

No Rhyme or Reason: The Whimsicality of Folk Art Environments

When Loy Bowlin died in 1995, the small house where he had lived in McComb, Mississippi was saved from demolition by an art collector, systematically dismantled piece-by-piece, and then later acquired by the Kohler Foundation. Though relatively banal on its exterior, the specialness of the house's interior was betrayed by its sparkling exterior trim—Bowlin had spent the last two decades of his life bedazzling the interior of the house (decoration that eventually leaked onto the exterior facade), filling every possible surface with bold display.

Walls and ceilings were brightly painted, layered with construction paper, and encrusted with rhinestones, glitter, sequins, and holiday ornaments (among other things). Referred to as the *Beautiful Holy Jewel Home*, the house's excessive adornment was guided by a construction process of abstract and adventurous enthusiasm. Incorrect by traditional architectural standards, Bowlin's house, like many American folk art environments, exhibits a less conventional and unique stance on the built environment. Folk builders like Bowlin generate environments packed with aesthetic novelty, cleverness, and material ingenuity without professional architectural prowess nor disciplinary investment, guided instead by inspiration and compositional impulse—in short, *whim*.

Conducting research in 2015–2016 through a university grant we looked to folk art environments to deeply examine the efficiencies, complexities, and techniques latent in folk art protocols. By studying these works, the research hopes to compliment and provoke new understandings of the potential of whim within a contemporary design agenda and toolset. As a general thread between all projects that were analyzed, the environments generally did not concern themselves with the specifics of intention. They were not built based on explicit instructions or plans nor a communication from idea to action. The construction in most cases was the result of inadvertent improvisation and eccentricity, most of which was driven by a divine spirit or in service a higher power and often without the privileged knowledge of the larger motive.

The notions of spontaneity and improvisation are not unknown in the building process. At a basic level, any project of significant scale and length of time has dealt with the need for unplanned or impulsive decisions by contractor and architect (problematic field conditions, resource scarcity, change in aesthetic preference...). Many informal communities, such as favelas or gecekondu, produce structures from materials and technologies at hand, crafting an expedient functional structure from any means necessary and without grander intentions. In the 1970s Charles Jencks hypothesized an ad hoc manifesto applauding the improvisational aesthetic produced by the amalgamation of several systems and parts.¹ His Adhocism is tethered to an idea of expressing the heterogeneous subparts and systems that

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expedite and create the overall functionality. Even modular architecture, whether the crystal palace or pre-fab designer homes, has the ability to absorb improvisational changes and re-arrangements as desired.

However, what is unique about most folk art structures is an unapologetic blind exuberance and enthusiasm for the built environment and what it represents. Some critics have even categorized such projects as being guided by a process of pleasure building rather than shelter building.² While many projects in this category appear materially resourceful and possess a mongrel beauty, the improvisation at work is not necessarily that of Adhocism nor the simply informal. These artists and builders engage their projects not only without typical construction drawings, but also without specific ideas for formal, material, and visual effects. Instead they deploy an unfettered ingenuity based on the vagaries of immediate emotional impulses. By virtue of their whimsicality, these projects dismiss ideals of the contemporary architecture project such as elegance (beauty), order, and geometric intricacy, in favor of charm, incongruity, and strange craftsmanship. In particular, a closer examination of such whimsical projects puts pressure on the established tenants of the design process.

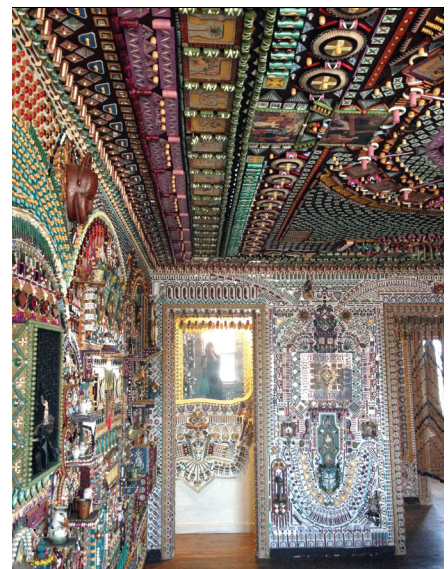
SUPERFICIAL

Whim requires ease, accessibility, and expediency. The surface as a medium for visual effects has the least inertia—it can be painted, repainted, adorned, glued to, scraped off, or covered up easily (and inexpensively). So it is no surprise that the superficial is paramount in folk art projects, generating rich considerations for the role of the cosmetic surface. The projects of our research develop compelling cosmetic effects through the use of common and cheap material—bright color (paint), reflection (glass, metal and mirror), sparkle (rhinestones, glitter), and textural relief (stucco, bottles, tires, ceramic tile, wood scraps, stones, found objects). This application of the surface defies the balance and precision of ornament as well as the “schizo-control” of the contemporary cosmetic.³ These folk art environments leverage the surface as the aesthetic way into charming others, saturating it with nonthreatening familiarity and creating appeal through quirky and clumsy visual attitude.

Salvation Mountain (Fig 1–2: Niland, California), constructed from 1984–2012 by the late Leonard Knight, is a fifty foot tall vibrant landform project in the California desert heavily

Figure 1: Leonard Knight, *Salvation Mountain*, Niland, California. Front view.

Figure 2: Leonard Knight, *Salvation Mountain*. Surface detail.



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reliant on paint as a visual messenger. Words, patterns (ex. stripes forming a “waterfall”), and symbols have been painted and repainted at Knight’s whim over the decades he built the structure. According to Knight, over 100,000 gallons of paint has been used to preserve the structure (and more since his death in 2014). While the result is a patchwork of fantastical colors and textures, the paint dually functions as a necessary and intentional binding agent for the fragile dirt and hay monument.⁴ Due to its innumerable coats over the last few decades, the paint is both structural as well as cosmetic.

Environments like *Salvation Mountain* exhibit a relentless enthusiasm through the surface, emphasizing the superficial’s role not simply for visual effects but also in delineating boundaries. In the most basic sense, many of these folk art environments do not distinguish interiors, exteriors, floors, walls, ceilings, thresholds, and doors from one another in their continuity of graphics, ornamentation, and finish treatments. The interior of the *Taya Doro Mitchell House* (Fig 3–4: Oakland, California) consists of uninterrupted surfaces adorned with uncountable amounts of small objects glued to the walls of the interior of the house. These objects were affixed in moments of geometric intention and filled in between without specific strategy, at the artist’s whim.⁵ The attachments range from found objects (pencils, plastic spoons, wine bottle corks, paper clips) to scrap materials (wood, mirror, tile), which together flow in a continuous interior wrapper from wall to ceiling, from wall to door, and even wrapping thresholds in openings between rooms. Further, the idea of the decorated surface is amplified significantly by the fact that each object in the main rooms (living and dining) have been individually painted with colored patterns. This micro level of painted cosmetics becomes an extension of the building’s interior surfaces significantly multiplying the amount of surface area available for coloration and pattern.

EXCESS

In a climate of design that may embrace the over-calibration of parameters or esoteric systems, the value of whim is its ability to induce a playful and unfettered approach to design. A consequence of whimsicality is that much of the project is unedited and left saturated with visual and formal information, exhibiting an unapologetic propensity for excess—resulting in what Sylvia Lavin might refer to as a kind of “clutter euphoria” of visual language.⁶ Many of the projects of our research use an uninhibited degree of visual information such as text,

Figure 3: Taya Doro Mitchell, *Taya Doro Mitchell House*, Oakland, California. Living room ceiling detail.

Figure 4: Taya Doro Mitchell, *Taya Doro Mitchell House*. Living room.



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symbols, patterns, and colors as they work through the desired effects, while others have a penchant for excessive tectonic systems, using innumerable parts and construction material, often recycled, cheap (or free), and easily procured items (ie. bottles, cans, rebar etc.). *Prophet Isaiah's Second Coming House* (Fig 5–6: Niagara Falls, New York) utilizes an overabundance of painted wood elements to generate an excessive thickened exterior facade. The facade of the house is vibrantly and irrepressibly adorned with colored and patterned wood planes, crosses, and panels so that, according to Isaiah, it may perform as a beacon for spirits as they are thrust toward Niagara Falls during the Second Coming of Christ.⁷ The density of painted surfaces is such that it must be layered from the garage and house (set back from the sidewalk) all the way to the street. This excess produces a rich and energetic building front that is thick, inhabitable, and experientially compelling. Excess becomes the mechanism for engagement.

Perhaps the excess of folk art environments is the material manifestation of the emotional expression of the artist-builders. Many of the environments are produced by artists with inclinations for spirituality, exuberant joy, and an interest to connect. The whimsicality of excess here stems from this emotional centerpoint, privileging sentimentality and delight. In his *Defense of Sentimentality*, Robert Solomon writes that sentimentality often connotes ideas of “too much.”⁸ In addition to deploying “too much” of a particular object or material in excessive accumulation or layering, the projects are embedded with an oversaturation of emotional language. They are life size kitsch creations with a stronger interest in relatability and engagement than any overarching disciplinary agenda.

CRAFT

The notion of whim is of an erratic, emotional, and fleeting nature, often creating inappropriate moments in its wake. In contrast to both historical and contemporary notions of architectural detail, the design of impulse naturally produces architectural environments that don't consider craft as an act of precision and clarity, but rather as an act of expression and production. Material is often misunderstood, misused, or imperfectly assembled in the momentum of caprice. Environments like *Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village* (Simi Valley,

Figure 5: Isaish Henry Robertson, *Prophet Isaiah's Second Coming House*. Niagara Falls, New York. Detail.

Figure 6: Isaish Henry Robertson, *Prophet Isaiah's Second Coming House*. Street view.

California), *Watts Towers* (Los Angeles, California), and *Howard Finster's Paradise Gardens* (Summerville, Georgia) all use unconventional and often repurposed elements in unusual ways to construct their environments. Whether bottles as bricks or license plates as cladding, these projects produce visual novelty by allowing the presence of a construct to take precedent over the tidiness of its material logic.

The order and neatness that is paramount to craftsmanship in professional architecture takes a backseat to the impulse and fancy of these builders. *Salvation Mountain* does not concern itself with neatness and precision—the painting is splattered, drippy, and clumpy at times, lines are inconsistent and imperfect, and the stucco material is loosely adjoined with the presence of hand still clearly visible. Imperfection in craft is a consistent and compelling quality here—by virtue of allowing the craft to be guided by whim, and therefore to be imperfect, even clumsy, the environment develops a new level of engagement and charm. Unlike the beautiful and elegant intentions of contemporary digital works, these projects are messy, quirky, cute, and interesting. They engage users by tapping into sensibilities found in consumer products less concerned with artistic beauty than they are with emotional resonance, or at least sympathy. The craft is questionable and visually fragile, and the true feat of each project is amplified by its ability to show how unlikely it was to exist. These environments challenge the idea that craft should be considered precious and absolute, and advocate for a captivating looseness.

Similar to the shift in aesthetic quality of their craft, methodology of constructing and working with material is also somewhat altered. *Sea Ranch Chapel* (Sea Ranch, California), designed by artist and architect James T. Hubbell is perhaps a middle ground between the whim of folk-building and the control of mainstream architecture, given that Hubbell's techniques and sensibilities don't align with conventional principles even if his qualifications do. One of the most interesting aspects of the construction process for this project was Hubbell's mandate to the building team—he requested that material should not be forced into pre-conceived locations but instead located through a process of trial and error until the proper placement was found.⁹ This notion—that there was no rigid and precise logic for organization, nor drawings to refer to, that the composition was fluid and could fluctuate without specific parameters—was the antithesis of much of contemporary architect's relationship with the digital. Here, like in many of the outsider projects of our research, the process was unscripted, privileging the holistic aesthetic of accumulated material as much as any notion of assembly.

The folk art environments of America are far from unified in their purpose, look, or ability to resonate with both authors and visitors. Yet when mined for a similar DNA, many of their builders share an unbridled interest in simply creating something. Evident in the desire to create is a reliance on whim—an unpredictable energy that forces an interesting deflection from our current understanding of aesthetics, atmosphere, and construction. By naively letting impulse drive decisions, the traditional grammar and vocabulary of contemporary architecture is cleared and new design opportunities emerge.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation*. 1972. Reprint. The MIT Press, 2013.
2. Esther McCoy, "Piecing together Los Angeles: An Esther McCoy Reader," edited by Susan Morgan, East of Borneo, 2012, pg. 264
3. This language and notion of ornament and cosmetic refers to Jeffrey Kipnis's description in "The Cunning of Cosmetics (A Personal Reflection on the Architecture of Herzog & de Meuron" in *Constructing a New Agenda: Architectural Theory 1993–2009*. edited by A. Krista Sykes, Princeton Architectural, 2010.
4. Described on the official website for Salvation Mountain in "The Mountain," accessed September 9, 2015, <http://www.salvationmountain.us/history.html>
5. Story of the Taya Doro Mitchell House is described in Jo Fab Hernandez's "Taya Doro Mitchell: Art of Healing," *Raw Vision*, 7, Winter 2010/2011, pg. 40-45
6. Lavin, Sylvia, "Architecture in Extremis", *Log 22: The Absurd* (Spring / Summer 2011): 51-61.
7. Isaiah Henry Robertson, verbal description to author, May 26, 2015.
8. Robert C. Solomon, *In Defense of Sentimentality*, Oxford University Press, 2004.
9. Timothy Carpenter, "The Sea Ranch Chapel," *Fine Homebuilding Magazine* 64 (December/January 1990/1991): pg 50-53. Timothy was the foreman on the project and recounts the construction process.