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## Without Precedent: The Watts Towers

Thomas Harrison

Italo Calvino, in the concluding tale of his *Cosmicomics*, tells the story of a mollusk that, though sightless, generated a beautiful spiral shell for external beholders to admire. The mollusk is of course a metaphor for the artist, whose creation becomes one in an endless series of images in the eyes of others. In fact the “vocation of form” embraced by the blind mollusk explains how the murky sea was transformed into a “visual field” to begin with. All the eyes that would focus in on shells like his in the course of the coming millennia — those of passing cuttlefish and seals, of sea captains with lady friends looking through a spyglass — owe their activity to this first and literally blind act of creation, generated in the manner of a spontaneous exclamation or gesture of love.<sup>1</sup> “All these eyes were mine,” says the mollusk, with some bitterness, but an even greater sense of pride; “I had made them possible; I had had the active part; I furnished them the raw material, the image [. . .] In other words, I had foreseen absolutely everything” (Calvino 152-53).

The parable of the mollusk suggests that each important first step, each beginning, entails a journey whose nature is unknowable until one reaches the destination, and then turns back and discerns its shape. That is what they mean when they say that the first line of a poem is given while the rest of the work still remains in the dark. But such a line is enough for a start. As the destination draws near, the beginning progressively recedes, until it is finally lost — in finality itself, in the completeness and enclosure of the work.



*Sam Rodia*

One day after working on his towers in Watts for more than thirty years, the immigrant tile setter from Campania, Italy called Sam Rodia decided he was through with them. He gifted them to a neighbor and left Los Angeles for good. To the day of his death he remained reluctant to discuss this extraordinary creation on his private property, wishing never to see the towers again, even though they had attracted the attention of art circles across the world. Once they were finished they had lost their purpose; for they were all about the doing.

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<sup>1</sup> Calvino 146; cf. Paul Valéry’s saying that poetry is at bottom “the development of an exclamation,” 549.

We know hardly anything more about Sam's motivation in building these towers than this. "Why I build the towers?" he retorted to queries from his admirers. "Why a man make the pants? Why a man make the shoes?" ("Now, it's no use my piling up words, trying to explain the novelty of this intention I had," says the mollusk about the making of his shell; "the first word I said is more than enough: *make*, I wanted to *make*, and considering the fact that I had never made anything or thought you could make anything, this in itself was a big event. So I began to make the first thing that occurred to me, and it was a shell.") Some years earlier, when still in Watts, Rodia had said something slightly more revealing: "I wanted to do something. I wanted to do something big." And, finally, in his most eloquent explanation, he offered this: "You gotta do something they never got 'em in the world."<sup>2</sup>

Rodia's emphasis is consistently on the doing, on creating something not only momentous but momentous *because* it was unprecedented. It short, building these towers was about making a beginning — envisioning something utterly new, something that would always *remain new* insofar as its objective could not be clearly foreseen. Here a beginning was dilated and extended indefinitely. Only when Rodia decided to quit building them did the creativity end. In fact, the towers were never finished; they were only terminated.

Hence, what prompted Rodia to begin a thirty-year project, engaging him each night after work, not to mention each Saturday, Sunday, and holiday of the year, cannot be established with historical or psychological certainty. Yet the motivation of the work is already inscribed in the form that it took, or in the *nature* of what Sam decided to build: towers. Towers reach up. They engage in an act of ascension. They formalize a continuous, consecutive accretion, an unending beginning. This is particularly the case with these open, agglutinative towers of Watts, with their differing and improvised heights, built rod by rod and ring upon ring. Rodia did not operate like a professional architect, on the basis of drawings and designs. He worked one day at a time, often tearing down on Wednesday what he had built on Tuesday (reported by his neighbor, the jazz great Charles Mingus 558-59). As the entire thing was built without the aid of external scaffolding, and Rodia was a slight man barely five feet tall, his towers themselves created a ladder "upon which he climbed as he "built" (Linda White, qtd.



*Photo by Thomas Harrison*

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<sup>2</sup> These statements and a good deal of others by Sam, or Simon, or (his christened name) Sabato Rodia are recorded in the captivating film documentary by Edward Landler and Brad Byer, *I Build the Tower*, 2006.

Morgan 74).

The towers articulate and record this process of accretion — this “incremental aesthetics” (Doss 28) — that offered the final result. At every stage of their progress they show themselves distancing themselves from the earth, “taking off” in a manner reminiscent of the scene in Federico Fellini’s *8 ½* that shows a launching pad for a rocket to transport people away from the earth. The launching pad-tower, in that film, is virtually coextensive with the spaceship. And, for all we know, its potentially infinite, ascensional drive might even have been *inspired* by Rodia’s towers, which had been completed eight years earlier (in 1954 or 1955) and had been conspicuously discussed in the press.<sup>3</sup>



*Anonymous*



*Photo courtesy of the Marvin Rand Trust*

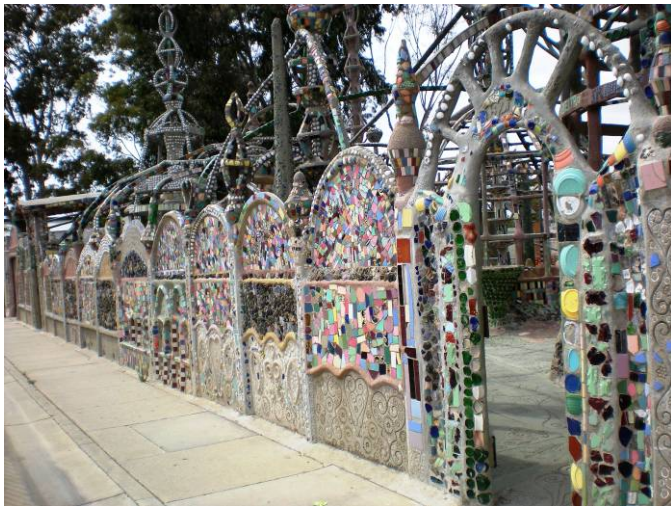
Or else, in a different perspective, the Watts Towers could be seen as a kind of pier turned upwards — a pier, which in a witticism of James Joyce (*Ulysses* 2.39) is “a disappointed bridge,” insofar as its real desire is to reach across the water to the other shore. Such a pier is destined to remain no more than a beginning, even when terminated. It is a thrust, a motivation — and thus also a failed connection.

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<sup>3</sup> The likelihood of Fellini’s knowing of the Watts Towers is less remote than it may seem considering that Simon Rodia was familiar enough a figure by 1967 to be featured in the company of Marlon Brando, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Marilyn Monroe, and dozens of other cultural celebrities on the cover of rock music’s most famous album: The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Rodia stands in the back, in the third row just to the left of Bob Dylan. One might even wonder whether Calvino’s story about the construction of the mollusk’s spiral shell (*The Cosmicomics* were published in 1965) bears reference to the story of Rodia and his towers.

But a pier at least rests on the water, and boats can attach to it. An openwork tower, instead — constructed out of thin steel rods encased in concrete — is a pure act of reaching out; of grasping and clasping, but with no corresponding hand to come meet it from the sky. These towers in Watts are the beginnings of a bridge that cannot be brought to completion. They figure the unending nature of beginnings, whose end lies in achieving no end, or in accepting their nature as unfulfilled bridges.

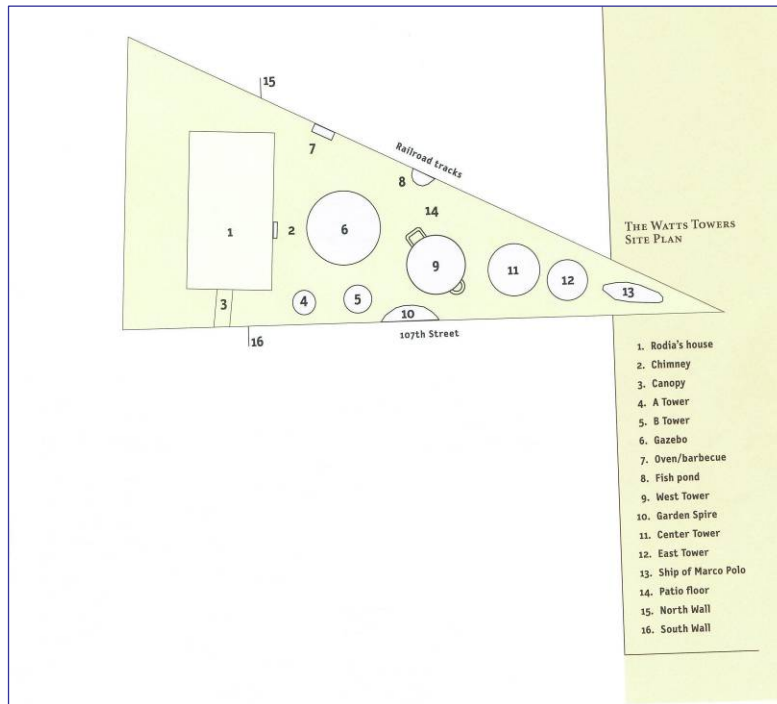
This act of ascension and aspiration is re-enacted by the material and cultural history of the towers. Materially speaking, these towering, vertical deviations in the extended and flat horizon of urban Los Angeles sublimate various products of nature and consumer culture. Empty bottles of Milk of Magnesia and 7-Up, seashells, pottery and cups, broken tiles, colanders and wire baskets are incorporated into cement surfaces, used to make imprints, built into the constructive foundations of bird baths, foundations, walls, and a sculpted ship.



*Photos clockwise from top left: Joanna Look, Matthew E. Cohen, Konrad R. Summers, Thomas Harrison*

In actual fact, what we refer to as the Watts Towers are not mere towers at all.

**LAYOUT OF NUESTRO PUEBLO (Courtesy of Goldstone and Goldstone, p. 9)**



They are an extended, assembled composition on a plot of land which Rodia named *Nuestro Pueblo*: our town, our habitation, even our people or clan.<sup>4</sup> Whether you call it

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<sup>4</sup> Although it has been noted that the phrase *nuestro pueblo* is underwritten (intentionally or not) by the original name of Los Angeles — *El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora de los Angeles de la Porciúncula* — no one has commented on the uncanny relationship between the *cultural origin* of the complete city name (St. Francis's *porziuncola* outside of Assisi) and the *pueblo* built by Rodia. The settlement of Los Angeles dates back to 1781 at a location along a "beautiful river" that had been spotted by the Franciscan missionary friar Juan Crespi in 1769. Laying eyes on this river Crespi immediately christened it *Nuestra Señora de los Angeles de la Porciúncula*. He chose the name in commemoration of the fact that the date of the sighting — August 2 — marked the annual feast of St. Francis' *Perdono* at the little chapel of the *porziuncola* ("very small parcel of land") on the outskirts of Assisi. This chapel had been given to Francis in a condition of complete disrepair in 1208 by Benedictine monks and apparently contained a fresco behind the altar depicting the Virgin Mary surrounded by angels. This, then, is how the chapel came to be known: *Santa Maria degli Angeli alla Porziuncola* (in Spanish: *Nuestra Señora de los Angeles de la Porciúncula*).

Now legend has it that the chapel had originally been built in the fourth century by outsiders to the area — hermits from the Valley of Josaphat — around relics they had brought to Italy from the grave of the Blessed Virgin. Iconographically, her ascent into heaven was often represented as accompanied by angels (as presumably in the chapel's fresco). According to some reports of the time, even the singing of angels was frequently heard at the *porziuncola*. Whatever the real story may be about how the *porziuncola* came to be associated with Our Lady of the Angels, what is beyond doubt is that Francis had to rebuild the rundown chapel with his bare hands. Later, as he gained followers, the *porziuncola* itself became a small *pueblo*, gathering the community of his small order of friars. (For a vivid depiction of life on the

vernacular architecture, assembly art, or, as Sam’s brother-in-law declared, “a pile of junk” (*I Build the Tower*), this complex manual sculpture takes thousands of pieces of debris, bonds them with the highest grade steel and mortar (costing Rodia small fortunes of his own money) and submits them to an imponderable artistic purpose.

It makes new use of materials that once littered the earth, inertly without life or function: empty bottles, found objects, dead shellfish, tile shards, the detritus of nature. A new beginning is made of these end points, transforming the “copious waste of an industrial society into structures of soaring magnificence” (Seitz 72-73).

This ostensible transmutation of junk into art (or so the external, vernacular mosaic appeared to some; beneath them is a breathtaking structure of high-grade engineering) turns into a bone of contention — a veritable political and ideological debate — when the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety decides to raze the towers to the ground three years after Rodia has left (1957).



*Photo by Swantie Willms*



*Photo by Thomas Harrison*

The official reason given is that these unregulated towers, built with no permit, are a community hazard; the only slightly less vocalized reason is that they do not serve any appreciable interests on the urban horizon.<sup>5</sup> The man responsible for the demolition

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*porziuncola* see Roberto Rossellini’s *Francesco, giullare di Dio*, 1950.) To be sure, it was a different type of chapel that Simon Rodia built with his own hands, but even so it was a place at which some witnesses said that baptisms and weddings were celebrated. Simon’s work was accompanied not by the singing of angels, but by the voices of Italian opera, one of them his own and others booming from his gramophone as he worked up in the towers. One can only wonder whether Rodia was familiar with the story behind the city in which he lived — *El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora* — when he named his own mini-village *Nuestro Pueblo* ... and whether he knew about the *porziuncola*’s small, utopian society of Franciscan friars ... and how the chapel was restored by hand ... and the reports of singing angels.

<sup>5</sup> The public “uneasiness or hostility” toward Rodia’s work, reflects one of the towers’ earliest defenders, Jeanne Morgan (74-75), was “an inevitable response to Rodia’s total freedom from any intent or hope of monetary gain.” More recently we have discovered that the hostility was also nourished by a municipal designation of Watts as a slum-clearance area, with almost 3,000 properties next to the towers slated to be razed to the ground in keeping with “a program ‘to clean up slum and blight conditions’” in Los Angeles

order, one Harold Manley, was all but explicit about this (Whiteson 27). In 1959, with Los Angeles reeling from the after-effects of the House Un-American Activities Committee (denounced the same year by President Harry Truman as the “most un-American thing in the country today,” Whitfield 1996), the custodians of a particular image of the city (county and state officials) clash with the defenders of a particular notion of art. In 1957, two men from a more prosperous neighborhood — who soon organize themselves and others into the “Committee for Simon Rodia’s Towers in Watts” — discover the structures in a derelict and abandoned condition, purchase them for a few thousand dollars from a Watts resident, and then spend immeasurable energy trying to convince civic functionaries that *Nuestro Pueblo* is not a meaningless, useless, unsafe pile of junk. It is rather a work of unique inspiration, made to the highest intuitive standards of design and engineering, even if with some poor materials, and with no defined space in the art world; with no determinable market value; no clear and incontrovertible purpose; no relationship whatsoever to the economic structures of contemporary life; no beauty or order as conventionally associated with art.

Beneath these issues, of course, lay the fact that the towers were located in Watts, a neighborhood thoroughly outside the economic and political power structures of Los Angeles. Here something both practically and symbolically dysfunctional seemed to be encroaching on the order of civic institutions; on clear and distinct conceptions of enterprise; on those immured bureaus of power which the Sixties would denounce as the “political establishment.” The city’s determination to destroy the towers was in many ways a defense of the “high” against the threats of the “low,” supported less by material than ideological interests. Both literally and figuratively, the towers suggested a rising up of the earth and the lowly, the *humus* and the materially unruly, against more elevated realms. The controversy surrounding *Nuestro Pueblo* was only a harbinger of more tensions to come — embodied in the Watts Riots in 1965.

In 1959, the call by a small group of college graduates, artists, intellectuals, engineers, writers, and museum curators to respect an unusual monument of land art called into question the beliefs and operational principles of a quite different group of city councilmen, law enforcers, bureaucrats, urban planners, politicians, and businessmen. The only way to preserve the towers, the two sides agreed, was to *prove* that they were no threat to their surroundings. If they turned out to be strong enough to resist a 10,000-pound load of cables trying to pull them down, then they would have



*Photo by Thomas Harrison*

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(Schrank 2000, p. 376).



earned a right to stay. The towers withstood the assault — fifty years ago on October 10, 1959 — and in so doing achieved a victory for the entire category of folk art, vernacular architecture, and environmental art that they represented. Thus did the towers bridge the art world and the ghetto, establishing common causes between them. To be sure, this was not the first case of *art brut* in modern art history; however, those were the years — the 1950s and 1960s — when *art brut* made permanent inroads into social consciousness, winning its right to stay. In other words, what Rodia began in 1921 found its cultural and political development on the cusp of the Sixties. By contesting the civil authorities, the intellectually astute members of the Committee (a tower of power, a unique work of social construction) successfully defended naïve art and by proxy underprivileged culture: in this case, the labor of a penurious immigrant, who hardly spoke the language of his host country, inhabiting a community worse off than he.

The result of this fight was that the ignored inner city was thrust into the affairs of the polis. This was the beginning, in Watts, of forced attention. The six days of rampage following police brutality in the same district on August 11, 1965 were a more clamorous dramatization of the same principle, stressing that well-to-do Los Angeles could no longer afford to ignore what was happening on the other side of town. Rodia's was a symbolic gesture; that of the Watts community a political one; both were inaugural and universalizing of their locale. In this context, additional thought must be given to the question of exactly where Rodia chose to construct his Pueblo: ten meters from the Watts railroad tracks on which nearly 100,000 commuters a week travelled between Long Beach and Los Angeles on their way to work (Goldstone and Goldstone 35). These passengers, who could almost reach out and touch these towers, could not avoid asking themselves what these structures were all about, why a man was hanging up in them with a bucket of cement, and what relation the towers bore to other types of constructive work and practice. It is astonishing to think — as Rodia reported to Antonio Vellani, the Italian-American film student at the University of Southern California who produced a documentary on the maestro called *The Towers* — that Rodia considered buying another triangular piece of property in Los Angeles before he settled on this \$900 lot on 107<sup>th</sup> Street in Watts (the purchase price is cited in Umberger, p. 112).<sup>6</sup> It was the property currently occupied by the Beverly Hilton Hotel, at the intersection of Wilshire and Santa Monica Boulevards in Beverly Hills.<sup>7</sup>

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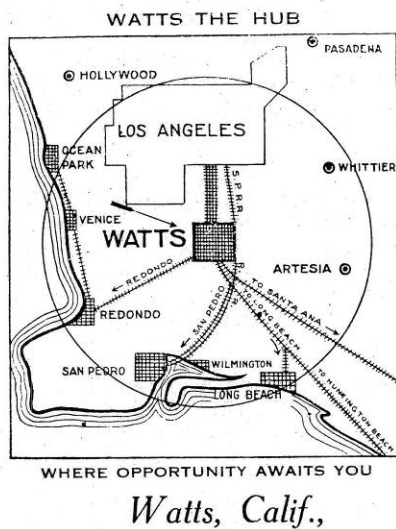
<sup>6</sup> This curiosity is revealed in Landler and Byer's *I Build the Tower*. Landler confirms in correspondence that Tony Vellani had the story straight from Rodia during the making of William Hale's film in 1953. Landler's co-filmmaker and Rodia relative Byer received corroborating reports about Rodia searching for a triangular lot from his family in Martinez, where Rodia went to live after leaving Los Angeles (Letter from Landler to T. Harrison, June 10, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> The lot immediately to the left of the one Rodia would have bought, just out of the frame of the photo, was purchased in 2006 for a staggering \$500 million, making it the second most expensive property sale ever in Southern California. The buyer was reported by the *Los Angeles Times* to be committing another half-billion dollars to the construction of a luxury condominium on the site. See <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/apr/11/business/fi-luxury11>, accessed March 4, 2009.

**BEVERLY HILLS IN 1920-1921. Rodia's lot would have been the triangular one at the far left.**  
*Courtesy of The Benjamin and Gladys Thomas Air Photo Archives (Spence Collection).*



Had Rodia bought that triangular lot at the intersection of Santa Monica and Wilshire instead of the one in Watts, the Los Angeles community would have had an even more heated debate about the future of these towers — assuming such a debate would have occurred at all! No doubt, the sculptures would have been dismantled even if they had been erected by Michelangelo himself. Or else, assuming a miracle, they would have become as visible a civic structure as the Roman Coliseum.

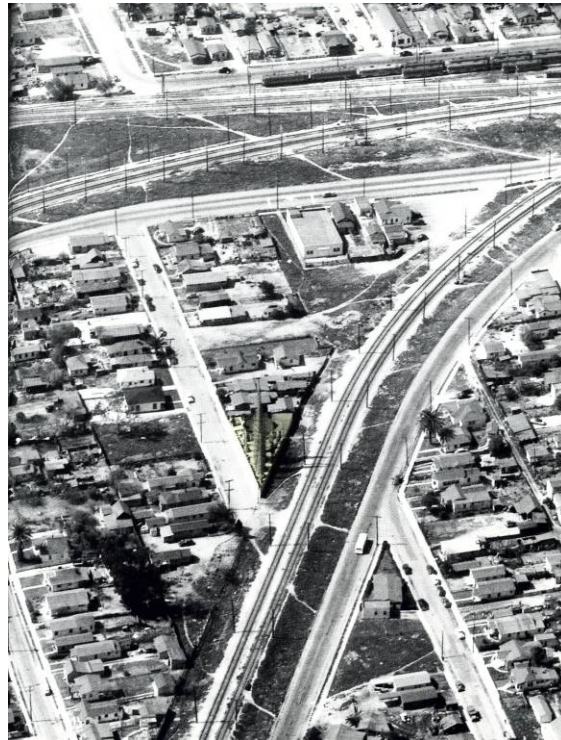


*Watts Chamber of Commerce Letterhead, circa 1912  
 Los Angeles City Archives, Watts City Records, 1907-1926*

*Reprinted from Ray p. 27*

The irony, however, is that in 1921, as Rodia deliberated over which property to buy, there was no action whatsoever at this barren intersection in Beverly Hills. The property next to the railroad track in Watts had much more going for it. It had already been ten years since Watts had been advertised as “The Hub of the Universe,” boasting a most extraordinary, four-track electrical line connecting “Los Angeles and Long Beach, Los Angeles and San Pedro, Newport, Huntington Beach and Balboa” (Ray pp. 26-27). So Rodia knew exactly what he was doing in terms of public exposure. He chose the location for his towers in view of their visibility. 107<sup>th</sup> Street in Watts ran exactly east-west between the two main train tracks moving north to Los Angeles proper; and the towers were well in sight of the other two tracks (see the diagram as well as the photo below). Outsider and marginalized immigrant though he was, Rodia wanted his towers to be seen.

His construction was thus intrinsically related to the geo-dynamics of the train. It shifted the commuters' and workers' vector — the motion in which they were taken — from horizontal to vertical. The towers offset the travelers' lateral movement, on tracks clinging to the earth, by way of a different set of tracks reaching up to the sky, converging at a paradoxically pointless point. Not only did these sleepy commuters have to ask themselves what the towers were all about; they also had to face up, however subconsciously, to the contrast between these static, inexplicable ascensions and their own plotted out, horizontal projects.<sup>8</sup>



*THE WATTS TOWERS are at center, between the two railroad tracks turning north to approach Watts' 103<sup>rd</sup> St. Station. Courtesy of The Benjamin and Gladys Thomas Air Photo Archives (Fairchild Collection).*

Since 1975, when they were donated by the Committee to the City of Los Angeles, the towers have turned Watts into a permanent, if not entirely welcome, presence on the stage of the larger metropolis.<sup>9</sup> In them, the politically repressed, South Central LA, pierces the city's surface. Despite the changes that this district has been through since Rodia lived there from the 1920s to the mid-1950s, the towers have remained Watts' abiding symbol. In the Sixties, they became the site of the oldest community art center in America, and they are currently the location of two annual music festivals. They are one of only a half-dozen National Historic Landmarks in Los Angeles. In short, the attention the towers have drawn to themselves over these years is simultaneously an attention to the broader precinct of Watts. And it is probably inevitable that the interests of the two should sometimes be at odds, especially considering how few funds Los Angeles directs towards Watts and how great a portion of these funds is earmarked for the preservation and upkeep of the towers. According to circumstance, the relationship between the towers and the neighborhood varies from conflictual to harmonious. In any event it is fatefully symbiotic, each element drawing attention to or away from the other in a syndrome of co-dependence (Schrank 2009).

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<sup>8</sup> In *The Towers* we can observe Rodia bending his steel rails into semi-circles by prying them under the railroad tracks and pulling upwards. This additional function of the tracks lends a twist to Paul A. Harris's suggestive reading of *nuestro pueblo* as Deleuzian "folding architecture" (where the inside of a structure incorporates its outside).

<sup>9</sup> On the implications and vicissitudes of the towers' relationship to the municipal politics of Los Angeles, see the recent studies of Schrank. On the history and cultural politics of Watts see Whiteson, Ray, and Sides.



Photo by Matthew E. Cohen

Thus do the towers perform a powerful rhetorical function. They become acts of invocation, calling from one place to another, perforating the other space with their spires. They inaugurate discourse, continually and reiteratively. In the beginning, their interlocutor was not greater Los Angeles, but the immediate surroundings of Watts. And when Rodia lived there in the Twenties and Thirties, the district had a different demographic. More multiethnic, it was inhabited by a solid working class, made up predominantly of whites, but with a sizeable number of Mexicans and Blacks and some Japanese. Hardly any of these immigrants were Italian like Rodia. Both before and after the towers began their uncomfortable symbiosis with the more monolithic community of postwar Watts (which has changed again, becoming more Latino than African American) *Nuestro Pueblo* was distinctly different

from its neighborhood in form, style, intent, and meaning.<sup>10</sup> Put otherwise, these towers have always enacted a gesture of otherness, in a prime instance of what, in the early Seventies, Roger Cardinal dubbed outsider art.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Calvin Trillin, one of the first journalists to report responsibly on the towers, began the second of his two articles for *The New Yorker* by noting that it is not at all ironic, but rather appropriate and exemplary, that these towers stand in Watts — for their entire history is one of “not fitting in” (December 4, 1971, p. 136). Six years earlier, he had already seen the structures as presenting “the aspect of a world that has no relation to the drab row of bungalows across the street” (May 29, 1965, p. 77). Analogously, the critic Beardsley argues that vernacular art environments like the Watts Towers always bear witness to that “uneasy relationship between the individual and the community” which is one of America’s “deepest social paradoxes” (p. 189). At the same time Rodia’s sculpture was also an offering, reaching over to fellow immigrants and denizens of Watts by way of the *nuestro* preceding the *pueblo*.

<sup>11</sup> Cardinal’s influential idea of outsider art (1972) grew out of reflection on the collections and criticism of *art brut* by the French painter Jean Dubuffet (who incidentally went on to declare the Watts Towers “the greatest work of art in America” and Rodia “more important than Matisse.” Rose 1974). Dubuffet’s specific criteria for *art brut*, according to Cardinal, were that “[t]he artist shall be innocent of pictorial influences and perfectly untutored; he shall be socially nonconformist, even to the point of diverging violently from the psychological norm [. . .] and he shall not cater for a public” (Cardinal 1978, p. 2). In motivation and objective the work of such outsiders is thus always in some sense “without precedent,” certainly more so than that of official artists (even if *not* without influence). Despite the basic soundness of the idea of outsider artist, the scholar-artist team Dal Lago and Giordano understandably denounce its moral and aesthetic consequences. The very notion isolates creators like Rodia “outside” the reputedly pure and institutionally controlled frames of art: outside the same frames that embrace the likes of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, who were no less eccentric than Rodia. Erika Doss gives a culturally more local spin on Rodia, reading him in terms of Greil Marcus’s image of the American artist as a fixated, underground figure, a radical, unconventional individualist committed to an “invisible republic.” For Beardsley *nuestro pueblo* is a symbolically alternative Los Angeles — a walled compound shutting out the world in order to rise above it, or voyage imaginatively beyond it. Analogously perhaps, for Teresa Fiore, Dal Lago, and Giordano, Rodia’s ship-shaped lot is a “heterotopia.” It shows “resistance to assimilation into the American mainstream” and “reverses the subjugation of the exploited immigrant construction

From the start, the towers marked a stylistic *écart*, a deviation, a difference within an environment already marked by social and ethnic difference. Within the walls of Rodia's *pueblo* one entered a recreated, imaginative, other-worldly space. We cannot discount the fact that he built them with only his own two hands and rudimentary tools; that he appeared to his neighbors as often curmudgeonly and even nuts; that by the 1950s, when the neighborhood had changed and Sam decided to leave, economic and social tensions had led boys to pelt his sculptures with rocks.

Giving free rein to his rants, Landler and Byer's film has the virtue of richly dramatizing the polemical, philosophical, and anarchistic outsider that Rodia was. And the rants have an obsessively consistent theme: *How America has degenerated*. No attempt that I know of has been made to link Rodia's worldview, as it comes across in the 1950s and 1960s, to the towers that he built. Yet we are well aware that in the case of most so-called outsider artists (and the nineteenth-century bohemians that preceded them), their strident anti-establishmentarianism of opinion is inextricable from the creative acts for which they are admired. There is no sense in dividing these autonomous and eccentric figures into two separate persons — the first an ingenious craftsman and the second a quack.<sup>12</sup>



*Photo by Thomas Harrison*

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worker" (Fiore 2004, p. 36). However that may be, this particular heterotopic space is still tied to a collectivity (*nuestro pueblo*) and is thus not altogether separate and "other." The assembled sculpture embodies "both church spire and the modern skyscraper and the stalagmites, both a cactus garden and apartment buildings rising up from the ground" (Cándida Smith 31); it incorporates and refashions features of modern urbanism and of the community in which it stands, embracing not only strong characteristics of Rodia's own heritage in southern Italy (Sheldon and Ward) but also some of his Mexican neighbors.

<sup>12</sup> Nor does it make sense to divorce the towers, in style, form, and intention, from that "veritable Tower of Babel" that the elderly Rodia said the United States had become (*I Build the Tower*). An interview and article from 1951 quotes Rodia calling *his own work* a Tower of Babel (Langsner 25). In that respect its heterotopic space would be an "immanent critique" (an internal reversal) of the culture he observed around him. Furthermore, interviews with Rodia in Martinez strongly suggest that the construction of the towers served as an act of atonement for him, even if it remained unclear just what he had to atone for (he was always drunk, he says on various occasions; he was not good to his children and wife, whom he abandoned; he buried his wife under the towers, he tells a German magazine in the early 1950s (Goldstone and Goldstone 39); he was given to having brawls with drawn knife, reports Sam's none too friendly brother-in-law in Martinez; he may even have killed a man). Whatever his wound, Rodia implies that he was expiating himself in building these towers. You are "either good good good or bad bad bad," he harped (*I Build the Tower*), and at some level he interpreted his towers as an effect or enactment of spiritual conversion. A sense of his struggles with inner demons is conveyed by taped interviews and written accounts of meetings that Committee members had with Rodia in the early Sixties. These are now archived

The visions, obsessions, and manias by which characters like Rodia are driven, reinforced by their marginal relationship with the culture they inhabit, are in large part *themselves* the beginnings, motivators, or inaugurators of the work that they do. What is altogether clear from the Landler-Byer documentary is how disillusioned the post-tower Rodia was about the politico-economic status of contemporary America. Short of dismissing him as a “cracker-barrel philosopher” (Langsner 25), we cannot help but reflect on how his points of view resonate with the prime concerns of anarchy, socialism, libertarianism, revolutionism, and sometimes even occult thinking. There can be little doubt that a sense of the principles and practices on which the United States were based, at least in the mind of this unassimilated immigrant — the degeneration of which principles so obsesses Rodia in his later years — were involved in his relation to the towers to begin with. And also to end with, for Sam may have stopped working on his project precisely when he no longer believed in its productiveness, its fruitfulness, the concrete possibilities of the aspirations it expresses. The cultural dereliction against which Rodia inveighs in the tapes is both embodied and battled in the towers themselves — in the manner, the materials, and the genealogy of their construction no less than in the historico-spiritual space they make their own.

Two minds of considerable distinction, Jacob Bronowski (in *The Ascent of Man*) and Buckminster Fuller (*I Build the Tower*), have hailed Rodia’s work as one of the world’s most unadulterated hymns to the dignity and freedom of pure human initiative. In their promethean gesture, the gratuitous and ingenious towers seem to signal the endless capacity and nobility of the inventive spirit. True as this is, Rodia’s work is testament to more than the spiritually irrepressible *homo faber* at the bottom of humanistic culture. His initiative inaugurates a series of material and cultural effects, beginning with the form that the work takes (towers) and its revitalization of abandoned and consumed materials. The initiative then focalizes an epochal debate about the very nature and worth of this kind of



*Photo by Jason Eppink*

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in the Department of Special Collections of the Young Research Library at the University of California at Los Angeles. Of these see especially Jeanne Morgan, “Visit to Simon Rodia in Martinez, California during September 1960” (October 17, 1960) and Letter to Mr. N. J. Goldstone by Claudio Segre (January 26, 1962), both contained in folder 1, box 1, of Collection 1388, Committee for Simon Rodia’s Towers in Watts. The tape recordings of conversations with Rodia are in folders 1 and 2 of box 5, with partial transcripts of the recordings in folder 5.

work. It bridges the art world and a particular type of urban space from which that world had so often strived to keep its distance. Many fortuitous and felicitous relations were forged by such a bridge, including connections with a world of social hopes and exclusions and disappointments that the towers referenced by their position in Watts, not to mention the civic battles with which these structures would get embroiled. There was no anticipating such beginnings from that first decision of Sam Rodia to build “something they never got ‘em in the world.” Blind as the mollusk was, a whole visual field arose from his vocation of form.

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