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Seymour Rosen

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SEYMOUR ROSEN (1935 - 2006)

by Jo Farb Hernández

Seymour Rosen, 71, of Los Angeles, Calif., died September 20, 2006. A renowned photographer, he founded the international art archives, SPACES (Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments) in 1978, and became its first director.

SPACES grew out of the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts, an ad-hoc group of artists and community members who came together in 1959 and were instrumental in saving the famous Watts Towers from the City of Los Angeles's wrecking ball.

Rosen worked tirelessly to document, raise awareness of and preserve the idiosyncratic genre of works now known as art environments. His photographs of the Watts Towers were first featured in William Seitz's book, *The Art of Assemblage* (1961), and in a solo exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1962.

In 1976, a ground-breaking exhibition of his photographs of significant California popular and folk culture, including art environments, was presented at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. *In Celebration of Ourselves* subsequently became a book, one of the first to document such sites. Rosen served on the board of directors of *Raw Vision* magazine since its inception and was a frequent contributor. In 1992, he won the Folk Art Society of America's Award of Distinction for his pioneering work in the field of environmental documentation and preservation.

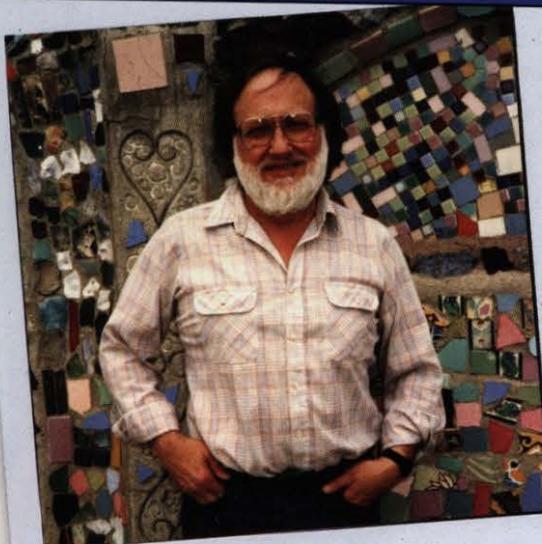
Rosen saw an important part of his mission as advisor to and advocate for other community groups and artists trying to save their local treasures, including the Preserve Bottle Village Committee (Simi Valley, Calif.), the Friends of Fred Smith's Wisconsin Concrete Park in Philips, Wis., and the Kansas Grass-Roots Art Association. He was instrumental in securing National Landmark status for the Watts Towers, as well as helping to place at least a dozen more California art environments, including Nitt Witt Ridge in Cambria, on state or local artistic and/or historic registries.

In 1985, Rosen and I worked together for the first time as co-curators of an exhibition on California art environments

at the Triton Museum of Art in Santa Clara, where I was director. Over the next several years, we worked together off and on, and by 1994, I had become his principal grant-writer, project director and, ultimately, a member of the board of trustees of SPACES.

By phone, e-mail and periodic visits, we fed each other's

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Seymour Rosen in front of Watts Towers, 1990.

insatiable delight at the varieties of personal and idiosyncratic human expression. Spending time with him refueled my ambitions to get out from behind my desk, to do more of my own primary fieldwork, to see more of this art with my own eyes and to meet more of the artists.

This past spring, at Rosen's request, I traveled twice to Los Angeles to discuss the future of SPACES. We spoke for many hours about his wishes in terms of organizational structure, recognition and programming. Those talks were important because in them he clearly articulated his dreams.

And now I've stepped into Rosen's shoes as the new director of SPACES. The board and I will continue his efforts to preserve, docu-

ment and do research on art environments, while perpetuating his plans and goals for the organization he founded. The worldwide community of those who are interested in these art forms can be assured that we will carry on Rosen's vision.

In 1989, he and Cynthia Pansing introduced SPACES in the first issue of *Raw Vision* with this statement: "The preservation and promotion of these environments has been the bane of our existence: enjoyable, heartening, disheartening, challenging and, most of all, providing the pinch on the arm which reminds us that we are alive."

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Seymour Rosen and Jo Farb Hernández in front of Watts Towers.