

LA WEEKLY

LA People 2009: Urban Redeveloper — Edgar Arceneaux

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Our spiny, spiky, Gaudí-by-way-of-L.A. landmark, the Watts Towers, represent an extreme, experimental way of working, rising and falling in the hands of Simon Rodia as he tested out radical ideas in rebar and concrete. “The best story comes from Charlie Mingus,” says artist Edgar Arceneaux, 37. “He said that one day there would be a two-story tower built, and the next day it would be gone.” That improvisational spirit is ever-present in Arceneaux’s Watts House Project, an artist- and volunteer-driven urban redevelopment project focused on revitalizing the row of single-story bungalows opposite Rodia’s sculptures, and the neighborhood beyond.



“Rodia was here for 35 years operating an active worksite — an open studio — and that informs our approach,” Arceneaux says. “We emphasize the ‘work’ part of this artwork.”

Raised in South L.A., West Covina and Pasadena, and of late a rising star (with a solo show at the Studio Museum in Harlem and last year’s Whitney Biennial under his belt), Arceneaux found an inspiration for his Watts Towers project in artist Rick Lowe, whose Project Row Houses in Houston transformed 22 abandoned shotgun houses into an art colony. He collaborated with Lowe on a version of the project for Watts from 1999 to 2007 but in 2008 the project took on new life, fueled by a fund-raiser at LAX ART and a community meeting that activated the neighbors.

“The thing that distinguishes this as art is what we attribute meaning and value to,” Arceneaux says.

“Our aesthetic choices are made not from how we want something to look, but how we want something to feel.” He sits on the curb across the street with artist Alexandra Lange as she shows her proposal for the brown bungalow next door to the Madrigals’.

Along with an addition to accommodate more children moving in, and a sustainability overhaul, a sculpture of the word “Love” will be installed on the roof in a collaboration with the owners — who just happened to be roofers. Lange made a mini version of the “Love” into a necklace that will be sold to raise funds for the house, adding to the \$100,000-plus Arceneaux has raised so far. He estimates he’ll need at least \$600,000 more to transform all 18 homes on the block.

On the other side of the Madrigal home, Rosa Gutierrez stands proudly before a mural of flower-power blossoms that covers the exterior of her house. (“It’s like The Simpsons,” she says of the color palette.) With a coy smile, she admits that she likes it when tourists come to take photos of the towers, then turn around to snap shots of her house.

“Rosa and at least two of her kids could have gone to art school,” Arceneaux says. “She’s our idea person.”

Friends had warned Gutierrez against moving into the house two years ago, but now, she says, “I walk with more confidence. If it wasn’t for Edgar, it would just be a regular neighborhood. Now I think it will spread. If we got this going, maybe the whole Watts area will be a better place. People will say, ‘I want to live there.’ ”