12-1-2001

Watts Towers

Jo Farb Hernandez
San Jose State University, jo.hernandez@sjsu.edu

Recommended Citation
Jo Farb Hernandez. "Watts Towers" *Raw Vision* (2001): 32-39.

Watts Towers

right
Simon Rodia in 1961, photo copyright Seymour Rosen, courtesy SPACES.

Sam Rodia's Towers in the Watts section of Los Angeles epitomize the genre of monumental art environments. Breathtakingly resplendent in the California sun, the spires sparkle to a height approaching 100 feet, boasting of the idiosyncratic yet elegant aesthetic of a single masterful artist. Yet the reverence in which the Towers are held, the international renown and public recognition in which they are celebrated, the status of National Historic Landmark with which they – to date, alone among U.S. art environments – have been honored, mask nearly a half century battle over their preservation and, indeed, over their very worth.(1)

Due in part to their location in one of the nation's largest cities – particularly one with numerous resident artists, filmmakers, journalists, and photographers enamored of quixotic story lines and eager to capitalize on them – the Watts Towers have received an extraordinary amount of publicity, much of which, unfortunately, has included significant fallacies or misinterpretations. Even the name of the creator himself has been in doubt: published accounts variously dub him Sabato, Sabatino, Sam, Simon, Simone, or Don Simon Radilla, Roddia, Rodia, or Rodilla, and his birthdate and place have long been in dispute. Based on research to date, including first-person accounts of discussions with Rodia and family members, the following appears to be the legitimate – if somewhat sketchy – chronology of this extraordinary site and its creator:

Sam [né Sabato] Rodia was born on the twelfth of February 1879, in the village of Rivottoli in the southern Italian region of Campania.(2) Although the village lies near the Sabato River, popular legend holds that his given name, signifying Sabbath, revealed his family's desire for this younger son to enter the priesthood. However, prior to his fifteenth birthday, he followed an older brother to the United States.(3) Little is known for certain about Rodia's early years in the States, except that he landed in the east coast, taking various low-paying jobs in the Pennsylvania coal fields, quarries, and railroad camps. After his brother was killed in a mine accident, Sam eventually made his way to Seattle, where he married Lucia (Lucy) Ucci in 1902. Sam and Lucy had two sons and, later, a daughter who died quite young. Moving from Seattle to the then predominantly Italian community of Fruitvale (now a district of Oakland, California), he built roads and worked as a cement mason, and it is said that after the 1906 earthquake he worked as a construction laborer rebuilding San Francisco. He filed a declaration of intent to become an American citizen, but never followed through with the subsequent requirements.(4)

Rodia was not the perfect husband or father; the marriage soon broke up, apparently a result of his boozing and her infidelities, and a divorce was finalized in 1912.(5) There is a subsequent gap of information about Rodia's whereabouts for the next five years. Various unsubstantiated accounts place him in France fighting with the Allies during the war or, alternatively, escaping the draft by moving to Mexico; other theories have placed him working in Texas or Wisconsin, where he claimed to have worked with Father Mathias Wernerus on the construction of the 'Holy Ghost Park' in Dickeyville, another remarkable art environment.(6) In 1917 he married Benita Chacón in El Paso, Texas, returning to Long Beach, CA, with his young wife in 1919. This marriage was short-lived, and he soon married another Mexican woman, Carmen; when she left him soon after, he apparently didn't try again.

Yet despite the continuing disruptions of his personal life, Rodia had somehow

1. My warmest thanks to Seymour Rosen, founding and executive director of SPACES (Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments) in Los Angeles, for facilitating my open use of the Archives, clarifying inconsistencies, and sharing his personal recollections. These sources formed the basis for this article.

2. This date is from Italian parish records, collected by Mae Babitz, of the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts. Rodia's social security application from 1937 – a copy of which is in SPACES' Archives – states that he was born in Rome, Italy on April 15, 1886, to parents Frank Rodia and Angelina Rosen. His Martinez gravestone lists his birthdate as 1875, taken from family records which list an April 15, 1875 birth in the village of Serino (published elsewhere as Serena).

3. Southern Italian peasant families would often send their sons to America in order to avoid military conscription. Daniel Franklin Ward, Authenticity in the Cultural Hybrid: A Critique of the Community Paradigm in *Folk Studies*, unpublished dissertation, Bowling Green University, 1990, p. 164.

4. Ibid., p. 166.

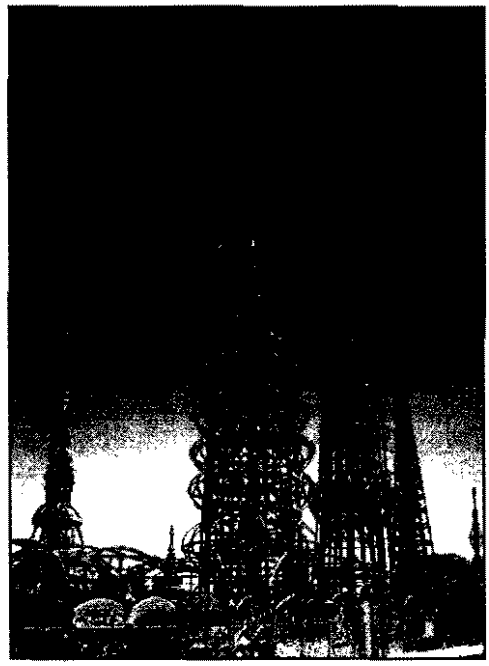
5. Ibid., p. 167.

6. Rodia made this assertion to several interviewers over the years, and a photograph of the Dickeyville grotto was among Rodia's personal papers, now in the collection of his niece in Martinez. Ibid., p. 168. Ward believes that Rodia learned many of the skills and processes that he used on his Towers while working with Wernerus.

Jo Farb Hernandez learns that almost fifty years of conservation efforts have still not secured the future of Rodia's acclaimed masterpiece

changed. He was no longer the 'drunken bum' that Lucy had known, but had sobered up and was beginning to channel his significant energies into artistic pursuits. A gazebo and garden ornaments, sculpted in decorated reinforced concrete, were Rodia's first apparent artistic efforts, created to beautify the house in Long Beach that he and Benita rented.(7)

Tax records show that Rodia next bought a property in Compton, California, in 1921, but never used it, relocating instead to a small cottage on a triangular site in Watts, an urban village which was annexed by the city of Los Angeles in 1926. Here, at 1765 107th Street East, on one-tenth of an acre (400 square meters) edging the Pacific Electric Railway Red Car tracks, Rodia settled some time between 1921 and 1925; the property title was assigned to him in 1929.



Although the dates of 1921 and 1923 are both inscribed into the Towers' decoration, the exact date of Rodia's initiation of his monumental endeavor is unknown. What is clear is that starting in his early forties, he worked on them for the next thirty-plus years, every day, creating a masterpiece that has become the poster image for the environmental art genre. Every minute that he was not working in his assorted day jobs (8) he spent either constructing and decorating his Towers, or amassing the materials necessary to do so. He combed the nearby railroad tracks for bits of glass and other discarded refuse that he could recycle into decorative surface treatment; green 7-Up bottles and blue milk-of-magnesia bottles were especially attractive to him for their strong, saturated colors. He took the Red Car line down to the beach to collect seashells and rocks; broken pottery, tile, plates, mirrors, and other found objects rounded out his 'palette'.

Around his home a complex environment began taking shape, complete with fountains, niches, outdoor seating, a gazebo, 'stalagmite' gardens, plazas, and walkways; seventeen separate sculptures were ultimately erected. Toiling alone, every day, Rodia added to what he had built the day before – building, tearing down, rebuilding, transforming. He worked without scaffolding, forming the steel substructure by wedging the ends of the metal beams under the railroad tracks, leaning down on them, and bending them to fit his need. A small, wiry man not even five feet tall, he slowly raised his Towers one short level at a time, building up from the lower tiers, using the structure itself as a ladder as he swung up the lacy supports, a window-washer's belt around his waist, carrying a pail of wet cement and his simple tools. He reinforced the vertical supports with horizontal bands circling the core, elegantly constricting the spokes as the spires rose in height, until the tallest tower, the westernmost, ascended to nearly one hundred feet high, making it the tallest slender reinforced concrete column in the world.(9)

Alternating T-beams and angle irons, he spliced and overlapped their junctures, tying them together with chicken wire that he then tightly wrapped with wire mesh. The joints were not welded, bolted, or riveted together in any way, but many were configured in the most economical and efficient structure possible: triangles developed into four-sided tetrahedrons, each tetrahedron having three triangles around each corner. These innovative 'socket footing' connections have become known as the Rodia Joint.(10) The steel was then covered by a reinforced concrete mortar mixture, into which were pressed decorative colorful glass and ceramic pieces which served as important functional elements in their own rights: they protected the substructure from rain and moisture, capping the essential simplicity and functional formalism of his aesthetic.(11)

left
Watts Towers,
photo: Marcus Schubert.

7. These works were destroyed with the house in 1961, to make room for a City of Long Beach parking lot.

8. He held cards in the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workman's, the International Hod Carrier's and the Building and Common Laborer's Unions. Jeanne Morgan, 'Rodia's Towers: Nuestro Pueblo, A Gift to the World,' in Daniel Franklin Ward, *Personal Places: Perspectives on Informal Art Environments*. Bowling Green, KY: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, p. 81. Rodia also worked in Santa Monica at Taylor Tilery, where he may have been able to gather discarded tiles. N.J. 'Bud' Goldstone. *The Los Angeles Watts Towers*. Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, 1997, p. 68.

9. The Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts. Information Packet, [n.d.] SPACES Archives.

10. Morgan, op.cit., p.79.

Rodia proceeded methodically to ornament his entire site. He began with the boundary wall, then created the so-called Marco Polo 'ship,' edged in by the narrowing triangle in the easternmost corner of the complex. The Towers themselves appear to have been built from east to west, with each successive spire rising taller and showing greater economy of form and construction methodology. The decorative motifs were well chosen to highlight in relief and color their spectacular silhouette; colored cement with incised and pressed-in designs (including impressions of his simple hand tools) contrasts with and complements the soaring assemblage. The 1954 William Hale film shows Rodia at his workbench, scrutinizing carefully segregated piles of decorative elements; even at the higher levels, his juxtapositions of colors and shapes were masterly.**(12)** Clearly, although his environment was created in an additive manner, it was by no means constructed haphazardly. Nevertheless, whenever Rodia was asked (as he often was) why he never had anyone help him, his answer was always the same – that he himself didn't know what he was going to do next, so he couldn't possibly direct anyone else in the process.**(13)**

As Rodia worked through the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, Watts itself was changing. From an ethnically diverse area of small Anglo, Mexican, and African-American homes alternating with larger Japanese truck farms, the Anglos moved on, the Japanese were interned, and their farms were turned into a higher-density, more homogenous residential district. During the Second World War, rumors swept the neighborhood that the Towers were transmission stations used to send classified information to the enemy Japanese; later, they were reviled as an alleged source for passing secrets to the Communists. The aging Rodia was becoming increasingly solitary, isolating himself from his neighbors, angry at the world and what he saw as its disintegrating values. Contemporaries reported that he stopped actually expanding his structures by the mid-1940s, spending the next decade finessing the site and repairing damage that was already starting to appear.**(14)** Local children, gleaning from their parents that he was a crazy old man, tossed rocks and climbed over the walls to smoke and drink; treasure hunters unearthed sections and smashed the crockery, certain there was a fortune buried underneath; debris and trash accumulated. Finally, Rodia had had enough.

In 1954 Rodia packed up his few belongings, deeded his property to his neighbor, Louis H. Saucedo, and walked away, never to return. When asked what should be done with the Towers, he shrugged his shoulders, indicating that he didn't care. Saucedo soon sold the property for less than $1,000 to another neighbor, Joseph Montoya, who planned to open a Mexican fast-food stand. Rodia's cottage, located within the enclosing wall, burned to the ground in 1955 or 1956, likely a result of arson, and the area within continued to deteriorate.

In 1959, actor Nicholas King and film editor William Cartwright were visiting the site when, seeing its neglect, they proposed that Montoya sell it to them, offering a twenty dollar down payment and a total of $3,000. They hoped to preserve the Towers as the spectacular art environment that they were. Only later, when they applied for a permit to build a caretaker's cottage on the site, did they discover the reason Montoya had never achieved his objective and had been so eager to sell: on the fifth of February 1957, the city of Los Angeles had issued a demolition order, condemning the buildings as 'an unauthorized public hazard' and refusing to allow further development on the site until the Towers were removed.

The City of Los Angeles based its decision to demolish on their understanding that 'there are no records of these towers having been designed or constructed according to a rational plan or engineering principles or having been inspected for sound or accepted construction procedures.'**(15)** In addition, they assumed that the manifest deterioration of various components indicated lack of stability and a presumed inability to withstand strength or wind loads, earthquakes, and working stresses as specified in the Municipal Code. To this end, the Department of Building and Safety concluded that the 'towers exist as dangerous structures and public nuisances and they endanger the life, limb, property, safety, and general welfare of the public.'**(16)** Since they believed repair was impossible, they decreed destruction.**(17)**

Since Montoya had ignored the demolition order and had sold the property, the city prepared to flatten the Towers at taxpayers' expense. Negotiations to save them seemed futile: a city staff member was quoted as saying that the Leaning Tower of Pisa would have been declared unsafe and demolished if it been in Los Angeles.**(18)**

An international cry went out, led by King and Cartwright, Jim Elliott, curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and other unaffiliated artists, architects, activists, and community members, who came together to form the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts. Soliciting letters and validating praise of the Towers from arts professionals internationally, the committee took over the

11. This construction technique was a radical innovation, foreshadowing by at least five years the thin-shelled concrete structures of ferro-cement by 'formal' architects. Goldstone, op.cit., p.22. The light weight of this type of construction facilitates the building of tall structures, while successfully supporting tension and compression loads

12. William Hale. *The Towers*. Los Angeles: Creative Film Society, 1954.

13. At other times he also noted that he couldn't afford to hire anyone; his meager earnings were spent on a frugal existence and those materials – such as mortar and steel – that he couldn't scrounge for free.

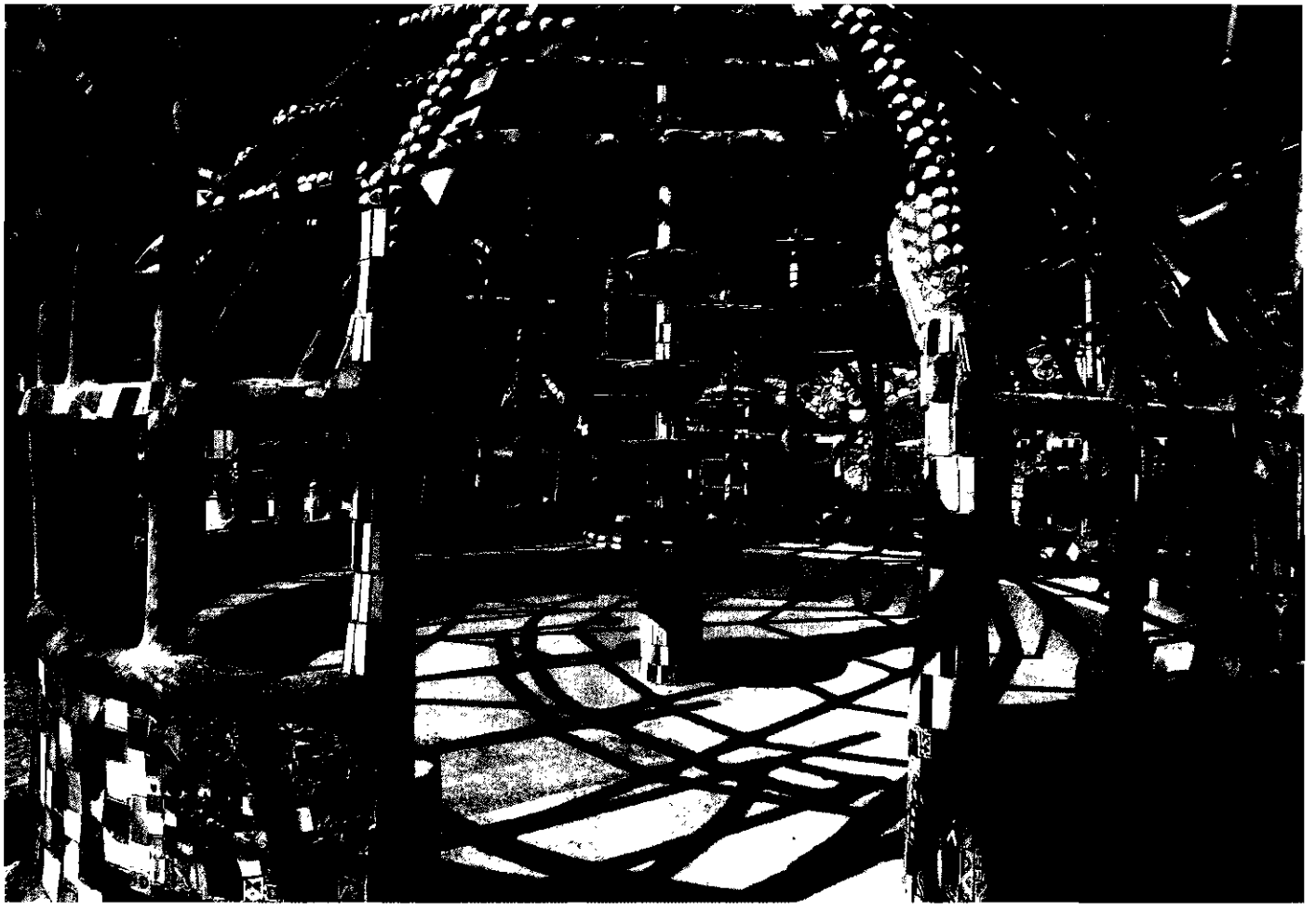
14. Daniel Franklin Ward. *Simon Rodia and His Towers in Watts: An Introduction and a Bibliography*. Monticello, IL: Vance Bibliographies, 1986, p.5. After the 1933 Long Beach earthquake, Rodia strengthened the Towers by adding outside columns, intersecting rings, and decorative buttresses on the eastern and center towers. Goldstone, op. cit., p.53.

15. W.G. Pearson, Principal Building Inspector, letter to the Honorable Board of Building and Safety Commissioners, City of Los Angeles, June 4, 1959, p.2, SPACES Archives.

16. Ibid., p. 4. According to the Los Angeles Municipal Building Code, a ten-story building would require a 24-foot deep footing; Rodia's ten-story structure had a footing of only eighteen inches Goldstone, op. cit., p.53

17. Structural stability and corrosion were the twin issues at stake; Rodia's mortar, in some places, led to an accumulation of moisture that affected the steel beams, causing a bursting of the cement casing, further exposing the substructure. William Firschein, *Identification of the Problems in the Restoration of Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts*, September 5, 1981, SPACES Archives

18. Lynn O'Shaughnessy, 'Towering Frustration,' *Los Angeles Times*. May 2, 1988, Metro section, Part II, p.8.



responsibility for the Towers from Cartwright and King, worked to pay off the debt, and began the task of proving that the Towers were structurally sound. Committee members leveraged technical experts to volunteer and testify. After much discussion at the demolition hearing, the City agreed to a lateral stress test, spearheaded by aerospace engineer N.J. 'Bud' Goldstone, at the committee's expense.**(19)** Cables were to be connected to the tallest tower, and stress applied in 1,000-pound increments, up to the top load of 10,000 pounds, equivalent to a gale-force wind of seventy-six miles per hour. If the tower could withstand this load for five minutes, the City would concede that the Towers were stable enough not to be demolished.

On the tenth of October 1959, the test was set up, with over 1000 supporters and detractors standing by, holding their breaths as the stress load was steadily increased. When it finally reached the 10,000-pound level, the steel beam attaching the tower to the testing apparatus began to bend, but the tower remained standing, showing no signs of buckling or strain. The city rescinded the demolition order and granted an Occupancy Permit to the Committee.

Following some minor repairs, in 1960 the Towers were opened to the public for a fifty-cent entrance donation. Cognizant that they couldn't conscionably focus on the Towers while ignoring the poverty and privation of the local community, the Committee developed a larger goal of enriching the general artistic environment of the surrounding neighborhood. This took tangible form in 1961 with the initiation of free art classes for local children, first held in the open space once occupied by Rodia's house and garden. A fundraising campaign, 'One Square Inch,' was initiated, granting a square inch of land the committee had purchased adjoining the Towers for each dollar donated to build the Watts Towers Art Center, an entirely new building earmarked for community cultural events. It formally opened in 1970.

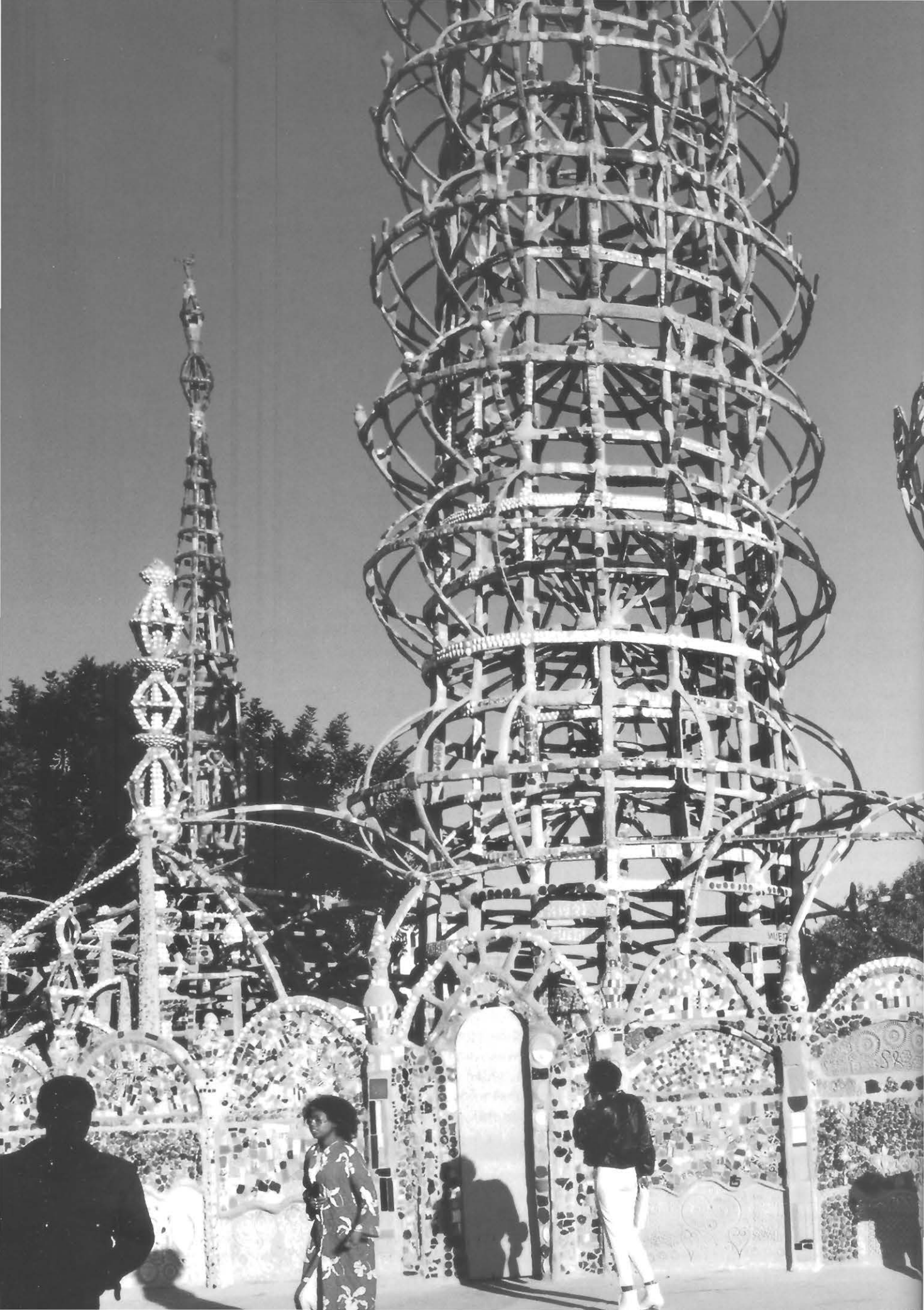
In the meantime, media attention led Rodia's relatives in Martinez, California, to contact the *Los Angeles Times*, informing them that Sam had been living near them ever since he had left Watts.**(20)** Committee members made several trips up north to meet, interview, and photograph Sam Rodia, although he generally didn't want to talk about the Towers ('When someone like your mother has died you don't want to talk about it,' he said].**(21)** Nevertheless, in 1961 they convinced him to attend two events honoring his work – at the San Francisco Museum of Art and the University of California-Berkeley – where he answered questions and received a standing ovation from hundreds of cheering devotees. On the sixteenth of July 1965, Sam

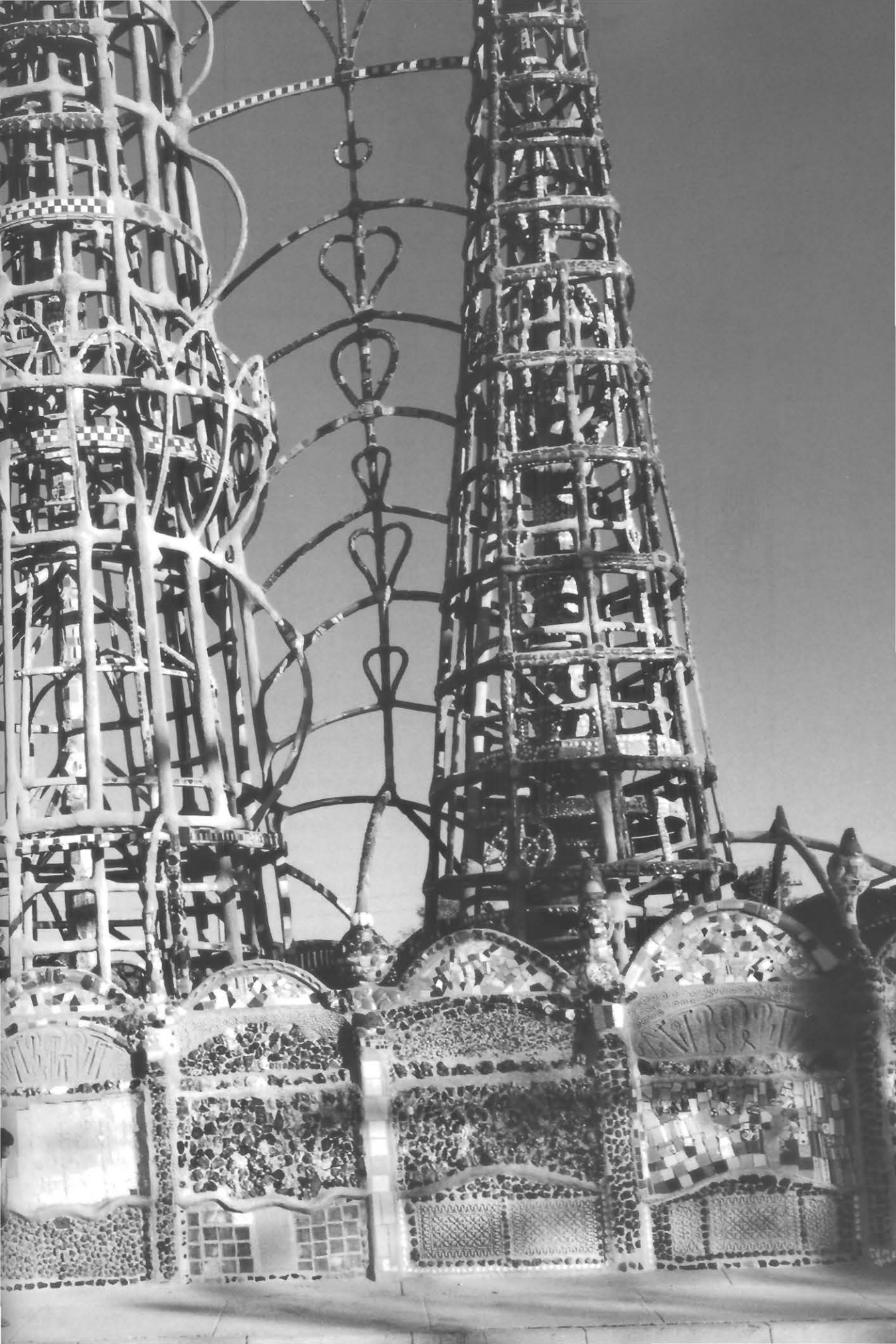
above
Watts Towers.
photo: Deidi von Schaewen.

overleaf
Watts Towers.
photo: Ted Degener.

19. More than twenty engineers and technicians collaborated to finesse the calculations and the test. Ascertaining that Rodia had utilized a design more suited to aircraft than to building construction, the aerospace engineers understood (as the city staff had not) that a different set of structural principles applied. Goldstone, op. cit , p 94

20. Rodia had assorted relatives in this San Francisco Bay Area town, including his sons, now middle-aged men, who had no interest in him after all those years of abandonment.
21. Seymour Rosen. Unpublished written recollections, SPACES Archives, n.d. (2000)





above and opposite
details of the Towers, photos. Sam Hernandez.

Rodia died quietly in Martinez. The dramatic civil revolt that took place in Watts the very next month burned and leveled numerous blocks of neighboring South Central Los Angeles, but his Towers remained untouched.

By October, 1975, the combined efforts of overseeing the Arts Center programs and trying to keep up with maintenance on the aging Towers exhausted committee members, who formally gifted the site to the City of Los Angeles, 'with the clear understanding that generous funds would be allocated for immediate repair and continuing maintenance and preservation.'(22) However, the committee was soon to regret this decision. A report by original committee member Jeanne Morgan, filed with the committee on April 17, 1976, described the glaring deterioration of the site:

'An enormous amount of vandalism has occurred. Row after row of glass and shells in defined areas have been systematically destroyed. Large objects embedded in the walls have been removed by prying and breaking. Big cracks have opened up everywhere in the vertical members of the Towers themselves and in the walls and entry area. ...Leaves, debris, garbage cover the floors and complete the effect of total neglect THE ATMOSPHERE WITHIN THE TOWERS RIGHT NOW IS AN OPEN INVITATION TO VANDALISM.'(23)

Despite reassurance, the City expended no money on the Watts Towers. In 1978 they closed them to the public and then conveyed them to the State of California, receiving, in exchange, $207,000 to support the expenses of repairs and restoration.(24) Alarmingly, a series of ill-trained crews were allowed to work on the Towers, causing considerable damage. They were only halted by a lawsuit brought by the committee.

While the suit was pending, the State interceded, allocating $1 million in the 1980 Budget for 'development' of the 'Watts Tower Simon Roddia [sic] Park Project.' In the meantime, the City of Los Angeles secured $497,000 in federal revenue sharing funds, and purchased parcels of land adjacent to and near the Towers, allocating the funds for land acquisition, landscaping, and public facilities. Boundary space approximately five times larger than Rodia's original parcel has now been landscaped, including the construction of a concrete amphitheatre, festively encircled by brightly colored banners. The Ehrenkrantz Group of San Francisco was awarded the contract to conduct the conservation study and propose specific remedies, recommendations for which were modified more than halfway through the process, reflecting the differing opinions of scholars and experts as to whether the Towers should be 'restored' to their original condition, or should only be conserved and stabilized.(25)

A further conservation study proposed specific remedies and recommendations. Scaffolding was erected and workers removed damaged pieces, repairing them if possible, replacing them if necessary, guided by approximately 5,000 photographs that had been taken of 'every inch' of the structures prior to the beginning of the restoration process.(26) Seventy-four months later, with the money running out, the unfinished project was concluded just after the seven-year lawsuit was settled, resulting in the allocation of an additional $800,000 from the City for a new five-year restoration and maintenance plan for the Towers. Significantly, the Towers were finally redefined as 'sculpture,' rather than as a 'building' – which would have had to conform to municipal Building Codes. Ongoing restoration continued, with about

22. CSRTW, Press Release, March 27, 1978, SPACES Archives.

23. Jeanne Morgan, Memo to Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts. April 17, 1976, SPACES Archives.

24. Mayor Tom Bradley letter to Jeanne Morgan. May 24, 1976, SPACES Archives.

25. Among those who volunteered to help devise conservation procedures were conservators from the J. Paul Getty Museum.

26. Helen Dudar, 'Saving the Watts Towers,' *The Wall Street Journal*. January 30, 1984, p. 30.

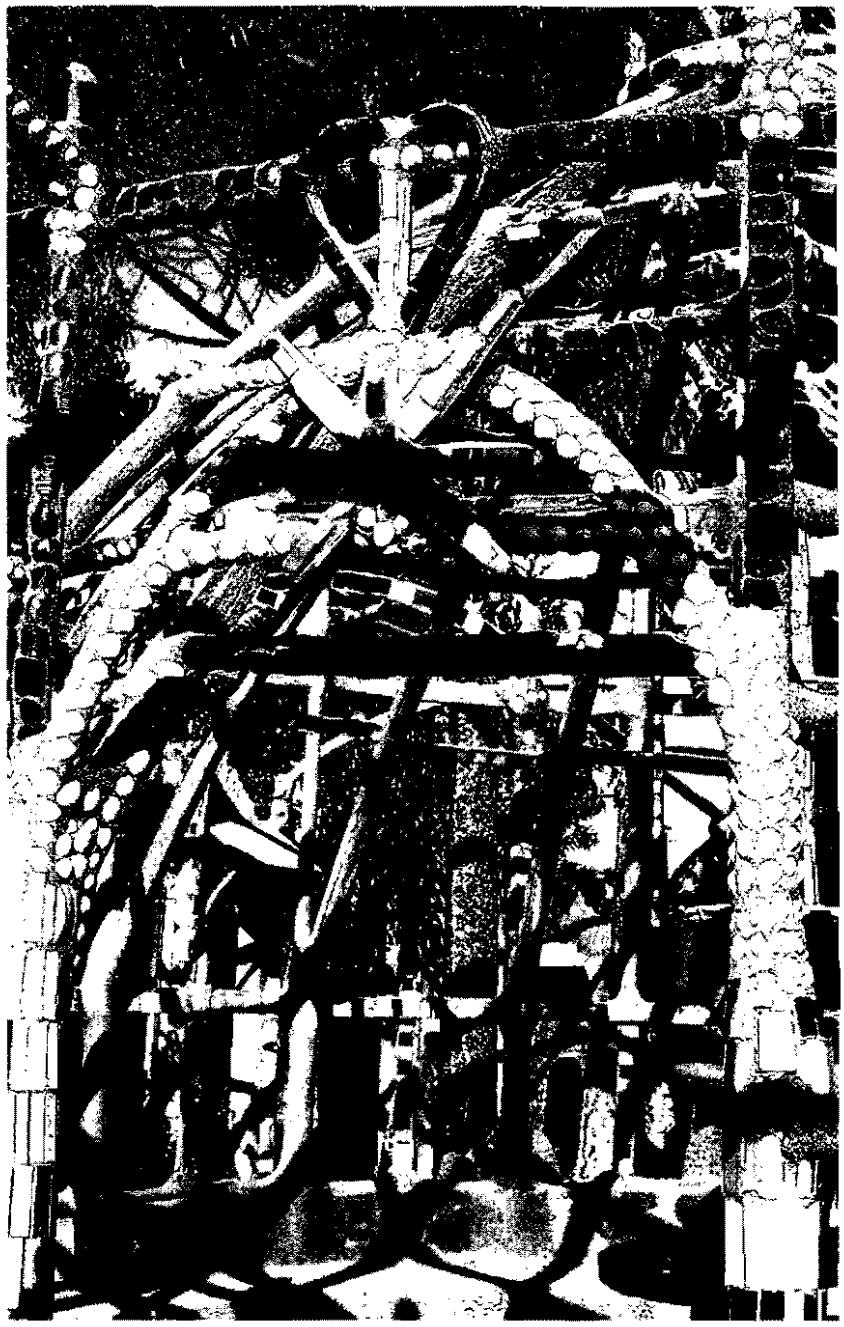
100 cracks sealed in 1992-3. Scaffolding was again erected in the mid-1990s in order to restore new damage caused by the 1994 Northridge earthquake, paid for by a $1 million grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Conservation guidelines are now 'state of the art,' and sophisticated computer technology tracks all conservation progress. The scaffolding was finally removed in 2000.

Despite these continuing and valiant efforts, the Towers themselves are not easily accessible to the public.(27) One may view them from the street or the adjacent park, but a visually distracting eight-foot-high painted steel fence surrounds them with such a tight mesh that even a camera lens can't be poked through the openings. The original painted steel sign welcoming guests leans awkwardly within the enclosure, almost completely defaced by rust. Despite its status as a National Historic Landmark and perhaps the world's best-known art environment, with a total of over $5 million poured into their survival by the federal, state, and municipal governments, as well as from hundreds of individual supporters, the Towers are forlornly set apart not only from their local community, but from their well-wishers internationally.

The archives of SPACES, along with supplementary materials, document almost five decades of intense work, research, proposals, counterproposals, assessments, and negotiations from dedicated, hard-working professionals and community members to preserve this spectacular art environment. Yet for most of the time since 1978, the Towers have been closed to the public, with their power and impact further diluted by the fence isolating them.

What is the solution to this conundrum? Should we be content to celebrate and document these kinds of environmental artworks when they are in their prime, and then let them degrade due to natural causes? Should we consider radical technological preservation such as massive impermeable domes dropped down on top of them (actually considered), or other futuristic bail-outs? Should they be dismantled and removed to alternative sites where they might be better protected, despite the conceptual damage resulting from the loss of the original sense of place? What are our collective responsibilities to an artwork whose own creator walked away, or to those other environmental artworks, located elsewhere, created by artists who worked doggedly until they could work no more? These sites are treasures, uplifting in their insouciance and freedom; can we just walk away and lose the lessons and the joy they impart?

As the first U.S. art environment to obtain municipal, state, and national landmark status; as the first to be the focus of a major museum exhibition;(28) as the center of a five-decade long struggle 'against City Hall;' Sam Rodia's Towers in Watts have had a tremendous influence on the art world, from numerous contemporary artists to the entire field of 'Outsider Art.' In this case, the decision to gift the site to the City was not the answer (it is even today considering dismantling a portion of Rodia's north wall to open a better view of the Towers from the new amphitheatre). Because artworks of this nature cannot be hermetically stored and protected, they need continued vigilance and a concerted effort from local community members – backed up by art and preservation professionals internationally – to ensure their survival. Without broad acceptance of these idiosyncratic structures as works of art, we risk losing them forever.



27. General visits are still suspended; group visits are available by appointment

28. 'Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts,' a photographic exhibition by Seymour Rosen, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1962.

Jo Farb Hernandez, curator, folklorist and author, has studied and documented art environments since the mid-1970s and written extensively on such artists as A.G. Rizzoli. Formerly President of the California Association of Museums, she is currently Director of the Thompson Gallery in the School of Art and Design at San Jose State University.