CURATING COMPONENTS OF ART ENVIRONMENTS
By Karen Patterson, curator

Unlike traditional modes of art making, i.e., a solo artist working alone in their studio striving for commercial success and art world recognition, artists who build art environments use a place—frequently a domestic setting—as a site for artistic inquiry. Whether as a means of political activism, spiritual healing, community outreach, or a private sense of joy, every art environment is built for different reasons. They can range in meaning, scale, or material; however, they share a role as being a visual record and intimate expression of history and place.

Often art environments are a result of a cumulative process wherein many components are amassed and altered to form an immersive experience. More than the sum of their parts, art environments are not merely “site specific;” they are “life specific,” with clear aspects of the artist’s biography, access to material, and relationship to the surrounding community.

Relocated elements of art environments offer curators interesting challenges. My instinct is to accept and respect that the original context has been lost. Rather than pretend that a site can exist naturally in a museum setting, I acknowledge that the move from the site to the museum is part of the art environment’s ongoing reality. It is my job to keep the story going.

And with this, I try to walk the line of re-creating and evoking, of museum display and evolving narrative. Of hinting and not explaining. For THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED, I also wanted to make sure our audience knew just how multifaceted art environments are and how relevant this field of art making is to our contemporary society.

At the same time, I am interested in how multidimensional and inclusive the art world has become. Artists, curators, and cultural workers of all kinds have expanded the boundaries of art and acknowledged contributions and interests from many cultures and communities. Our understanding of art is no longer bound to traditional aesthetics but centers on significant ideas, topics, and themes. Now more than ever, there is need for a plurality of voices, perspectives, and programs.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED responded to that need. Although it centered on the JMKAC collection of art environments, the series’ design was highly collaborative and included a variety of viewpoints. Because these works intersect with so many aspects of contemporary art—identity, place, site specificity, materiality, spirituality, architecture—we were excited about taking this interdisciplinary and open approach. This series really focused on the inherent qualities of art environments that have yet to be discussed. And although the responses were varied, we kept to one question: how do we bring the audience closer to the site?
Bringing someone into your collection and letting them respond to the works intuitively and without boundaries is not typical for a museum. Here are introductions to a few of the many collaborators who helped make the 2017 exhibition series a success.

Dr. Iain Jackson is deputy head of architecture, BA director of studies, and senior lecturer at the University of Liverpool, with an emphasis in the history of architecture in colonial/postcolonial nations and the notion of Modernism in India. Dr. Jackson conducted his PhD research on Nek Chand’s “Rock Garden of Chandigarh.” His expertise informed the design of the exhibition THE WORLD IN A GARDEN, which included his own site drawings and documentation.

Faythe Levine is an artist, author, filmmaker, and curator widely credited with articulating the rise of the DIY craft movement. Levine engaged with the work of Levi Fisher Ames and Albert Zahn by illustrating the title wall with her reflections on artist-built environments she has visited. She also invited artists Norma Jeanne Maloney and Stacey Rozich to participate in the exhibition FOLK & FABLE.

Jonathan Frederick Walz is director of curatorial affairs and curator of American art at The Columbus Museum. His expertise is in American Modernism and supporting diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism in art and history. Walz worked with Brazilian artist Gê Orthof in responding to Eddie Owens Martin’s “Pasaquan” site in Georgia, with an original installation for PASAQUOYANISM.

Shannon Stratton is the William and Mildred Lasdon Chief Curator at the Museum of Arts and Design, NYC. With interests in fiber/material studies, regionalism, art activism, and craft, Stratton brought ideas of materiality and atmosphere to the presentation of Emery Blagdon’s “Healing Machine” in AN ENCOUNTER WITH PRESENCE.

In addition, Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe, a time-based artist, created a sound environment employing Harry Bertoia's Sonambient sculptures and Blagdon's Healing Machine components.

Jennifer Joy Jameson, a folklorist and cultural organizer, documents the ways culture shapes creativity. She directed the Folk and Traditional Arts program at the Mississippi Arts Commission from 2014–17 and now works with the Alliance for California Traditional Arts in Los Angeles. In THE MAKING OF A DREAM, Jameson underscored the community impact of Loy Bowlin’s “Beautiful Holy Jewel Home” with oral histories, archival materials, photography, and ephemera collected from community residents.