In Celebration of Ourselves: Seymour Rosen + SPACES Archives

This exhibition highlights two significant moments in the history of preserving and presenting artist-built environments. The first moment recognized is the pivotal exhibition *In Celebration of Ourselves*. This unprecedented exhibition opened forty years ago at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now SFMOMA) and, through the presentation of archival material, site photography, and works of art, featured a boundary-pushing view of the Californian creative spirit. Not solely focusing on art environments in the state, the exhibition and accompanying publication underscored the importance of spotting creativity in your own surroundings with categories such as homemade ads, parades, and neon signs.

The second important moment in the history of artist-built environments featured in this exhibition is the founding of SPACES Archives. Started in the late 1960s, SPACES Archives is a nonprofit organization created with an international focus on the study, documentation, and archiving of art environments and self-taught artistic activity.

Linking these two events together is the founder of SPACES and the curator of *In Celebration of Ourselves*, Seymour Rosen (1935–2006). For fifty years, Rosen tirelessly set out to legitimize, preserve, document, and protect artist-built environments. This exhibition is a tribute to his passion and the passion of so many others who seek to do the same.

About the exhibition

In 1976, Rosen set out to show museum audiences, “a magical world created from what most other people would consider junk,” and to “make available...work that looks best outside of institutional walls—with the hope that we will all take the time to do our own explorations.”

In many ways, that exhibition and the accompanying publication were game changers. It was the first exhibition of its kind for the San Francisco Museum of Art. The intent was to reflect the creative spirit in California—to Californians. Reaching far beyond the confines of art history or the institution, this exhibition showed that creativity is everywhere, if you just pay attention. Mounting *In Celebration of Ourselves* was an empowering decision, as Beth Coffert wrote in the foreward to the publication: “[Rosen] shows us that art is not what we are told it is, but what we discover or create; that art is an impulse, and instinct, and our birthright; neither masterpiece nor marble, but gestures of the spirit in the void, forming the characters and symbols of the language of life itself.” Comprising both Rosen’s extensive photography and related art objects from various sites around the state, the exhibition included categories such as shaped buildings, parades, county fairs, and graffiti and markers.
The exhibition featured many prominent Californian art environments that exist to this day, including Grandma Prisbrey’s “Bottle Village” in Simi Valley and Simon Rodia’s “Watts Towers” in Los Angeles. It also included photography of sites that are no longer standing, such as Sanford Darling’s “House of 1,000 Paintings” in Santa Barbara and Calvin Black’s “Possum Trot” in the Mojave Desert.

About SPACES Archives and Seymour Rosen
Jo Farb Hernández, SPACES Director since 2006

“There is something out there.”

With these words, Seymour Rosen (1935–2006), founding director of the nonprofit organization SPACES, helped to introduce the world to the genre of art environments—a genre that has become broadly recognized, respected, and the subject of numerous exhibitions, films, articles, and books. The need for an organization to document and mobilize support for art environments was identified in the U.S. as early as the late 1950s, when a group of concerned citizens fought to save Sabato Rodia’s Towers in the Watts section of Los Angeles; however SPACES was not formally organized until 1969. It achieved its official nonprofit status in 1978.

Born in Chicago, photographer and documentarian Seymour Rosen came to Los Angeles as a teenager with his family, and found his life’s work after his brother brought him back a camera when he returned from his military deployment in Germany. He wrote that “the ‘50s [were] a perfect time for a youngster of seventeen to come to Los Angeles,” and he expressed how invigorated he was by the “novel forms of creativity” he discovered there.

Rosen informally apprenticed to the noted photographer Marvin Rand, who had been photographing Sabato Rodia’s Towers, among other subjects, and suggested that Rosen try to photograph them himself. At his first attempt, Rosen walked around and around, finally snapped three photographs, and then gave up. Remembering this occasion later, he described his surrender to the Towers’ intensity as “falling in love.” Seduced by their beauty and undaunted by their complexity, he was to return again and again for fifty more years, and his photographs of the Towers have become some of the most iconic—as well as historically valuable—images ever made of these spectacular constructions.

In many ways Rosen was a most unlikely candidate for either parenting the institutionalization of a genre or amassing and archiving the tens of thousands of documents, photographs, and ephemera associated with it. Nevertheless, he pursued legitimizing, preserving, documenting, and protecting these arts for some fifty years.
Rosen approached the world holistically, and the tremendous range of material included in SPACES’s Archives reflects this approach; although the bulk of the collection focuses on art environments, it also includes significant sections on other widely diverse expressions of human artistic activity. Today, under the direction of curator, author, and professor Jo Farb Hernández, the organization continues to focus on its mission to:

IDENTIFY large-scale art environments and other publicly-accessible, self-taught artistic activities; DOCUMENT these artworks through a wide range of visual and audio records; COLLECT publications and ancillary information about these works; and ADVOCATE for their preservation.

Perhaps SPACES’s most vital service is to provide vintage documentation of destroyed art environments for a variety of preservation and research projects. Priorities as the organization moves forward include the following infrastructural, organizational, and programmatic goals:

RESEARCH: to fill gaps in the photo and document collections as well as to identify, conduct primary research on, and document newly identified sites; ARCHIVING: to upgrade maps and databases, digitize photographs and collection materials, and migrate antiquated resources to new formats; DISSEMINATION: to publish data and research via online and traditional media organs, curate exhibitions, and consult with individual researchers and community groups; and ADVOCACY: to produce model guidelines, criteria, and field survey forms for comprehensive site documentation and preservation.

The material housed in SPACES Archives documents the often ephemeral acts and expressions created by those who may not self-identify as artists but who produce a range of idiosyncratic and compelling creations. These works, taken together, paint a picture of an occasionally enigmatic, often humorous, and always evocative world, in Rosen’s words, of “magic and wonder.”