. Family crisis led to another Bottle Village structure, a heart-shaped planter, made for a terminally ill daughter who died a year after its creation. Prisbey had more than her fair share of tragedy, watching all but one of her children die, and there are many references in bottle village to the tragic loss of her children.

Bottle Village is aligned upon a central axis that serves as a walkway. This walkway is tiled with various bits of ceramic refuse salvaged from the dump. The most impressive structure within the complex is the "Round House," a circular building

twenty-three feet in diameter. The Round House is particularly striking among the structures of Bottle Village not only for its unique geometry but because it is the only one that employs uniform size and color bottles. The building requires the entrant to step down to a submerged interior floor level. Prisbey sank the building into the ground for practical reasons; working alone and approaching old age, she needed a lowered structure in order to apply a roof to it.<sup>47</sup> Prisbey did have some help from her sons in hanging doors and installing windows, but the majority of the labor behind Bottle Village was her own.

The construction technique behind Bottle Village was relatively simple. Prisbey would lay bottles in courses joined by mortar. She would lay three courses on one structure and then stop to wait for them to solidify, working on courses in other structures or on low freestanding walls during the interim. She raised all of her walls without framework in this fashion.<sup>48</sup> Besides the bottles she used, Prisbey also had to invest a bit in cheap cement and sand. Her knowledge of construction came intuitively and through trial and error.

The buildings and structures of Bottle Village are at once chaotic, seemingly haphazard, and thoroughly beautiful. Several buildings are constructed with the drinking end of the bottles facing the exterior, which makes for gorgeous lighting effects within the interior space, somewhat like a translucent honeycomb. The amalgamation of junk and glass that occupies Bottle Village creates a three-dimensional mosaic effect. In her effort to make a monument to the love of her family, Prisbey created more than a cluster

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<sup>47</sup> McCoy, 78.

<sup>48</sup> McCoy, 78.



Figure 2.4 A portion of Tressa "Grandma" Prisbey's Bottle Village.  
From Maizels.

of bottle houses, she made a cohesive artistic/architectural statement that is so individual it allows a peek into the Divine.

### Outsider Architecture Environments

*Some of the people they say "What is he doing?"  
Some of the people they thinking I was crazy,  
and some of the people they say,  
"He's a gonna do something!"*<sup>49</sup>

Bottle Village is very significant as an outsider architectural example of the bottle house. Although it is certainly that, it is also somewhat representative of another form of outsider architecture, the outsider environment. Mixing primary structures with auxiliary landscape effects and art, these environments represent some of the finest outsider architecture to be found. The United States has seen the creation of two particularly significant outsider environments, Clarence Schmidt's "House of Mirrors" and Simon Rodia's "Watts Towers."

The notion of the "environment" as a separate form in outsider architecture is perhaps a bit misleading. Many works of outsider architecture have accompanying art or landscape features that contribute to a larger "whole" than just the primary building itself. This is certainly true of Prisbey's Bottle Village and Leedskalnin's Coral Castle, among other works. Still, those sites are primarily significant as expressions of their respective forms, although their significance as total environments cannot be denied. Perhaps the use of the term "environment" to describe other outsider works is just an easy way to categorize the remaining examples of outsider architecture that do not fit the "bottle house" or "castle" designations. The term is by no means inaccurate, however, as these

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<sup>49</sup> Simon Rodia, quoted in Jeanne Morgan, "Rodia's Towers: Nuestro Pueblo, A Gift To The World," in Daniel Franklin Ward, ed., Personal Places, (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Popular Press, 1984): 72.

outsider works do function more as total environments than singular parts. Clarence Schmidt's "House of Mirrors" is evidence of this notion.

Clarence Schmidt's status as an outsider architect could be subject to debate, only because he did have training as a plasterer and mason.<sup>50</sup> The eccentric individuality of Schmidt and his House of Mirrors environment more than adequately compensates for this tie to the professional world of building, however, leaving no doubt that he is a true outsider. Schmidt was born in 1897 in Queens, New York and moved to the state's Woodstock region at the age of thirty-one. There he began work on his amazing outsider environment.

Schmidt's first architectural venture on his Ohayo Mountain site was a relatively simple cabin construction he called "Journey's End." This cabin was a simple affair composed of railroad ties, but Schmidt was not satisfied with the end result of the initial construction. He felt that something more was needed for the cabin. Eventually he found his outsider spark, and covered the cabin in tar and then applied a layer of cracked glass to the sticky surface. His neighbors thought he was certainly insane, and no one to this day knows whether or not they were right.

An overwhelming compulsion to build swept over Schmidt after he brought his Journey's End cabin to the end of its outsider journey. Soon thereafter, he began to clear and terrace his mountainside property. To make his terraces, Schmidt used dry key construction retaining walls made of blue stone native to the region. He planted the terraces with common perennials and shrubs, but this was the last "common" thing Schmidt would do on the property.

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<sup>50</sup> Gregg Blasdel and William Lipke, "Clarence Schmidt: Towards Journey's End," in Walker Arts Center: Naives and Visionaries, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1974): 44. All information on Schmidt and his House of Mirrors comes from this source unless otherwise noted.

In the late 1930s, Schmidt began to build another small cabin in the midst of his newly formed terraces. By 1968 this small cabin would grow into a seven-story, multi-roomed behemoth of outsider architecture. Schmidt used found objects and materials donated by local residents, primarily window frames, to erect his new creation, which eventually became known as the House of Mirrors. The name came from the abundance of windows and shiny aluminum found on the building's exterior. Schmidt was quite proud of the house's optical qualities, commenting, "When the sun gets off down there, you should see the reflections."<sup>51</sup>

While Schmidt was creating his House of Mirrors he was simultaneously building a roof garden that was a distinct entity, although it was partially built into the House of Mirrors' roof. The roof garden also ran into the hillside and possessed a character as fantastic and individual as the main house itself. Schmidt again employed his beloved windows, leaning them against anything in sight or hanging them from the garden's trees. Most of the trees and many of the plants were wrapped in silver foil to further the iridescence of the garden. Schmidt was as consumed with expanding the garden as he was the House of Mirrors, and eventually neighbors had to bring legal action to stop his garden from spilling over onto their adjoining properties.

The House of Mirrors continued to grow even after the local authorities had put a stop to the garden. The building's interior was as bizarre as its angular and shiny exterior. Schmidt filled the rooms with all sorts of found junk, again wrapping the majority of it in silver foil to catch the light streaming in from the abundant windows. Some interior spaces were dug into the mountainside as much as forty feet.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Clarence Schmidt, quoted in Blasdel and Lipke, "Clarence Schmidt: Towards Journey's End," 49.

<sup>52</sup> Cardinal, 65.

Schmidt's House of Mirrors and its surrounding environment began to take on the appearance of a bizarre Dadaist/Surrealist museum. Both indoor spaces and outdoor gardens and terraces were filled with wood bits, dolls, car parts, and various refuse, much of which received a coating of Schmidt's beloved silver foil. "There's more art here than in all the museums in the country!" declared Schmidt, who went on to advise, "forget the Pyramids and the Mona Lisa!"<sup>53</sup>

Architecturally speaking, the House of Mirrors embodies Gothic honesty of materials applied to an Andean/Indonesian terrace site by an architect taking the free-plan to new extremes. Schmidt's philosophical motivations for building were based on notions of hope, which he obviously equated with light. He even made portrait galleries of United States' presidents whom he felt contributed to the concept of hope, the most notable examples being Washington and Kennedy.

The entire grounds of the House of Mirrors became an environmental shrine to the potential of a better, more peaceful and harmonious life on Earth. With that in mind, it is especially tragic that vandals burnt Schmidt's House of Mirrors to the ground in 1968.<sup>54</sup> Schmidt, ever the hopeful idealist, began building a new complex after this tragedy but could not accomplish much at his advanced age. He died in the mid-1970s, and only small remnants of his marvelous House of Mirrors environment remain today.

Escaping the unfortunate fate of Clarence Schmidt's House of Mirrors, Simon Rodia's Watts Towers soars proudly above the bland, flat Watts, California landscape to this day. To many critics the Watts Towers are the ultimate example of outsider architecture, and Rodia the preeminent outsider architect. The Watts Towers are

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<sup>53</sup> Clarence Schmidt, quoted in Cardinal, 67.

<sup>54</sup> There is speculation that the House of Mirrors was burnt down by Schmidt's neighbors, who were unhappy that Schmidt's creation was spilling over the property lines into their lots.

certainly the most famous piece of outsider architecture, relatively well known or at least familiar to those who are otherwise unfamiliar with the genre. The story of the Watts Towers and Simon Rodia is an amazing tale of determination, vision, and the triumph of the dedicated outsider and his creation over local suspicion, the elements, and even governmental aggression.

Simon Rodia was born near Nola, Italy in 1879.<sup>55</sup> He left his native country for America when he was fourteen, probably due to his family's wish to keep him out of Italy's compulsory military service which begins at age fifteen. He moved around the United States working at various odd jobs, eventually settling in the Watts area of Los Angeles in 1920. He purchased a small triangular lot on a dead end street adjacent to a major rail line. Around 1922, Rodia went to work constructing his outsider architecture environment, which he called "Nuestro Pueblo."

"Nuestro Pueblo" is a Spanish phrase meaning "our town." This name seems to indicate that Rodia meant his towers as a celebration of his surrounding neighborhood and neighbors in Watts. Rodia occasionally spoke of the place of the common man in what he considered the unfavorable economic and class system of the United States, and in this sense the Watts Towers and their original title can be seen as a monument to the vast lower class which included Simon Rodia. With his typical evasiveness, Rodia remarked of his "Nuestro Pueblo" title that, "It means many things, means lots of different things."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Bud Goldstone, The Los Angeles Watts Towers, (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, 1997.): 25. Information on Simon Rodia and the Watts Towers comes from this source unless otherwise noted.

<sup>56</sup> Rodia, quoted in Morgan, 72.

Owing to its appearance and location, Rodia's outsider architecture environment has come to be commonly known as the "Watts Towers." Rodia himself never approved or disapproved of this name. Other than his "Nuestro Pueblo" title and a few cryptic explanations of the Watts Towers' purpose, Rodia was not at all keen on classifying, naming, or explaining his creation. He left those chores up to the observer; his true focus was in his obsessive construction of his outsider masterpiece.

What Rodia single-handedly built is quite amazing. Over a space of thirty-three years, Rodia created three primary towers, an encompassing wall, an elaborate entryway, a sculptural representation of a ship, and several smaller towers and spires. He also created a vast mosaic patio floor for the property. The flying buttresses that serve as additional support for the three primary towers are also significant creations as separate entities.

Of all that Rodia created, the three primary towers are certainly the most magnificent constructions and the hallmark of the total environment. These three towers have been named the West, Center, and East Towers. The West Tower is the largest, with a height of ninety-nine and one-half feet and a total weight of forty-thousand pounds. The Center Tower is nearly as tall at ninety-seven and three-quarters feet, but is larger overall with a weight of forty-five-thousand pounds. The East Tower, small by comparison, is fifty-five feet tall and weighs twenty-one-thousand pounds.

The visual appearance of the Watts Towers is somewhat like a cluster of church spires. Rodia was fervently anti-church, so it is doubtful he intended any religious/Christian metaphor. Commentators have often remarked that the overall shape, massing, and texture of the Watts Towers recall Antonio Gaudi's "Sagrada Familia" in

Barcelona. Rodia was not a copycat, however, and although he conceded a certain similarity to Gaudi's work he made it clear that he had never seen any of it until after his Watts Towers were finished. When first shown a picture of Gaudi's "Sagrada Familia" and asked of a possible connection Rodia said, "No I never see this" and asked, "This man, he had helpers?" When told that Gaudi did have professional construction help, Rodia boastfully replied, "I never had no help at all!"<sup>57</sup>

Throughout his life, Rodia remained enigmatic about both the Watts Towers' message and its inspirations and influences. Later speculations led to two distinct theories on the environment's symbolic meaning and Rodia's influences. The first involves Rodia's journey to the United States and its connection with other, more famous sea voyages made by Italians throughout history.

One of the main structures within the Watts Towers environment is a multi-colored, mosaic-coated sculptural representation of a ship. Rodia was known to interchangeably refer to this creation as both the "Ship of Marco Polo" and the "Ship of Columbus." Rodia also occasionally referred to the three main towers as the "Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria,"<sup>58</sup> and their appearance and arrangement certainly resembles the masts of ancient sail-ships. The triangular shape of his chosen lot also resembles the shape of a ship's bow, and its location next to a major rail line not only provided lots of public exposure but connected the environmental with notions of travel and exploration as well. Rodia spoke with great reverence of Columbus, Marco Polo, and other Italian explorers and innovators. His Watts Towers was probably not only a monument to these

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<sup>57</sup> Rodia, quoted in Morgan, 76.

<sup>58</sup> Beardsley, 169.

famous historic voyages and voyagers, but to his own journey and innovative spirit as well.

Although Rodia apparently was not intending religious metaphor in the Watts Towers, many commentators have suggested that religious festivals he may have witnessed as a child in Italy influenced the site's creation. In the town of Nola, near Rodia's rural Italian birthplace, annual religious festivals honoring the "Feast of Saint Paulinus" involve the creation of thin, ornate spire-shaped towers known singularly as "Giglio."<sup>59</sup> Their semblance to the Watts Towers has led many to speculate that Rodia may have been influenced by their design, although not by their religious message. These festivals also feature smaller constructions that are representations of ships, which again points to Rodia's fascination with nautical themes. The link to the "Giglio" festivals was formulated after Rodia's death, so it is not known conclusively if Rodia actually ever saw them or if they are indeed an influence, although their remarkable visual similarity would certainly suggest that possibility.

Rodia's own given motivations for the Watts Towers are vague. He said that he simply wished "to do something big." He never really offered a theoretical base for the Watts Towers. Perhaps the reasons are among his rants and raves heard by neighbors and visitors over the years, which included such subject matter as the place of the poor in society, the evils of the Church, and Rodia's belief that modern women were dressing like prostitutes. He also made the claims that he built because he "gave up drinking" or "this

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<sup>59</sup> For a more thorough discussion of this theory, see Sheldon Posen and Daniel Franklin Ward, "Watts Towers and the Giglio Tradition," *Folklife Annual*, (1985): 143-57.

is a great country" or, falsely, that "I buried my wife here."<sup>60</sup> Whatever Rodia's theoretical reasons were they went with him to the grave.

Much more is known about how Rodia created the Watts Towers than why he built them. Rodia had some limited knowledge of mechanics and building through his various jobs, but he certainly had no in-depth training on building techniques. The Watts Towers are a work of intuitive building in which Rodia exhibited remarkable construction finesse, particularly in his application of pre-stressed and thin-shell concrete as a building technique.

Rodia developed homemade reinforced cement by applying a thin layer of cement mortar on metal wire that he shaped to his desire. His intuitive skill with reinforced concrete allies him with fellow outsider Ferdinand Cheval, whose building technique was in many ways remarkably similar to Rodia's. Both of these architects also pressed found objects into their wet mortar as ornament, and again share common ground in their extensive use of sea-shells as a decorative device.

Simon Rodia built upwards at a slow pace, adding layers to the diameter of the tower columns to reinforce them. Buckminster Fuller was impressed with Rodia's technique, saying:

I am not amazed by the fact that Rodia was an unlearned man...I believe in intuitive intelligence and in the dynamics of genius...almost all great design is first intuitive design. Rodia was a master of his material, cement. (He) built the towers as a tree grows, with one ring developing after the other. The tree might become hollow, but it will not lose strength, as the surface now becomes the carrier of strength. The towers are superb.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Rodia, quoted in Bud Goldstone: 36.

<sup>61</sup> R. Buckminster Fuller, from Watts Tower Preservation Committee meeting minutes, quoted in Bud Goldstone: 50.

Rodia not only layered each tower outward from the center of its shaft, he also built reinforcing rings around each tower that run the entire vertical length. These rings served not only as extra support and decoration, they were also the ladders that Rodia used to climb the towers as he built them. He used no scaffolding. He would carry a bucket with his tools and materials up and down the towers, using these outer rings as steps. Rodia was only four feet and ten inches tall, so he placed these rings very close together – building to his own physical scale.

The thin, lightweight cement Rodia used allowed for a taller structure. Early photographs give evidence that Rodia had to experiment with his reinforced cement until he obtained the right mixture and method to make the towers. These photos show earlier portions of the towers that Rodia built but subsequently tore down as he searched for a proper technique.

The foundations of the main towers are remarkable due to their apparent instability versus their actual stability. The West Tower, the tallest of the three, is roughly the same height as a ten-story building. Ten story buildings are required legally to have a minimum foundation depth of twenty-four feet. Rodia's West Tower has a foundation of only one-and-a-half feet. Extra stability is obtained through the tower's anchoring to the large mosaic patio floor. It would seem that the foundations are completely inadequate for such a large structure and yet Rodia's towers have stood through several major California earthquakes as well as man-made attempts to topple them.

Flying buttresses are also used effectively to give the towers stability. Each tower is connected to its neighboring structures by a series of thin buttresses, often decorated

with a heart-shaped motif at their center. Rodia added more than one-hundred-and-fifty of these structural supports after the primary towers were completed.

The Watts Towers environment is decorated with over eleven thousand pieces of whole and fragmented pottery, fifteen thousand glazed tiles, six thousand pieces of colored bottle glass, and ten thousand seashells of various types. Rodia either collected these objects as junk or obtained them from the various day-jobs that he held. It took skill and precision to apply these pieces as the mosaic ornament of his environment; Rodia had to know when his concrete was just right to accept the bond. Aesthetically, Rodia understood the palette of his surface ornaments well enough to arrange them in a manner that would create a "pointillist" effect, making the entire surface seem to vibrate and shimmer in the sunlight.

The Watts Towers are quite a visual marvel. Their verticality recalls the Gothic tradition, as does both their organic nature and their honesty of building materials. The polychromy of the environment is overwhelming yet somehow manages to form a cohesive whole. Again, as in other outsider architecture, they seem to be fantasy made real, an architectural "dream come true."

After over three decades of working on the towers seven days a week, whenever he was off from his "day job," Rodia left the site in 1955. He gave no reasons for his exit. He walked to his next-door neighbor's house, gave him the deed to the property, and was gone. He was eventually located near San Francisco and honored by a committee of artists and architects who had become enamored with his Watts Towers, but he never



Figure 2.5 Simon Rodia's Watts Towers. From Goldstone.

returned to the site after leaving them. He died in 1965, leaving behind perhaps the most notable example of outsider architecture in the world.

Beyond Architecture:  
The Outsider Inside and at the Drafting Table

In keeping with other studies of architecture relative to preservation, it is important to note that outsider architecture is more than just structures and exterior environments. Like any other architectural style or genre, the outsider scene has its important interior designers and architectural draftsmen. As Louis Tiffany created “objects de art” that are considered the interior counterpart to the architecture of the Craftsman style, so did James Hampton and Joseph Furey realize the interior version of outsider architecture.<sup>62</sup> As the draftsmen of the Ecole de Beaux Arts rendered a vision of the Beaux Arts style, Achilles B. Rizzoli created magnificent visions of outsider architecture on paper, visions that were unfortunately never realized. These visionaries prove that outsider architecture is equivalent to mainstream architectural styles in its overall composition as a type of architecture; it is only the stylistic specifics of the outsider genre that place it in a parallel yet alternate universe.

Whoever it was that had to clear out the late James Hampton’s rented garage in Washington D.C. must have been astounded when they first opened the doors. Probably expecting boxes, tools, and junk, they were instead confronted with the otherworldly splendor of Hampton’s “Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly.” Although there is no record of the discoverer’s reaction, it can be assumed that they were duly astounded. This feeling of discovery, of unearthing a spectacular

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<sup>62</sup> Other creators of outsider interiors, such as Annie Hooper of North Carolina, are not included here. This is for purposes of brevity and by no means a comment on the merit of their creations or the validity of those creations as outsider works.

buried treasure, is specific to the interiors and drawings of the outsider architecture scene. The pure architecture of the outsider genre is usually created in view of the public, although it may be somewhat secluded or hidden. Only drawings and interiors actually remain hidden behind closed doors until an unsuspecting soul happens upon them – the commonly acknowledged “dream come true” of most outsider enthusiasts.

James Hampton was a night janitor in a Washington government building. During his time off, the unmarried and reclusive Hampton would retreat to his rented garage. Over the space of fourteen years (roughly 1950-1964), Hampton created nearly two hundred pieces of furniture (chairs, thrones, tables, footrests, etc.) and other decorative arts that were to be the interior elements of the mystical, all-African-American church he intended to create. Hampton even devised a “holy script” (yet to be deciphered) that embellished many of the interior pieces he created.<sup>63</sup>

The “Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly” shimmers in the light. Hampton took discarded furniture, cardboard, old light bulbs, and other discarded objects and wrapped them in gold and silver foil. Some objects were given a smooth texture and others were crumpled. Many references to the Book of Revelations (a bestseller among outsider artists indeed) are found in Hampton’s work. He even created twenty-five crowns and christened himself “St. James, Director of Special Projects for the State of Eternity.”<sup>64</sup>

Hampton’s creation represents a relatively anomalous situation in the preservation of outsider architecture. Since it was a group of interior decorative objects not specifically correlated to the building that housed it, it could be moved to another

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<sup>63</sup> Maizels, 139-40.

<sup>64</sup> Beardsley, 24.



Figure 2.6 James Hampton's Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly. From Beardsley.

location for preservation. This is indeed what happened as the Smithsonian museum acquired and relocated the Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly to its facilities in the 1960s.

Two maintenance men entered Joseph E. Furey's recently vacated Brooklyn apartment in 1989 and discovered an astounding outsider interior. Furey had created the interior environment over a space of seven years (1981-1988) following his wife's death. After being mugged twice near his apartment, Furey moved in with nearby relatives, which meant that work on his outsider site stopped.

The interior walls of Furey's apartment were decorated with a variety of shells, mirrors, lima beans, plaster of Paris creations, ceramic tiles, cardboard cutouts, and other found objects. All objects were hand-painted by Furey and covered with a coat of polyurethane, which gave them a lustrous, jewel-like finish. There are over seventy thousand individual applied decorations in the entire composition.

The motivation behind Furey's creation was relatively simple in terms of outsider architecture. He created as tribute to his wife, children, and close friends. Furey lived until 1990, and so managed to see his creation recognized as an important outsider site. When asked of his motivations he humbly explained that he "just wanted to make the place look nice."<sup>65</sup> In the face of his sudden outsider notoriety, the elderly Furey had the wit to jokingly refer to himself as "Le Artiste."<sup>66</sup>

In a small house in San Francisco, Achilles G. Rizzoli worked feverishly at night and on weekends off from his job as a draftsman in various San Francisco architectural firms from the late 1910s through the 1970s. Neighbors rarely saw him, but those who

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<sup>65</sup> Kogan, Lee "Living in a Brooklyn Folk Environment," *The Clarion*, Spring 1990, 52.

<sup>66</sup> Kogan, 51.

did and who had polite interactions with him were to be immortalized through his creativity. Rizzoli would render elaborate building elevations and plan views based on his interpretation of their character. In his words, he “symbolically sketched” those he loved or respected as works of architecture.<sup>67</sup>

None of Rizzoli’s architectural drawings were ever realized in built form; they were too fantastic and elaborate to be built in the early twentieth century America in which they were produced. Some were in fact structurally unfeasible, but others showed (particularly through plan views) that Rizzoli understood architecture enough to design a building that could in fact be built. The eccentricity and opulence of his designs and the economic situation of the time in which the majority of them were created (1930s and 1940s) assured that none of his visions would ever come to fruition.

Rizzoli’s creations have a strong link to the Beaux Arts style, the Art Deco and Art Nouveau movements, and the “stripped Classicism” of early twentieth century America. The architecture and general *modus operandi* of the Works Progress Administration are also clearly influential. These mainstream influences, however, do not betray Rizzoli’s status as an outsider.

The fantastic buildings Rizzoli created on paper are structures of enormous proportion, profuse ornamentation, and incredible grandeur, but as buildings alone they are not really in the outsider vein. It is the complete presentation of Rizzoli’s architectural ideas that exhibits the outsider touch. His renderings were always accompanied by lengthy and naively poetic written explanations of the philosophy and

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<sup>67</sup> Hernandez, Jo Farb, and John Beardsley and Roger Cardinal, A.G. Rizzoli: Architect of Magnificent Visions. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 15.

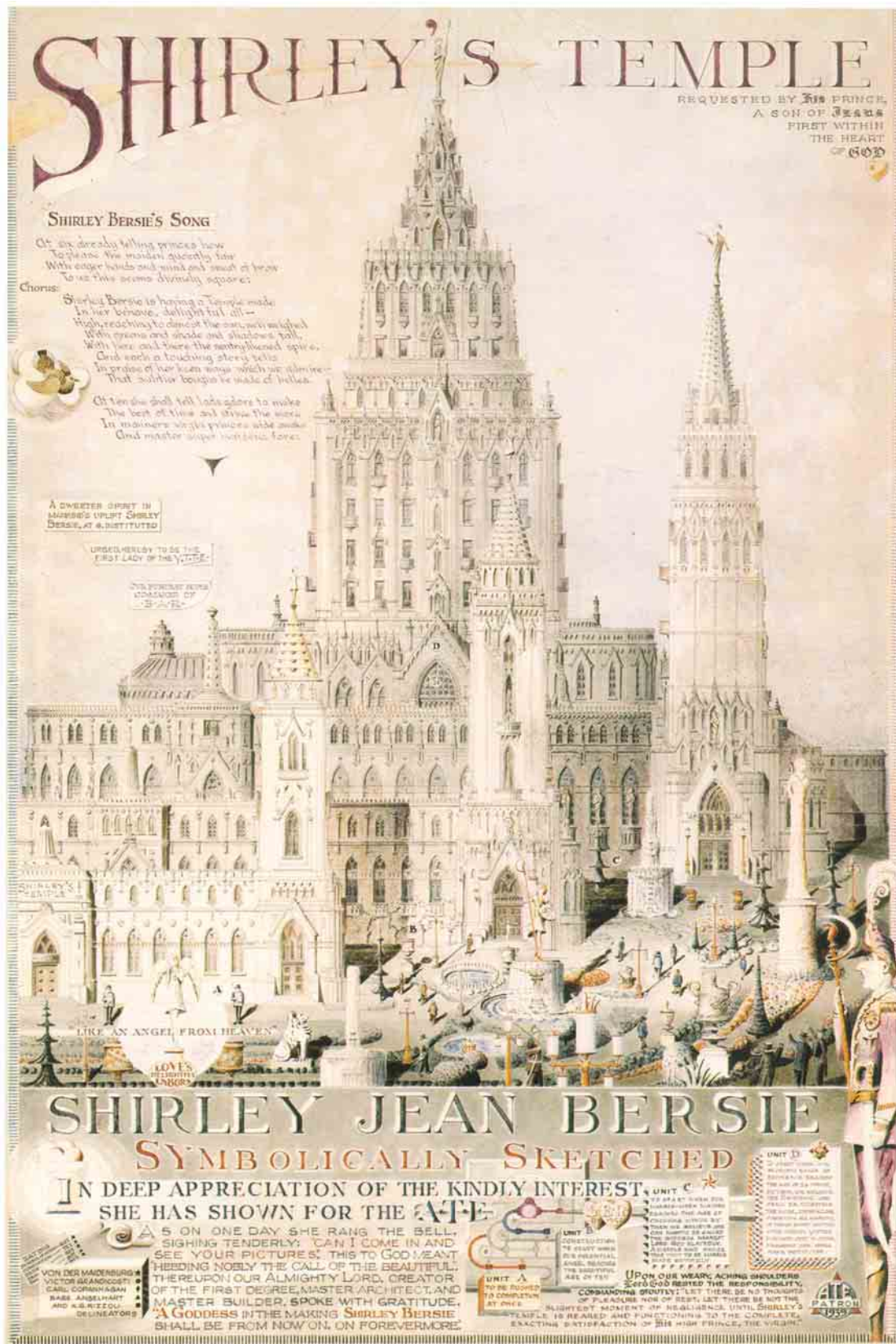


Figure 2.7 Achilles Rizzoli's Shirley's Temple. From Hernandez.



inspiration behind each work. Aping the acronym fervor of the New Deal period, Rizzoli produced what he entitled YTTE (“Yield To Total Elation”) works for the ATE (“Achilles Tectonic Exhibit”). The outsider cosmology espoused in his renderings was a mix of mystical Christianity and Rizzoli’s own simple, almost childlike praises for those he held dear.

The renderings of Achilles Rizzoli are perhaps the most difficult of all outsider architectural manifestations to understand. As of this writing, he occupies a unique position in the outsider world, the only outsider draftsman known to the world. Where words fail to encapsulate any outsider creation, they seem especially useless when Rizzoli’s work is concerned. Hard to codify, impossible to describe, Achilles Rizzoli’s drawings are more evidence of outsider architecture venturing down each and every avenue its mainstream cousin has traveled throughout architectural history thus far.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE HISTORY OF OUTSIDER ARCHITECTURE PRESERVATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Preservation efforts aimed at architecture sites more or less follow the same route and have the same history as preservation efforts directed at more mainstream resources. The primary difference lies in what the preservationist who adopts the outsider cause is up against. Preservationists of outsider architecture face all the usual obstacles – apathetic or hostile citizens, unscrupulous developers, unsympathetic government organizations, limited funding – but have to contend with an added degree of skepticism regarding their mission.

Frankly stated, it is much easier to convince others of the need to preserve an eighteenth century town hall than it is a bottle village or a mammoth ark. The fact that outsider architecture is sometimes known (even in academic discussion) as “junk sculpture” says a great deal about the situation. To some, outsider architecture sites are cathedrals of innovation, monuments of recycled and non-traditional building materials. To many more they are simply scrap heaps made even worse because someone had the audacity to forge them into architecture – and worse still by the fact that others consider this “junk” to be art.

The general public can appreciate, ignore, or, at the very least, tolerate the majority of resources preservationists bring to their attention. Outsider architecture fares a bit differently. It cannot be ignored; it demands a reaction. It also cannot be merely tolerated. Reactions to outsider architecture generally fall wide of any middle ground.

There are the few who really love it and the many who find it tacky, brazen, inappropriate, corrupting, and just plain bad. The cliché states “people do not like/fear what they do not/cannot understand,” but the situation with outsider architecture’s public appeal (or widespread lack of) has more to it than that.

One reason for the cold shoulder that outsider architecture often gets in terms of preservation has to do with its age. As any preservationist who has worked with resources of the recent past can attest, promoting the preservation of a relatively modern resource is a much tougher chore than doing the same with an older resource. This situation, however ludicrous it might be in a country as young as the United States, is the norm in preservation work and certainly hinders efforts directed towards outsider sites. All of the major outsider sites in the United States are products of the twentieth century, many of them younger than the fifty-year guideline of the National Register. The notion that a place like the Orange Show “cannot be historic or significant – it was built during my lifetime” will probably continue to be a stumbling block for outsider preservation efforts so long as this mentality persists about American considerations of history in all its guises.

Another problem more specific to outsider architecture preservation is the reactions inspired by the architects themselves. More often than not, mainstream preservation work deals with resources that are prized for their architectural merit or the historic events that transpired at the site. Sometimes there is a specific historic figure, group, or well-known architect associated with a resource, but this person or group is usually benign in the public eye. In outsider architecture, the site is the architectural manifestation of an eccentric and sometimes controversial or even confrontational

personality. The outsider site is therefore the symbol of something foreign, even threatening, to many. The notion of preserving something that is the temple of an undesirable lifestyle or ideology is as ludicrous to these people as is the idea of leaving up the flags and banners of a vanquished foe that once occupied the land.

Often seen as the town “wacko,” the outsider architect leaves a legacy that is subject to less-than-favorable reaction from many people, especially local citizens who were negatively affected by the presence of the outsider architect in their lives. Many people in Buena Vista, Georgia recall Eddie Owens Martin with some fear.<sup>68</sup> They remember him as a kind of warlock, and definitely as a bad, “creepy” presence in their community. It is not surprising, then, that these people see no need for the preservation of Martin’s Pasaquan. Some even think the site should be demolished, providing closure on the reign of a witch doctor in their midst.

The suspicious citizens of Homestead, Florida had Edward Leedskalnin and his Coral Castle investigated during World War II. With sightings of German submarines off the coast of Miami Beach (which was a large military training base during the war) the area was already in the grip of paranoia. Leedskalnin’s interest in radio and magnetic technology, the fortress-like nature of his outsider creation, his bizarre personality, and his European accent were to many evidence of his conspiracy with the Nazis. Although he was proven innocent of any Nazi collaboration, Leedskalnin and Coral Castle continued to be held in contempt after the war’s end. Only the final conquest of South

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<sup>68</sup> This observation was made during interviews I conducted in Buena Vista, Georgia in October 1996. To be fair, many of the citizens of Buena Vista recall Eddie Owens Martin with fondness, and many believe Pasaquan to be a local treasure. Still, the magnitude of the negative reactions I encountered was remarkable. Buena Vista is a small town and could be considered subject to typical notions of small town suspicions and unfavorable reactions to anything beyond the norm, but my reading suggests that the outsider architect and their creation suffer the same degree of contempt in any setting.

Florida by tourism, rather than Nazis, and a massive demographic change have led to Coral Castle's preservation in the face of local hostility.

So, while mainstream preservation has to cope with opposition based on many issues, it rarely has to contend with public hostility towards resources because of what they stand for or the suspicions leveled at their creators. This is certainly a generalization, but the fact that each and every outsider preservation effort must contend with this situation makes its relative occurrence in mainstream preservation efforts seem minor. Perhaps there is a mainstream preservation parallel regarding religious buildings, but again it is of such slight occurrence as to be unknown.

Outsider resources do face a tougher time in the world of historic preservation. That said, it is astounding what has been accomplished in the preservation of outsider architecture. As fervent as the detractors of outsider sites can be, they find an equal and opposite force on the other side of the issue. All historic preservation relies on committed and impassioned individuals and effective organizations, but those who champion the outsider cause seem almost absurdly dedicated. They are infected with the zeal of the architects whose creations they love and admire, and often they reflect the dedication, intuition, and innovation of the outsider in their own preservation work.

### The First Battle

The first and most-famous outsider architecture preservation battle centered on Simon Rodia's Watts Towers in Los Angeles. After Rodia had spent over three decades working on the Watts Towers seven days a week, whenever he was off from his "day job," he suddenly left the site in 1955.<sup>69</sup> He gave no reasons for his exit. He walked to

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<sup>69</sup> Information in this section taken from the following source unless otherwise noted:

his next-door neighbor Louis Saucedá's house, gave him the deed to the property, and was gone. He was eventually located near San Francisco and honored by a committee of artists and architects who had become enamored with his Watts Towers, but he never returned to the site after leaving them. He died in 1965, leaving behind perhaps the most notable example of outsider architecture in the world.

After Rodia left the site, Saucedá quickly sold the property to another neighbor, Joseph Montoya, for five hundred dollars. Montoya took little interest in the property. He considered making a taco stand out of the property, but this plan never amounted to anything. The site was left unused and unsupervised. Vandals burnt down Rodia's small house on the site. The property fell into disrepair, beginning a journey that could take it from "eye-catching" to "eyesore" if unchecked.

One afternoon in 1959, William Cartwright and Nicholas King visited the Watts Towers. They were astounded by the creation around them but appalled at the state it was in. They realized the significance of the site and recognized that it would take an interested and involved owner to maintain the site in the proper manner. Their feelings for the site were so powerful that they decided they must get involved, so beginning a preservation process that would soon become high drama.

Cartwright and King quickly located Rodia's former neighbor who owned the site. They bought the property, paying only twenty dollars for the site, which was all the money they had on them. They agreed to pay an additional several thousand dollars later. Rodia's creation, which they had only first visited that day, was now their property.

The duo's first attempts to rehabilitate the property uncovered quite a surprise. Cartwright's friend Edward Farrell went to City Hall to get a building permit for the erection of a caretaker's cottage on the Watts Towers site. He instead found a demolition order for the property, and so began the "greatest story ever told" in terms of outsider architecture preservation.

Oddly enough, former owner Montoya's disinterest in the property had been a curious de facto form of preservation. There had been a standing demolition order for the Watts Towers site since 1957 following a city inspection of the property. Whenever city officials arrived at the site to serve paperwork on the order, they could never find an owner, so the order was never served. Montoya had also not repaired damage to the property, which many now view as fortunate because of the likelihood of an improper restoration that may have done more damage than good. Ironically enough, when King and Cartwright began a proper effort to restore and preserve the Watts Towers they unknowingly unleashed a serious threat to the property in the form of municipal aggression.

Almost immediately, a group was formed to facilitate preservation of the Watts Towers. Named the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts (CSRTW), this group was comprised of King, Cartwright and other Los Angeles area residents. The CSRTW followed what is now considered standard procedure for a preservation organization. They raised money, attended municipal meetings, lobbied politicians, and spread their story to the media.

Despite its tremendous efforts, the CSRTW found that traditional preservation strategies could not counter the city's claim that the Watts Towers were unstable and

therefore a threat to public safety. The struggle over the Watts Towers wound up in court in 1959. In court, the CSRTW realized it would have to try an unconventional preservation strategy in order to save the Watts Towers. The CSRTW agreed to find the solution to the problem through a load test. If the Watts Towers were unstable, as the city claimed, they would be partially demolished in the course of the test. If they remained undamaged then the city would abandon its campaign to have them demolished.

Although this preservation strategy seemed extremely risky, the CSRTW really had no other way out of the situation. The case seemed to be leaning heavily in the city's favor. The judge would almost certainly end up deciding for the city. The CSRTW's actions were not entirely born of desperation, however. The CSRTW's engineer, who was an expert in aeronautic engineering, realized that Rodia had intuitively grasped the structural composition of an aircraft. The city engineers had no way of understanding the structural strength of the Watts Towers for they were judging it relative to buildings or other works of civil engineering.

On October 10, 1959 city engineers applied a 4.5-metric-ton pull upon the West Tower for one hour. The load was designed to replicate the force of eighty-mile-an-hour winds. The West Tower held firm while the steel beam on the city's winch device began to bend. The Watts Towers were saved, and ironically went on to become the property of the City of Los Angeles.

The Watts Towers would go on to survive the fierce Watts riots of 1965, which destroyed much property in the area. Motivated partially by the message of the riots, the Watts Towers Arts Center was built in 1966. This neighborhood arts center brought hope

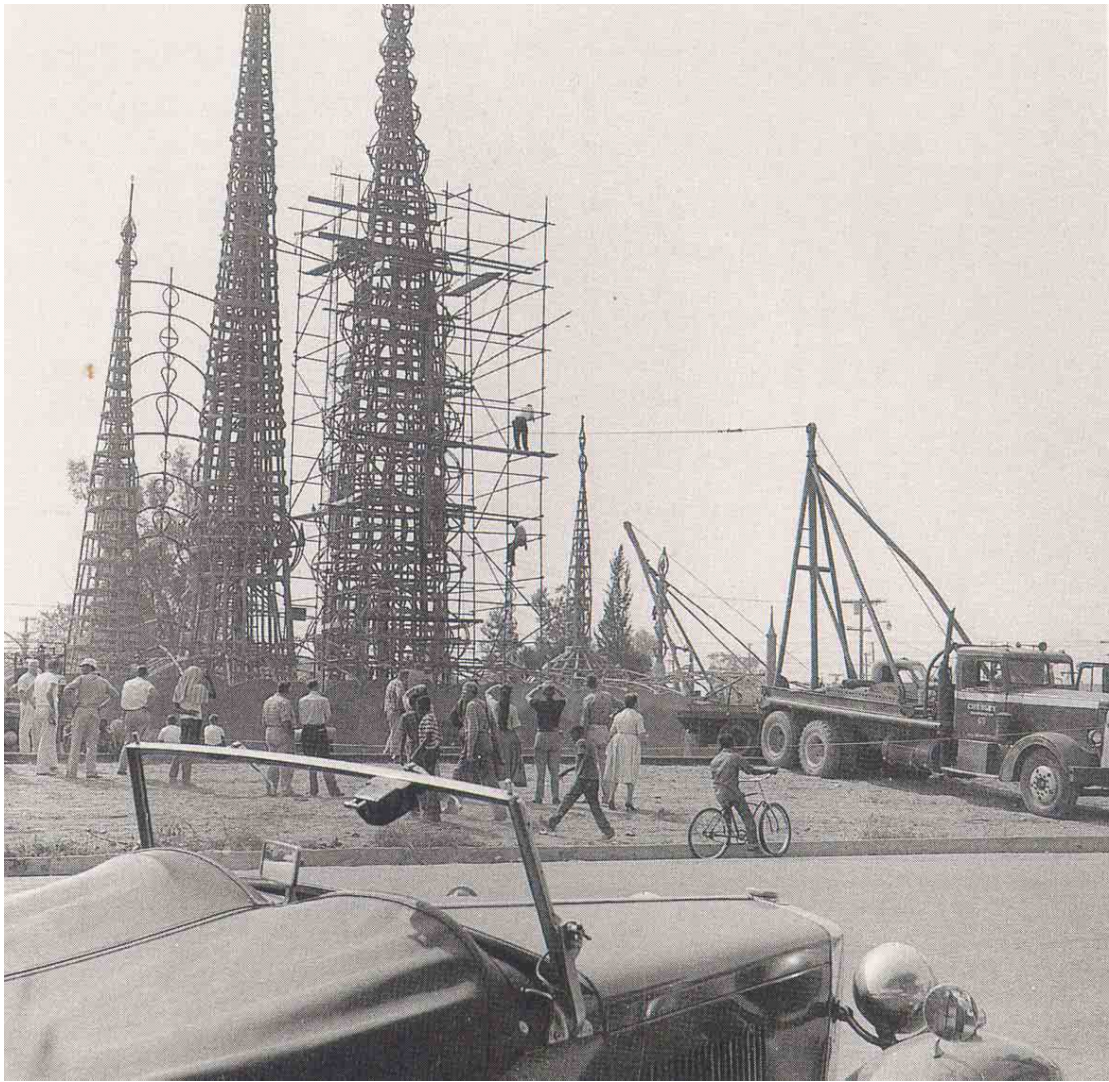


Figure 2.9 Load test on the Watts Towers. From Goldstone.



Figure 2.10 Preservation work on the Watts Towers in the early 1990s. From Goldstone.

to a blighted area and helped to establish the Watts Towers as a nucleus of the Los Angeles arts community. Many outsider architecture sites (the Orange Show, Wisconsin Concrete Park, the Garden of Eden) have followed the Watts Towers' footsteps in this regard, setting up arts centers to further local arts and provide protection for the site itself through a renewed sense of purpose.

In 1975 the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts (CSRTW) deeded the Watts Towers to the City of Los Angeles. As part of the transfer, the city agreed to implement a predetermined level of maintenance and preservation work. Soon thereafter, the CSRTW surmised that the city was not sufficiently honoring its end of the bargain. Political and legal battles erupted over the Watts Towers once again.

The new preservation issue had to do with the caliber of the city's preservation effort. The contractor chosen by the city was doing irreparable harm to the Watts Towers in a so-called restoration effort. Workers were climbing the Watts Towers and knocking off important pieces. They were filling cracks with a mortar used for highway repair that did not match the original structure. It was clear to the CSRTW that the contractor had no idea how to perform a sensitive restoration, and they immediately filed suit against the city to have work stopped.

In the ensuing legal battle, ownership of the Watts Towers was shifted to the State of California and the city's contractor was removed from the restoration work. The funds (\$209,000.00) that were to go to this contractor were given to the state. The state also secured one million dollars in the state legislature in 1980. A thorough and sensitive restoration was undertaken with help from restoration specialists at both the Getty Conservation Institute and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Eventually, the state

ran out of funds for the site and the Watts Towers were transferred back to the City of Los Angeles in 1985.

The Watts Towers now enjoy federal recognition and protection. On April 13, 1977 they became the first example of outsider architecture to make the National Register of Historic Places. In 1990 the Watts Towers were awarded National Landmark status, becoming one of only three sites in all of Los Angeles to receive this honor. They were significantly damaged by the Northridge earthquake of 1994, but the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency quickly allocated one million dollars for their restoration following the earthquake. The Watts Towers are now the most recognizable piece of outsider architecture in America and perhaps the world. They have become something of an American institution, an otherworldly monument in a landscape of immense diversity.

#### Documentation as an Outsider Architecture Preservation Tool

Although the Watts Towers' preservation story made international headlines, widespread public awareness of outsider architecture was still practically non-existent throughout the 1960s. Gregg Blasdel remedied this situation in his photo-essay "The Grass-Roots Artist" which appeared in the September/October 1968 edition of *Art in America*. Blasdel's article featured photographs of fourteen outsider sites and featured many quotes from the artists themselves. The most effective text, however, came from Blasdel himself, as he addressed the state of the outsider genre:

Clarence Schmidt's house burned; he is rebuilding it. C. E. Tracy's bottle house is being leveled for a parking lot, no one will pay to have it moved down the road a mile. Ed Root's homestead was land taken by the government to be flooded for a reservoir. Jesse Howard's signs have

always been stolen or blasted with buckshot from cars making that particular turn in the road. Fred Smith's last work, a replica of a Budweiser beer wagon pulled by horses, stands unfinished and his other figures in need of repair; he is crippled with arthritis. Stephen Sykes's tower was pillaged of useful parts and pulled down on the highway. S. P. Dinsmoor's "Garden of Eden" has been passed from relative to relative now three times removed, none concerned that the concrete is cracking on its forms. The grass-roots artist is a phenomenon of a particular economic and social situation in time that is rapidly approaching its close.<sup>70</sup>

Blasdel did not realize that his documentation of outsider sites would be key to the preservation efforts that were waiting just around the corner in the 1970s. His photo-essay put the world of outsider architecture in waiting rooms and on coffee tables throughout America, and managed to coalesce a great deal of energy into focused preservation initiatives. In response to his grim forecast of 1968, Blasdel would later write:

I stated in my early article that the climate in which this art was able to flourish was rapidly coming to an end. In retrospect, I see my prediction was premature; this art continues to enjoy a vigorous and lively existence. At that time my concern for the work was its ephemeral nature and its neglect by an indifferent and ever-encroaching public. Ironically, the identification and eventual preservation of this work came about due to outside intervention.<sup>71</sup>

Blasdel's photographs had been key in stirring others into action, leading them to document outsider sites as well. The new interest in recording the outsider genre during the late 1960s and early 1970s helped promote the idea of outsider architecture as a national phenomenon. The realization that there were outsider sites in all regions of the country and in places both urban and rural gave credence to early preservation efforts. Organizations such as Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments (SPACES)

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<sup>70</sup> Blasdel, Gregg N. "The Grass-Roots Artist," *Art in America* (September/October 1968), 24.

<sup>71</sup> Blasdel, Gregg N., "Ed Root and Dave Woods: Grassroots Artists, Defined or Not (or Grassroots Art: An Artist's Perspective)" *Grassroots Environments of the Great Plains* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 3-4.

and the Kansas Grassroots Art Association (KGAA) were formed during this period. They were born out of the documentary fervor that Blasdel had set into motion. These organizations would eventually lead efforts to obtain landmark designation for many outsider sites as part of a national historic preservation consciousness, referencing the larger context that earlier documentation of outsider sites had revealed.

In terms of preservation, the influence of the documentary phase of outsider architecture history is hard to precisely quantify, although there has been much acknowledgement that it was a crucial element. There have been instances, however, where the effectiveness of the documentary practice as a preservation tool is unquestionable. When a site is lost to tragedy or demolition (many would argue these are redundant terms) photo documentation (or drawings) is the only preservation tool left. This notion has been an element of the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) mission all along, but it has proven its worth to outsider sites that would not qualify for that program as well.

When Clarence Schmidt's House of Mirrors was lost to a series of fires and the death of its builder, photographs of the site (many by Gregg Blasdel) were all that remained to represent this outsider marvel. The site was memorialized in a traveling exhibition and an accompanying monograph in 1975 and 1976.<sup>72</sup> Likewise, Kea Tawana's Ark found preservation only through the camera lens, being demolished in 1988.<sup>73</sup> Photographic documentation is a meager substitute for the genuine article indeed, but in instances such as these it has proven to be the only way to preserve an

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<sup>72</sup> Blasdel, Gregg N. and William C. Lipke, Clarence Schmidt, (Vermont: The Robert Hull Fleming Museum, University of Vermont, 1975).

<sup>73</sup> Here is the interesting irony of a "new Ark" destroyed by representatives of a city named Newark. Those who deal in cabalistic innuendo and conspiracy theory should be able to have a field day with this coincidence.

outsider site, or at least the memory of it. Infused with their particular message and spirit, the outsider site preserved only through photograph still manages to communicate its message in a significant fashion.

### Tourism as an Outsider Architecture Preservation Tool

Given the fantastic nature of outsider architecture, it would seem a tourism-driven strategy would be the natural course for outsider preservation efforts to follow. The sites are like architectural theme parks, with bright colors and surreal images tempting the eye and luring the visitor. Outsider sites do attract curious sightseers who are willing to pay admission fees, but not in sufficient numbers to guarantee successful preservation.

Why do other, more mundane tourist destinations thrive while outsider sites struggle to attract visitors? The reason must be location. Most outsider sites are/were either in remote locations distant from any tourist base (Pasaquan, the House of Mirrors) or in depressed areas with social stigmas that keep most potential tourists away (Watts Towers, Tea Kawana's Ark). When outsider sites are in a tourist-friendly setting, they can do quite well off the tourist dollar, as does Edward Leedskalnin's Coral Castle.

The Coral Castle sits on US Highway One about twelve miles south of downtown Miami, Florida. Brochures for the Coral Castle sit in the tourist reference racks of pancake houses, motel lobbies, and rest stops throughout the state. The sign outside the site looks like it advertises a miniature golf course. The parking lot has spaces for tour buses. Visitors enter the Coral Castle through turnstiles and leave through a gift shop. The preservation at the Coral Castle is entirely tourist-based, and the present owners of the site have done a miraculous job adapting to the vacation Mecca that is South Florida.

Something about the crass and commercial nature of tourism seems antithetical to the cosmic motivations that delivered outsider architecture. Putting an interior-lit plastic sign beside a hand-hewn wall of Coral Rock seems in theory incongruous at best, sacrilegious at worst. In practice, however, these gaudy trappings of tourism seem to blend in rather well with the spirit of the Coral Castle. Edward Leedskalnin was serious about his Coral Castle, but he was never too serious to know the humor in his eccentricity and the fun that his creation could be. The current tourism slant at the Coral Castle plays upon this spirit while still maintaining a sufficient reverence for the outsider spirit carved into the mammoth slabs of coral rock.

Perhaps the most interesting manifestations of tourism at the Coral Castle are the guided tour speaker stations. Several mail box-sized metal boxes featuring maps and speakers are placed at strategic locations within the Coral Castle compound. They are painted in a bright color scheme and are easily visible. The visitor presses a button to hear a tape of Leedskalnin discussing different aspects of his creation in his thick Latvian accent. The campy humor of this device is almost as surreal as the architecture that surrounds. Somehow it all makes sense, as the bizarre atmosphere of Leedskalnin's creation intertwines with the garish trappings of South Florida tourism.

The Coral Castle sees thousands of visitors annually and is in no danger of losing the funding crucial to its upkeep, but it is anomalous in this situation. Tourism can and should be incorporated into the preservation strategy relative to any other outsider site, but it must be considered a peripheral strategy that enhances other, more feasible initiatives. If tourism is encouraged at an outsider site, it should always be done in a manner appropriate to the nature of the site. The tacky tourist atmosphere at the Coral

Castle would be inappropriate for Bottle Village, Pasaquan, the Watts Towers or many other outsider sites.

### Failures in Outsider Architecture Preservation

Through the fervor of pro-outsider advocates and the generosity of sympathetic volunteers, many outsider sites have been preserved. The good will of supporters, however, is not always enough to prevent an outsider site from being lost. Two lost sites in the American northeast illustrate the failure that can easily befall these fragile and irreplaceable resources.

Tea Kawana grew up in hard circumstances.<sup>74</sup> Orphaned by the age of twelve, she took to riding the rails and performing manual labor to keep herself alive. She arrived in Newark, New Jersey in 1953. After the Newark riots of the late 1960s, many buildings in the city's Central Ward were left derelict throughout the 1970s. In the early 1980s, Kawana realized the value of the leftover materials in these buildings and began to construct her ill-fated "Tea's Ark."

Tea's Ark was inspired by an overseas journey Kawana had made from Japan to America in her childhood. The structure was made entirely of salvaged materials. It was built to be sea-worthy, and Kawana used shipbuilding manuals to assist her in the process. The ark featured an eighty-six foot long timber frame and was twenty feet wide and twenty-eight feet high. Her ark soon became a landmark in Newark, but city officials were not pleased with the outsider creation in their midst.

In 1986 Kawana was evicted from the land where she was building the ark. She had it moved to the property of a nearby church, where it remained temporarily safe.

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<sup>74</sup> Beardsley, 174-78.

City officials, however, would not relent and the issue wound up in court. Kawana's lawyer argued that the ark was an expression of free speech and that it had value as a community landmark. The demolition order for the ark was temporarily halted while a compromise was sought with city officials. No compromise was to be found, and in the early fall of 1987 Kawana signed an agreement to either move or demolish her ark.

Kawana never found a proper site for her creation and so she began demolishing it herself in late 1987. The ark was completely gone by the summer of 1988. Kawana had the support of preservation organizations and private individuals, but there was never any united coalition to help preserve her ark. While there is no real proof, it is easy to assume that the disjointed nature of the preservation effort surrounding the ark contributed to its ultimate demise.

Nearby in Brooklyn, New York, outsider enthusiasts discovered Joseph Furey's outsider interior shortly after Kawana's ark was lost. Furey's environment was not in danger of exposure to the elements and was not subject to any city codes because it was inside of a building. The task of preserving this environment seemed relatively easy.

After Furey left the apartment it was rented by two academically trained artists, Addison Thompson and Lesa Westerman, who were intent on maintaining and preserving Furey's richly decorated interior environment.<sup>75</sup> They did just that for four years, but decided to move to a larger apartment upon having their first child. They searched for other artists to occupy the apartment who would understand and preserve Furey's creation.

After finding several suitable new tenants for Furey's former apartment, Thompson and Westerman provided the building's owners with a list of names. They

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<sup>75</sup> Kogan, 51.

moved out with the notion that the next tenant would be the new caretaker for the site. The owners of the building, however, had nothing of the sort in mind. They gutted the apartment the day after the couple moved out, destroying an outstanding and well-maintained work of outsider architecture in a matter of hours.

The failure to preserve Furey's apartment is difficult to explain. The site was not under any apparent danger and had been restored and cared for by on-site conservators. The situation seemed ideal – sympathetic artists living in the outsider environment, caring for it, and publicizing it to the world. The only flaw may have been that once the environment was in the care of its artist occupants, the preservation organizations in the area failed to properly monitor the site. This negligence left the site open to the whims of the building's owners and the real estate market.

Perhaps there was no way to stop the demolition of Furey's environment, as it was in the hands of private citizens and was not in public view. If it had been an exterior environment, it would have been easier for preservation organizations to argue its contribution to the community as a landmark or work of art. As an interior, Furey's creation could only be preserved by sympathetic occupants, unless it was purchased by a preservation organization. Purchasing the apartment was not an option in this case, and the small gap between sympathetic occupants was all the time needed to lose a tremendously important, valuable, and beautiful example of outsider architecture.

## CHAPTER 4

### NEW STRATEGIES IN OUTSIDER ARCHITECTURE PRESERVATION

Though the world of outsider architecture has seen some peculiarities in its preservation situations, the general strategies of outsider preservation efforts have more or less followed the pattern set down by preservation efforts in the mainstream architecture world. There is certainly nothing wrong with this; the preservation strategies used thus far for outsider architecture have been relatively successful. There are issues and opportunities, however, which have not been addressed in the field of outsider architecture preservation.

In defining a preservation strategy for outsider architecture, advocates should not be afraid to adopt radical methodologies. They are, after all, working for the preservation of something that is itself a radical venture. To maximize their effectiveness, outsider advocates should maintain the successful traditional preservation measures that are already in place and supplement them with new and progressive techniques.

Most of the efforts undertaken by preservationists are reactive. Reacting to threats of demolition, demolition by neglect, and improper or unsympathetic treatments of historic resources, most preservationists' hands are full simply keeping abreast of the latest preservation crisis. With development pressures increasing in America, preservationists will remain in a defensive and reactive position for the foreseeable future.

Preservationists concerned with outsider architecture, however, have the opportunity to supplement their reactive preservation practices with new, proactive

measures. In doing so, they may stray from the technical definition of what is and what is not “preservation.” In using a proactive approach, outsider preservationists could bridge the gap between traditional preservation and environmental design. Certainly traditional preservation can be seen as an ingredient of environmental design, but the notion of a proactive preservation methodology emphasizes the “design” in environmental design. It makes “design” an action word and allows preservationists to create rather than simply protect.

Understanding the abstract notion of "proactive preservation" is difficult. Preservation, by definition, is the practice of keeping something extant from being lost or damaged. How can it be proactive? How can it create and lead rather than maintain and follow? Preservation can only be proactive if preservationists shed their existing notions of historic preservation and “think outside the box,” and what better place could there be to do this than in the field of outsider architecture preservation?

Outsider preservation is subject to the larger circumstances of preservation in America but is unique enough that it presents an opportunity for a different preservation methodology. No matter how successful current outsider architecture preservation efforts are, they will only result in preserving a very small number of resources. This is because there are only a very few outsider resources to preserve. Compared to even the least common styles, categories, or genres of architecture, outsider architecture is rare. Its scant numbers ensure that, even if it enjoys thorough preservation, outsider architecture will never make much of an impact upon the built environment.

Outsider preservationists can change this situation by encouraging the construction of outsider architecture and by facilitating its implementation into the built

environment as a useful tool – by making it something more than just an anomalous collection of architectural curios. Outsider architecture's appeal as art, its connection to folk traditions, and its usefulness as a do-it-yourself building practice give it an ability to change our built environment for the better. Creating outsider architecture to address contemporary issues in the built environment also increases the total number of outsider resources, which helps to legitimize the outsider creations that have come before and which increases the number of resources that can be preserved into the future.

Encouraging the creation of outsider resources forces the preservationist into territory beyond their mission of protecting the past. They will still protect the past, of course, but they will also be engaged in the construction of the future. It is a move from stewardship towards leadership, but a move that intends to connect both in a symbiotic relationship. Many in the field of preservation have already acknowledged the need to use the lessons gained from preservation and the environmental quality of the past it preserves in an active manner to shape the present and future. With outsider architecture however, there is an unprecedented opportunity to make the lessons of the past work to the good of the built environment's future.

The idea of encouraging a new wave of outsider construction as an instrument of preservation is easy to attack. Would not the new outsider constructions only be ersatz creations that cheapen the genuine article? Could these new faux-outsider creations ever become items worthy of preservation themselves? Is the anomalous and eccentric spirit of outsider architecture, its very foundation, not impossible to appropriate in this manner? These are all valid questions and in the abstract they certainly do render the notion of a self-conscious, proactive push to create outsider architecture a ludicrous one. The

argument in the abstract, however, can easily ignore contemporary trends that help validate the notion of proactive preservation in terms of outsider architecture.

The first trend to consider is the ever-increasing transition and acceptance of outsider art and outsider architecture into the mainstream. The general public's awareness of and fondness for outsider art and outsider architecture grew by leaps and bounds through the 1980s and 1990s. Howard Finster's outsider art graced the covers of albums by REM and the Talking Heads, two of the most popular musical acts of this era. His death in October 2001 was headline news in several major papers. Outsider art galleries flourish in trendy areas of major cities. Outsider-influenced gift items, from sculpture to furniture to wall hangings, are even easy to find in shops that do not have a clear outsider focus. Craft fairs, such as the 1997 and 1998 Kentucky festivals in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, usually include several booths that feature both genuine outsider and outsider-influenced art.<sup>76</sup> The outsider genre has become so popular that there is even a large museum devoted entirely to outsider creations in Baltimore, Maryland.

The general public is rapidly catching on to the value and potential of outsider creation, and the look and spirit of outsider work is being appropriated by non-outsiders with increasing frequency. A walk down Boulevard in Athens, Georgia reveals the truth

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<sup>76</sup> The fine and fluid line between genuine outsider work and what is close but not thoroughly-outsider work, according to strict definitions, was in evidence at both Kentucky festivals the author attended. Both featured a booth by representatives of Howard Finster, a clear and undeniable outsider (although having a cottage industry that sends a crew of business representatives around to hawk his creations does seem a bit suspect if outsider authenticity is the issue), and a booth by Tim Reid. Reid is not really considered an outsider in the same terms as Finster or Simon Rodia. He is college-educated and has a connection to and awareness of other facets of the art world that deprive him of "true" outsider status. Yet this is a man who, as his alter-ego the Reverend Doctor Fred Lane, wrote and recorded an album partially based on a death threat note found in an abandoned automobile. He led a marching band comprised of people dressed as vegetables through the 1975 University of Alabama homecoming parade. He wandered the streets of Tuscaloosa carrying a toy machine gun and dressed in black tie, tuxedo jacket, and boxer shorts, with his face covered in band-aids. His often atonal, big-band-on-LSD music (see photograph) certainly suggests he is every bit the eccentric with a warped ideology that any genuine outsider is. Here is the overlap between outsider and dadaist, agit-prop artist. The blur between these two areas is interesting and worth study, but is too lengthy of a subject, and a bit beyond the focus of this thesis, to discuss here.

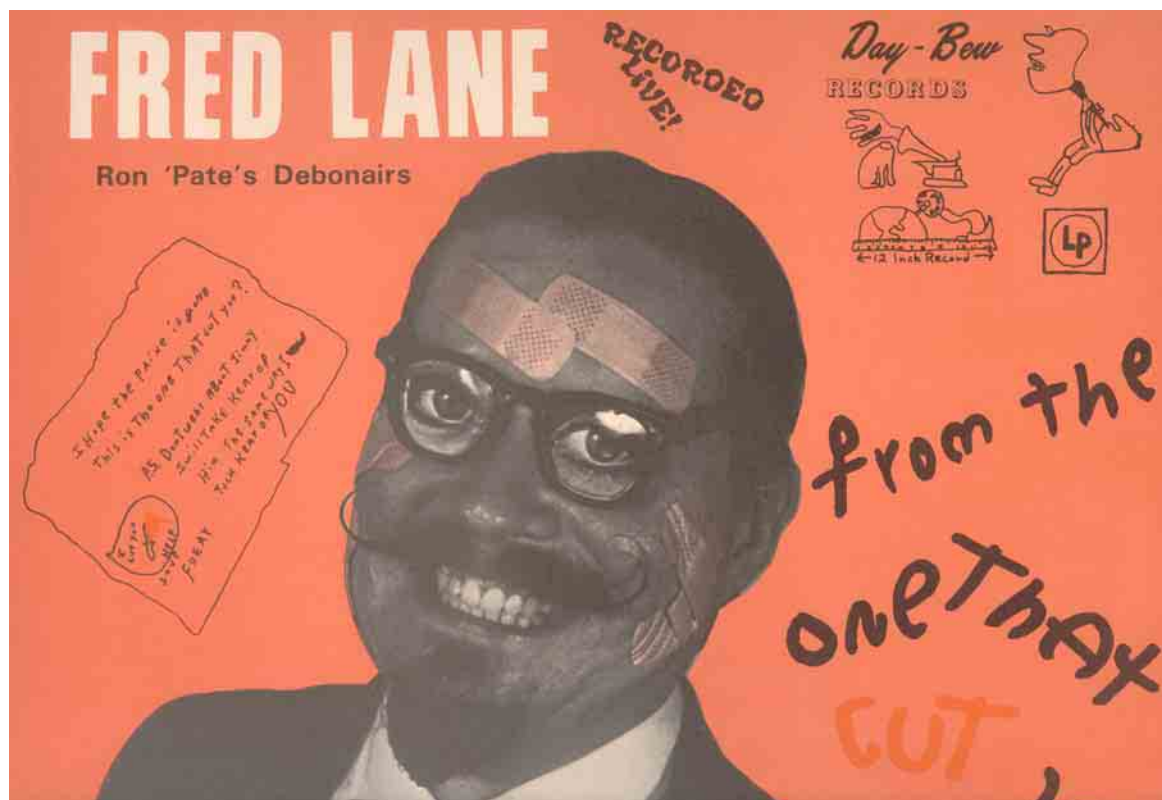


Figure 4.1 The often blurry line between the outsider and the dadaist/agit-prop artist: The Reverend Doctor Fred Lane's (a.k.a. Tim Reed) "From the one that cut you" record album. From the author's private collection.

of this statement. Several yards feature creations that are clearly influenced by outsider aesthetics. The public sees the appeal of outsider creation, realizes the relative ease in creating their own "outsider-esque" work, and has no reservations about violating any unwritten rules of authenticity. Outsider work may have originally stood apart from the folk tradition, but it is quickly being pulled in to the folk milieu by an eager public.

Preservationists can either ignore this trend or they can capitalize on it. The public is going to engage in outsider-influenced creations regardless; the increasing popularity of outsider work makes this clear. Should preservationists ignore this opportunity for the sake of a purity that is often difficult to establish anyway? Certainly some will feel they should and that to do otherwise is a betrayal of the real outsider, a sacrifice of the exceptional in favor of a substandard but more plentiful substitute. This thesis, however, suggests that missing such an opportunity is a vain gesture that is out of step with reality. Now is the time to become part of this trend and infuse it with preservation and environmental design values that serve the built environment in a progressive and beneficial manner.

The second trend to consider involves "New Urbanism" and various neo-traditionalist movements that have become popular over the last twenty years. While it is perhaps as easy to find fault in the aesthetics and agendas of these movements as it is to celebrate them, they do a service to preservation that cannot be denied. They promote the value of the "real thing" through a contemporary re-creation. They celebrate the genuine article in a manner that can foster an increase in its perceived value among the general public. The individual who visits the New Urbanist community of Seaside, Florida may better understand the value of historic areas that were the inspiration for Seaside. The

individual impressed by the neo-traditionalist Athens Banner-Herald building may find their way to an appreciation of its historic precedents. These understandings and appreciations may in turn promote preservation of the genuine article. The same process could easily be applied to outsider architecture. An interest in outsider-influenced creations may be the catalyst to produce a stronger public movement for preservation of genuine outsider works.

So, with these two trends in mind, it is evident the time has come for preservationists interested in outsider resources to shift into a more progressive mode. As stated, the outsider aesthetic is going to be appropriated by the public like it or not. Preservationists can ignore current events in the service of purity, but in doing so they lose the opportunity to steer these events and to utilize the preservation potential in them. Although based on noble ideas, purist preservation is ultimately a very limiting methodology, and with their hands tied in the sake of purism preservationists may lose some of the pure resources they treasure.<sup>77</sup> Expanding our preservation vision and incorporating new tactics only allows more avenues for preservation efforts, and makes for much better odds in the protection of historic resources.

To make outsider preservation a proactive practice requires us not only to suspend our purist definition of preservation, it also means that we must modify what has become the definition of outsider. The purist notion of the untrained or naïve builder as crucial to outsider architecture would be dismissed, to some degree. To successfully utilize outsider architecture for the good of the built environment, it would be necessary to teach

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<sup>77</sup> Although the notion of "purism" seems a bit odd in a discussion of something as left-field as outsider architecture, the term is used here to describe those who feel that the only outsider architecture that deserves preservation attention is that of established outsider architects who satisfy the notions of the "true" outsider, such as St. EOM or Clarence Schmidt.

its lesson and to have people who do not qualify as outsiders, either through their professionalism or lack of an eccentric ideology, applying those lessons through architecture. Surely there would still be the genuine outsider architect, but they would be joined by a group of sympathetic non-outsiders who were extending outsider ethics and aesthetics into the mainstream.

Passing the outsider torch to the masses could lead critics, academics, and purists to develop a system of stratification. On one level would be the pure outsider architecture created under the same circumstances as genre-defining examples of the past. Below this would be the architecture made from appropriated outsider practices by builders who do not fit the historic definition of outsider. The end products of both groups, however, might be indistinguishable to the layman, or perhaps even to the expert who does not know the story behind their creation.

Outsider architecture does gain an overwhelming amount of its character and mystique from the colorful, iconoclastic personalities of its creators and from the legends that develop around them. Advocating an infusion of outsider architecture into more mainstream building practices seems antithetical, and will certainly quickly divide the ranks of purists and progressives. Outsider architecture enthusiasts must remember that most outsider sites, save a few well-protected ones such as the Watts Towers, hang at the end of a slender and fragile lifeline. In the present scheme of things, the demolition and neglect that claim valuable outsider resources will always eclipse the slow rate of outsider architecture creation. Attrition will result in only a handful of outsider sites remaining in the future – probably far less than exist today.

While shifting outsider architecture into the hands of non-outsider architects would violate the accepted tenets of the genre, it seems the most realistic way to preserve the genre. Increasing its proliferation in the built environment will ensure that it maintains a balance with the inevitable losses to demolition and neglect. The stories of eccentric builders and fringe ideologies may become rare, but the physical manifestations of the outsider spirit will increase.

In encouraging the construction of outsider architecture by the general public there is also the chance to honor the intentions of the outsider architects of the past, many of whom wanted to see their ideologies and practices influence large groups of people. Their individual theories (St. EOM's wrapping the hair to project vertically from the scalp and act as a "spiritual antenna," for instance) may not find widespread acceptance but their individual architectural practices can become tremendously influential. These architectural practices can also help serve a social agenda and contribute to the general welfare of people everywhere, which, more often than not, have been the underlying goals of outsider architects from the past. Where purists will likely see only the sully of a heretofore virginal realm of architecture, the outsiders themselves, gazing down from whatever cosmic plane they have chosen for their afterlife, will feel the satisfaction of knowing some part of their message was received and that their efforts were influential and made a difference.

### The Four Horsemen of the Outsider Apocryphal-ypse

Considering the applicability of the outsider ethic to the mainstream built environment, four useful properties are immediately identifiable. The first of these has to do with the general appearance of the built environment itself. Contemporary America is increasingly a land of non-descript, prefabricated, cookie-cutter architecture. As the cancer of this artless replication spreads through our country, “experts” propose methods to treat the problem. New Urbanism is one contemporary example of the suggested antidote to the generic American landscape; the rehabilitation of historic areas is another. Both of these are worthy ideas, but they are, to a large degree, strategies that can only be implemented by those with significant financial resources and/or political finesse.

Outsider architecture could put the solution to America’s generic landscape into everyone’s hands, a democratic architectural tool for a democratic nation. Infusing the general public with the passion for outsider-style creation, and equipping them with the know-how to execute such creation, could lead to an American landscape of wonderful variation and imagination. The outsider architects of the past have worked on shoestring or non-existent budgets. Those who adapt the outsider ethic could just as easily do the same. This would put the ability to create a distinctive site in the hands of all economic classes, a vernacular revolution with an outsider twist.

Around Athens, Georgia, there are several examples of what appears to be outsider art and outsider architecture. There is no better example of Athens' outsider architecture than Keen Zero’s house on Odd Street near the Oconee River.<sup>78</sup> Featuring a distinct wall of concrete slabs covered with television screens, Asian-influenced “shrine”

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<sup>78</sup> The author can only wonder if the site’s location on a street named “Odd Street” is an example of serendipity or some greater cosmic force.

areas, and bizarre metal sculptures, the house appears to be another outsider environment that has yet to find fame. This environment will likely not find fame as an outsider site anytime soon, however. Keen Zero does not fit the bill of the traditional outsider architect. He is college educated and has studied architecture.<sup>79</sup> His home is evidence that the outsider lesson can be applied by those who are not technically “outsiders,” and that it can be applied with wonderful results.

Keen Zero's house is in an area that has older homes, so the generic quality of contemporary American architecture is not really an issue in this instance. Still, the work done on this site could just as easily have been executed in the blandest of subdivisions. If this site were transferred to any cookie-cutter subdivision, the juxtaposition would only magnify the splendor of the outsider creation. Some would certainly find this application incongruous, but there are others who feel that a landscape lacking diversity is incongruous with the established American notions of self-determination and individuality.<sup>80</sup>

In the manner that it could diversify the American built environment, outsider architecture would adopt the role that vernacular architecture once played. In the past, vernacular architecture was often owner-built and reflected the idiosyncrasies of its builders and their functional expectations for the building. The aesthetic result was a blend of shapes, sizes, and textures that varied the landscape and created distinct senses of place. Twentieth century modernization lead to the increasing proliferation of pre-

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<sup>79</sup> Information on Mr. Zero gathered during an interview with the author, April 16, 2000.

<sup>80</sup> There are many works that address the idea of conceptual American individualism versus factual American conformity and the generic American landscape. Good places to start in this literature are: Garreau, Joel. *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*. (New York: Doubleday Press, 1991). Jackson, Kenneth. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

fabricated or kit-style vernacular buildings, with the same design repeated endlessly throughout the land. Adopted as a vernacular building practice, outsider architecture could provide the environmental variation that traditional vernacular architecture once supplied, in a form that could not be standardized.

Outsider architecture also has the ability to sow the seeds of a better built environment by attracting the interest of children. Architecture and environmental design are like any other art or activity in terms of how they relate to children. The sooner an interest is developed, the more proficient the individual can become in the particular area of interest. Early interest also affords the chance for a deeper understanding of architecture, one that has evolved and matured along with the individual's development.

Outsider architecture can attract children to what might otherwise seem a dull subject. It is no secret that children are attracted to the fantastic, the colorful, and the outrageous. Outsider architecture can provide the "pop" stimulus to get children interested in both architecture and preservation. Where they feel a vague reverence for the United States Capitol, they will feel an immense curiosity about the Watts Towers or Bottle Village. Their introduction to architecture may eventually lead them to careers in the field or in related fields such as preservation.

It is easy to imagine the "old guard" of architecture and preservation repulsed at the thought of tomorrow's best and brightest being lured into the field through the architectural lollipop that outsider architecture represents. The fear of lowbrow motivations (entirely a matter of perspective, obviously) should not obscure the notion that it is crucial to interest children in architecture. The more children that gain an early interest in the field the better; the more young people that realize architecture is

something more than just shelter the better chance the landscape of the future has for diversity and substance. There is no need to worry that all who come to architecture via the outsider route will only go on to produce works derivative of outsider architecture. The inevitable changes brought by maturation would assure that many who came to architecture through interest in outsider creation would go on to become staunch neo-traditionalists, Greek revivalists, or any other type of mainstream architecture enthusiasts.

The essential lessons of outsider architecture are ingenuity, intuition, innovation, integrity, and originality. Although the dynamic shapes and colors of outsider architecture may be the reasons children are drawn to it, these lessons are what they will ultimately absorb from it. It would be hard to think of five better lessons regarding architecture to instill in the architects and preservationists of the future.

Pursuing the active integration of outsider architecture into the built environment also has applicability in the realm of public art, art that is outdoors and visible to anyone at no charge. Public art has long been considered both a means to increase civic pride and to enhance the built environment. Many outsider architecture advocates have claimed these values for outsider architecture as well. Some have even worked to classify certain outsider sites as works of public art in order to facilitate better preservation efforts and a better image in the perception of the general public, most notably in the case of the Watts Towers.

If outsider architecture is moved into the mainstream, the public will have the chance to create it themselves. This means that the public can, in effect, become the creators of public art. Objects of local character and civic pride can spring up on every corner.

Anyone who has visited or lived in a town with copious public art can testify to the desirable civic atmosphere that art provides. Not every work of outsider-influence will be a masterpiece, but if the outsider ethic takes hold in the vernacular builders of America, each and every town should see a significant increase in desirable public art. The increase in public art should bring an increase in sense of place and local pride.

A fourth and final manner in which outsider architecture can serve the built environment and the public is through the creation of low-income housing. As with the creation of public art, utilizing outsider architecture in this area can put people in control of their own environment. At present, most low-income housing is created with tremendous emphasis on production costs and consequently little regard for aesthetics or character. Low-income housing sites are often the worst examples of faceless, unimaginative cookie-cutter design. Their lack of identity and their poor appearance only add negative psychological reinforcements to an already disadvantaged and often depressed group of people.

Looking to the vernacular tradition of the past, it is clear that people of low-income once devised innovative solutions for their housing needs. In present times, a survey of the international scene would reveal that economically disadvantaged peoples still address their own housing needs in several countries, resulting in some very unique and visually striking sites. These vernacular structures often recycle cast-off materials and can appear quasi-outsider, such as the bottle houses observed in Jamaica by the Heineken Breweries president discussed in chapter two of this thesis.

Training low-income people in outsider architecture practices can give them self-determination and a sense of freedom in their housing concerns. They may be able to

build homes for less than the amount they spend on mass-produced and faceless housing project dwellings. Government subsidies for low-income housing could be redirected towards training programs that teach economically disadvantaged people to use outsider techniques to make adequate housing out of recycled or non-traditional building materials. These structures would be more than merely “adequate housing,” they would be personal spaces reinforcing the identities of their creators and providing a sense of civic pride and participation.

Through the diffusion of outsider architecture into vernacular building programs aimed at a low-income audience, ghettos of grey dilapidated buildings could be transformed into quirky enclaves of vibrant colors and sculptural forms. Notions of hope, inspiration, and self-determination could supplant feelings of depression and hopelessness and the sense that environmental issues were controlled from without. This transformation could potentially decrease the myriad of problems currently associated with low-income housing areas. Outsider architecture as a low-income building method would not only revitalize an area for its inhabitants, it would also work to enhance the built environment of these areas for all who encounter them.

Most of the outsider architects of the past were themselves economically disadvantaged and lived in low-income areas. They chose to forge personal spaces in landscapes that offered little inspiration or hope. The impact their creations had on their communities was always positive. They gave their neighbors evidence that something beautiful and significant could be created amidst the blight. They shared the dream of a better world with those who desperately needed a vision of hope and a sense of purpose. If those same people are given the means to create similar creations of hope and personal

expression through training in outsider building practices, then outsider architecture will in no small way have accomplished its fundamental goal of elevating the world to a better place.

### Integrating Outsider Architecture

All the aforementioned notions of integrating outsider architecture into the mainstream are appealing. Regardless of their appeal, an important issue is the plausibility of putting these ideas into effect. How does this dream become a reality? Beyond this, what steps could be taken to assure that promoting outsider architecture as a widespread vernacular type of building would not result in sites that fall far short of the aesthetic mark set by previous outsider architecture? There are already plenty of kitschy, crass, or otherwise uninspired homemade roadside creations that evidence none of the aesthetic aspirations or creative spirit of outsider architecture; there is the danger that promoting outsider architecture could become a miscommunication that only results in more of these banal assemblages. It is critical to the successful integration of outsider architecture into the mainstream that outsider architectural practices be transmitted to the public via the proper channels.

There are many ways that the outsider “craft” might be successfully taught to vernacular practitioners and thereby integrated into the general built environment. One model for the implementation of such ideas centers on a preexisting outsider site and an established and successful university architecture program. The site is St. EOM’s Pasaquan in Buena Vista, Georgia. The architecture program is nearby Auburn University School of Architecture’s “Rural Studio.” Bringing these two resources together, it may be possible to create a program that channels outsider architecture into a

useful tool for American environmental design and simultaneously preserves an important outsider site.

Pasaquan is a complex of buildings, walls, and pagoda structures in the country outside of Buena Vista, Georgia. It was built between the 1950s and 1980s by Eddie Owens Martin, a prodigal son who returned to his inherited property after years living in New York. Visited by otherworldly beings (“Pasaquoyans”) that insisted that he promote their cosmology or die, Eddie became “St. EOM” and started to preach an eccentric gospel based on an amalgam of mythology and country-fried science fiction.

Pasaquan sits on roughly six acres of land. The main house is a circa 1910 farmhouse that has been covered in an outsider swaddling of cut aluminum, cheap masonry, and a psychedelic color scheme. Curvilinear walls run throughout the property. The motifs of snakes and Pasaquoyans, with their conical hairdos, semi-Asiatic features, and large physical stature, are everywhere painted or sculpted into both exterior and interior surfaces. There are rooms for meditation and levitation and an outside sandpit for spiritual dance. The whole site is alive with profuse ornamentation and a dazzling spectrum of color. It is as though Eddie Owens Martin created the palette of the psychedelic counterculture ten years before the fact.

Pasaquan is currently in the hands of the Marion County Historic Society. A dedicated caretaker, Gwen Martin (no relation to Eddie), has looked after the property for years. Maintenance barely meets the needs of the site, and in time Pasaquan’s problems will overtake the available funds for its upkeep. There is a National Register nomination currently in the works for Pasaquan, but even acceptance to the National Register will not solve the crisis of Pasaquan. Area residents are aware of Pasaquan and many think of it



Figure 4.2 Eddie Owens Martin's (St. EOM) Pasaquan. From Maizels.

as a regional landmark, but most are indifferent to the site. Its remote location makes it impossible to market as a tourist location. In short, with no way to revitalize the site as an economically self-sufficient entity or attract funding through the benevolence of an interested organization, Pasaquan is in danger of being lost.

Auburn's Rural Studio is a program run by architecture professors Sam Mockbee and D. K. Ruth.<sup>81</sup> This program works to bring housing to those in the rural "blackbelt" of Alabama (particularly in Hale County). Students studying architecture at Auburn University are assigned to develop creative solutions to the housing needs in these areas. They are encouraged to come up with progressive solutions to housing issues that will keep the cost of construction and subsequent habitation low, as their clientele are low-income people of rural areas.

The structures built through the Rural Studio program frequently incorporate discarded or recycled materials. The experimental ethic of the program results in structures that do not follow the pattern of the vernacular architecture around them. Rural Studio buildings are, more often than not, uncanny, eye-catching structures of non-traditional building materials that are wonderfully incongruous to the built environment around them. This description should sound familiar, for it is more or less the same description of an outsider architecture site.

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<sup>81</sup> For more information on Auburn's Rural Studio, visit their internet web page at:

<http://www.arch.auburn.edu/ruralstudio/>

This is the Rural Studio homepage and features a mission statement, photographs, and other key pieces of information. For further information and a public perspective on the Rural Studio, see the following: Plummer, William and Wescott, Gail Camerson, "The Midas Touch-Rural Alabama Architect Sam Mockbee Recycles Cast-off Materials and Lifts Up Lives," *People Magazine*, December 4, 200, 217-21. Sittenfeld, Curtis, "We Take Something Ordinary and Elevate it to Something Extraordinary," *Fast Company*, November 2000, 296-310.

Auburn's Rural Studio could establish a center for the study and implementation of outsider architecture techniques at Pasaquan as part of their mission to serve the housing needs of the economically disenfranchised. Pasaquan would provide an on-site laboratory for students to interpret outsider architecture practices. The students could also rehabilitate Pasaquan as part of their learning process, providing the much-needed maintenance for this prime outsider site.

The ultimate goal of such a venture would be to provide a training center for the general public to become proficient in both the amateur building techniques and aesthetic considerations common to outsider architecture. In doing this, the Rural Studio would directly involve those it serves in the process of architectural creation, teaching the public methods to address their own housing needs. The results are a more economical way of building, a more environmentally sound building technique, and a move toward diversity in the built environment.

#### The True Outsider Architect's Place

While efforts should be made to incorporate outsider architecture into a more mainstream current, the recognition of true outsider architects should never suffer in this process. If anything, the position of the true outsider architect should be elevated in the wake of an outsider "movement" taking hold as more of a folk tradition. They should be honored as leaders and innovators, and their creations should serve as the high-style vanguard of any creative amateur architecture.

The foundations and preservation organizations that have developed to serve outsider architecture interests should maintain their service of past outsider creations while striving to find true outsider works in progress. When a new outsider work is

found, preservation organizations can again be proactive by facilitating the work of the architect. This is not to say they should assist in construction or design, but that they should work to ensure that city codes or development interests do not lead to the premature end of the outsider site.

In the promotion of outsider architecture as a mainstream vernacular building practice, the true outsider might find a new calling. Besides being architect and builder, the true outsider could become a teacher as well, for who better to teach outsider architecture practice than an outsider architect? Outsider architects could be brought to training centers, such as the one envisioned at Pasaquan, to teach their lessons to the general public.

This idea is not without its share of difficulties. Many outsider architects are notorious for their anti-social behavior and their inability to explain their creative process. There are, however, enough “user-friendly” outsiders in history to suggest that a satisfactory cadre of teacher-outsiders could be developed in present times.

Outsider architects could also be a new breed of public artist. There is no reason that outsider architects should not be encouraged by outsider advocate organizations to compete in competitions for public art contracts or grants. There are many public art works created by “name” artists of academic pedigree that do not exhibit half the splendor, creativity, or spirit of an outsider work. Certainly this is a matter of taste, but arts council juries should always have an outsider option before them. This is the duty of outsider advocates, to ensure that the outsider is promoted in the present day, not just preserved in the past tense.

The onus is upon outsider enthusiasts to find contemporary outsider architects and exhibit their creativity to the world. In secluded backyards, country fields, and suburban garages they work their lives away consumed with the desire of creativity. Some will promote themselves; others will work forever in secrecy until accidentally discovered.

Whether it is through listening to the message of the self-promoting outsider architect or keeping a keen eye out for the creation of the hermit outsider architect, it is crucial that all contemporary outsider architects be discovered and celebrated accordingly. In this age of unforgiving zoning regulations, design guidelines architectural review panels, and unscrupulous developers, the outsider enthusiast cannot afford to let the outsider architect go it alone against such formidable foes. The outsider architect must be cared for but not tampered with, held closely with a hands-off ethic. Their true outsider creations, working in tandem with vernacular adaptations of outsider style, can provide an imaginative remedy for the faceless built environment that modern life creates and can work to change social ills that accompany this bleak and vapid landscape.

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