

# Artist-Built Environments to Rescue and Preserve

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The artist Bernard Langlais on his art-filled property in Cushing, Maine, where real farm animals roamed alongside his sculptures (photo by David Hiser, courtesy of Colby College Museum of Art)

For some artists, a sheet of paper, a length of canvas, a block of wood or stone, or a computer screen might not provide a large enough starting point for communicating their biggest, boldest, most expansive ideas.

Sometimes such artists have been known to conjure up ambitious “art environments” — gardens, parks, houses, or unique architectural structures filled or covered with works of art. In the United States, some of the best-known of such all-encompassing artworks include the [Watts Towers](#) in Los Angeles, which the Italian immigrant Sabato (“Simon”) Rodia (1879-1965) began constructing in 1921, and [Paradise Garden](#), which the Baptist preacher and “Man of Visions,” [Howard Finster](#) (1916-2001), built in Summerville, Georgia.

In numerous cases, these environmental works are fragile and become imperiled after their makers die if they are left without capable, resourceful caretakers, only to deteriorate at the mercy of the elements. How much does the long-term care of such artistic properties cost, and who can — or should — pay for it? A corollary to that question is: Can or should they be restored and, if so, to what extent?

Such topics were among the main themes of [The Road Less Traveled](#), an illuminating conference that took place at the [John Michael Kohler Arts Center](#) in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, in late September. The confab brought together curators, collectors, art dealers, researchers and, most notably, conservators who have worked on art-environment restoration projects, as well as administrators, both volunteer and professional, who oversee the care and

maintenance of such sites. (Many of them are open to the public.)

Karen Patterson, JMKAC curator and the moderator of the conference's first panel, pointed out that, whenever some or all of the parts of an artist's multi-element, site-specific environment are removed to a museum for the sake of preserving them, a host of aesthetic and custodial issues may emerge. Patterson noted that she and her colleagues regularly ask: What were an artist's intentions for the presentation of his or her work, and, since museums cannot or perhaps should not exactly replicate the conditions of a site, how can they evoke its original ambiance in an exhibition setting?



On view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin: Undated photos of Sabato ("Simon") Rodia's Watts Towers in Los Angeles, shot by the late Seymour Rosen, a pioneering researcher of California-based, vernacular art forms (photo courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center)

Katherine Jentleson, the curator of folk and self-taught art at the [High Museum of Art](#) in Atlanta, recalled that her institution began working directly with Finster in the 1990s, acquiring a sizable quantity of the prolific artist's paintings on cut-out boards, as well as his signs and objects. She stated that the museum set out to take "an object-specific approach" to displaying them; for example, it installed a large Finster signboard above viewers' heads, just as it had been mounted in Paradise Garden, where it had helped demarcate different sections of the property.

Similarly, Jentleson and her colleagues placed some of Finster's sculptural objects on the floor, emulating their original locations in the artist's garden, where they had helped to shape the overall, crafted environment, and visitors

could walk around them. Jentleson joked, “My fantasy is that someday someone will make a hologram of Howard Finster that can be displayed along with his works; that would be perfect for a ‘man of visions’ whose work managed to reach a wide audience that included rock-music fans and many people in the contemporary-art world.”

Lisa Stone is the curator of the [Roger Brown Study Collection](#) of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and an associate professor in the SAIC’s art history, theory, and criticism department. Offering a model of how works from a self-taught art-maker’s site-specific environment can be displayed, Stone looked back at an exhibition that the late Chicago Imagist painter [Roger Brown](#) (1941-1997) curated in 1971 at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago. Its subject: the cathedral-shaped birdhouses that the Chicago-based, Italian-immigrant artist Aldo Piacenza (1888-



What are the aesthetic effects of moving all or part of an artist’s site-specific art environment from its original location into a museum? After Loy Allen Bowlin (1909-1995), the Mississippi-based “Original Rhinestone Cowboy,” died, his artwork-home was acquired by and moved to the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin (photo courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center)





The ornately decorated interiors of the home of Loy Allen Bowlin, the Mississippi-based "Original Rhinestone Cowboy," were integral parts of the work of art he created and in which he resided (photo courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center)

1976) had hand-crafted and displayed all around his house. He also had made cut-out constructions and filled the walls of his home with hand-painted scenes of Italy.

Stone, who has long worked in the preservation field, recalled that, in the exhibition, Brown, who had famously collected and was influenced by folk art, outsider art, tribal art, and offbeat pop-culture and vernacular artifacts, remained faithful to Piacenza's creative vision. "Roger definitely did *not* stick with the white-cube approach," Stone explained. Instead, in setting up Piacenza's work at the art center, "he brought in picket fencing, plastic foliage, and a painted cloudscape. His installation of the birdhouse cathedrals on posts may have referenced the way Piacenza had placed them on posts in his garden."



Finding inspiration in the arts of various civilizations and eras, the artist Eddie Owens Martin (1908-1986), who called himself "St. EOM," created his seven-acre Pasaquan compound in Buena Vista, Georgia, beginning in 1957; in recent years it was restored thanks to the aid of the Kohler Foundation (photo by Brianna Wright, 2016; courtesy of Columbus State University)

As curators wrestle with aesthetic issues surrounding art environments, conservators do, too, often in relation to the technical and scientific aspects of their work. [Jason Church](#), a conservator at the [National Center for Preservation Technology and Training](#) in Louisiana, described the challenges of conserving the work of a living artist when her grand production is still evolving. In recent years, Church has been assisting [Juanita Leonard](#), a preacher and artist in Montgomery, Louisiana. He noted, "She has a church on her property, and everything there is a work of art."

He added, "She had been making angel sculptures with plaster of Paris and plywood, but in time, they started to slump. One time, when I was visiting Juanita, I suggested that maybe she could use stronger materials. Later, she made all-new angels using metal sheets. She told me that she believed the Lord had sent me to tell her to use more durable materials. I wondered: Had I influenced her? Was that good or bad? I had just been thinking like a conservator." Church also noted that it is important for specialists like himself to routinely shoot photos of a living artist's evolving art environment so that there will be a visual record for future reference. "The question, though," Church observed, "is, in the future, looking back, to which stage of its development should conservators aim to restore a work like Juanita's?"





One of the restored interiors at Pasaquan, in Buena Vista, Georgia, created by Eddie Owens Martin, the self-styled "St. EOM" (photo by Brianna Wright, 2016; courtesy of Columbus State University)

Hannah Blunt, an associate curator at Mount Holyoke College Art Museum in Massachusetts, spoke about her work several years ago on the restoration of a rural site created by the artist [Bernard Langlais](#) (1921-1977). Trained at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, DC, and other schools, Langlais became a successful modernist painter in New York. However, in 1956, after making a mosaic-like wall composition with wood scraps, he abandoned oil painting and retreated to a farm in Cushing, Maine, where he made more than 65 large-scale, painted wooden sculptures of elephants and other animals. Blunt explained that Langlais “articulated a desire to use the land the way a farmer uses it, to create what he described as his ‘environmental complex.’”

Blunt recalled that, in 2010, Langlais’s estate, “including 3300 works of art and the sprawling Cushing property, passed to the Colby College Museum of Art as a bequest.” The museum hired her to manage that huge gift, and she moved into the artist’s former residence. She said, “Like many colleagues here who have had the rare privilege of occupying an artist’s home or built environment, I soon discovered [...] the primacy of place [in] Langlais’s art.”

To restore Langlais’s on-the-land sculptures, Blunt reached out to the Wisconsin-based [Kohler Foundation](#), which sends experts out to such sites to evaluate their conservation needs. The foundation requires would-be recipients of its aid to partner with third-party institutions — schools, museums, other foundations — that can maintain restored art environments for the long term. In the case of Langlais’s property, Blunt explained, the Maine-based Georges River Land Trust eventually agreed to “take ownership of the site in perpetuity.” Somewhat controversially but, ultimately, successfully, many works from Langlais’s estate were given to museums, libraries, schools, and communities around Maine, in effect making the artist’s original property a bit more manageable, while raising his region-wide profile.



The artist Bernard Langlais (1921-1977), seen here in 1976, gave up painting to make large-scale wooden sculptures, which he placed on his property in rural Maine (photo by David Hiser, courtesy of Colby College Museum of Art)

Ronald Harvey is an artist-turned-conservator from Maine who worked with Blunt on the Langlais project. He said, “1  
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understand how artists love to experiment with materials; I try to approach conservation work artistically.” Harvey has worked on the big, mixed-media whirlygigs that the self-taught artist Vollis Simpson (1919-2013), a skilled repairman and inveterate tinkerer, made and installed on his rural property near Wilson, in eastern North Carolina’s tobacco country. As Simpson grew older, he could not take care of his rusting, found-object sculptures. They deteriorated, but some local residents reached out to Harvey and Dennis Montagna of the National Park Service’s Monument Research and Preservation Program. They oversaw the restoration of the weary whirlygigs’ worn-out mechanisms; the sculptures were repainted and then relocated to a new park, which will soon open in Wilson. In this instance, as with other art-environment rescue projects, community leaders recognized the potential for tourism development surrounding a unique cultural attraction.

On display during the conference and remaining on view through February 18, 2018, the exhibition *In Celebration of Ourselves: Seymour Rosen + SPACES Archive* examines the legacy of Seymour Rosen (1935-2006), a California-based pioneer in the preservation of artist-built environments. In the 1960s, he founded [SPACES Archive](#), an organization that gathers information about such works around the world. The exhibition features archival photographs of California art sites examined by Rosen and objects from an exhibition he organized in the 1970s. Now, in partnership with the Kohler Foundation, SPACES Archive is digitizing Rosen’s vast collection of photos and documents, and depositing the originals at the JMKAC for future study by researchers.

SPACES Archive’s director, Jo Farb Hernández, who has documented art environments in Spain and other parts of the world for the past 45 years, spoke movingly following one of the conference’s panels. She echoed the sense of something big and complex that one often feels when encountering — or working in or with — artist-built environments. She evoked their creators’ open-heartedness, which seems to characterize many of them.

Speaking from experience, Hernández said, “With this kind of art, we come to the aid of the people who made it if and when they need it. It’s a different kind of relationship than the one you have with a conventional contemporary artist who makes art for the market. These artists created their works with a deep sense of commitment. Those of us who love what they’ve given us — we owe it to them to make a personal commitment to them as well, advocating for the preservation of their work whenever and however we can.”