

Watts House Project: art meets architecture near the Towers

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/arts/la-ca-watts2-2008nov02.0.7393094.story>

An artist's vision for the neighborhood surrounding the famed landmark is taking shape from the ground up.

By Lynell George
November 2, 2008

It's so hot that the heat doesn't hang, it shimmers. And though Edgar Arceneaux tends toward the pragmatic, even he has to stop and question whether he's staring at a mirage.

Standing in the tilting, lacy shadow of Simon Rodia's venerable Watts Towers (once again wrapped in scaffolding for repair), Arceneaux looks on as a group of college students -- young men and women; white, black, Asian, Latin; some from USC, others UCLA, and still others from Cal Arts and Art Center -- have set to work in front of a modest, cream-colored stucco bungalow on 107th Street. This is the home of Felix and Maria Madrigal -- and brick-one of the Watts House Project.

A couple of dozen folks run in and out of the Madrigal's house, some in flip-flops and Bermuda shorts eagerly checking in on their assignment, some on their first trip to Watts. In all the commotion, Arceneaux, 36, a young artist on the rise, is difficult to miss. It isn't his height, 6-foot-2; it's his presence. He moves as languidly as his voice -- calm, unmodulated and seldom rising above a murmur. [More](#)

He settles on the porch in a folding chair next to Susan Yank, head project coordinator, running down the lengthy to-do list before the official groundbreaking, set to happen in mere hours.

A few of the students pile into a car to pick up more clay tiles for the front walkway. Another group gets a primer on how to set up scaffolding. And a trio of students begin to dig a deep trench for a new fence.

The plan is to rethink the Madrigal home based on their needs, their habits, their dreams. This means a new front walk, porch and light fixture -- all reimagined with an artist's eye. The most dramatic addition is to build out the porch, giving the Madrigals more space. A model for things to come.

It's been a long time coming -- a decade in the making -- which contributes to a measure of Arceneaux's disbelief. Especially in a place like Los Angeles, which often puts more credence in the region's myths than the realities.

What Arceneaux has been up against is more pernicious: It's those other sorts of myths, misconceptions -- about race, about class, "about us and them, black and brown divided" -- that have had him both working double-time and kept him on course.

What is Watts? What does Watts need? And what does Watts deserve? These have been among the hard questions Arceneaux, with the help of residents, hopes to answer. To the outside world, Watts is many things: code, a euphemism, a one-word cautionary tale. "It's a place that everybody thinks they know about but are afraid to go to," says Arceneaux. "And this project offers a chance for people to come together and build something collectively."

Off the ground

After dozens of community meetings, fundraisers, late-night porch talks and a trip to buy a foreclosed property at auction, this first chapter of Arceneaux's venture -- a grand-scale collaboration involving local artists and the city's major arts and educational institutions, as well as residents -- is finally beyond the drawing board phase. Based on artist Rick Lowe's Houston development, Project Row Houses, the Watts House Project (WHP) -- part conceptual art, part activism -- is a mission that Arceneaux, its director, describes as "an artwork in the shape of a neighborhood development."

At the moment, his medium looks like many old streets in L.A., those elder neighborhoods that have eluded the nip-and-tuck of assembly-line gentrification. Here stands a row of bungalows, some stucco, others with their original wood, some fronted by neat lawns, or gardens tangled with succulents or bright splashes of bottle brush. Down the street, on this September afternoon, two neighbors watch under the harsh sun; another, down the block, is trimming a tree as carefully sculpted as a bonsai. Some windows concealed by bars are the only hints of anything untoward.

Much of the project is about just this: the nuances. It's what gets lost in the overview: the day-in, day-out stories of a section of L.A. that has seldom had a chance to define itself for itself -- let alone to the world. To this end, Arceneaux wants to fold together the history of the neighborhood alongside the stories of its residents, pairing artists with architects, creativity with practicality. He hopes to get to all 20 structures on 107th Street -- refurbishing four a year for the next five years -- and expand to create exhibition spaces, cafes, gardens and artists residences. "Instead of using clay, we're using time and space to sculpt a neighborhood and relationships."

While it isn't lost on Arceneaux that his project sits in the shadow of one of the more famous monuments to the quixotic, his ground-up approach is what has attracted vital support from L.A.'s arts community. LAXART, a Culver City-based nonprofit contemporary art exhibition space, has taken WHP under its wing. The project has received funding from the nonprofit Creative Capital and UCLA's Hammer Museum, and support from USC's School of Architecture, the Watts Towers Arts Center and the interdisciplinary producer ForYourArt. "It's crucial to explore ways for artists to work outside the gallery walls," says ForYourArt founder Bettina Korek, "and in this case, enhance community resources." Of the estimated \$1 million they need for the work on 107th Street, they've brought in \$85,000.

Easing concerns

For all the good intentions, Arceneaux has come against roadblocks and suspicions. Homeowners worry if it's another city plan to lop off a piece of their backyard for a parking lot. Some community leaders balk, apprehensive that it might be some hidden agenda wrapped in altruism: "A lot of it," says Arceneaux, "has been convincing the surrounding Watts community that the intentions are noble and progressive . . ."

"[People] go to meetings and listen to promises," says Felix and Maria's son, Oscar Madrigal, 30, who still lives nearby. "But 'Nothing ever comes through.' 'When will we see tangible results?' So he hasn't had it easy."

Paired with this is a general skepticism of outsiders -- much of it a reaction to how the outside looks in, says Municipal Art Gallery director Mark Greenfield, who worked as director at the Watts Towers Art Center: "I'd get these calls from a university. And it would be some sort of anthropological thing where they would treat people in Watts like laboratory animals -- 'How many kids did drugs?' 'How many kids in gangs?' So I think a lot of distrust began to develop."

So if the "medium" is the built environment, Arceneaux's essential tools are these volunteers, designers, residents and people who can be described only as neighborhood griots who have witnessed Watts' changes -- people like Felix Madrigal, who has lived in the neighborhood for more than 20 years, or artist John Outerbridge, who served as the director of the art center for more than 30. What Outerbridge finds most noteworthy is that this endeavor honors both the history of the people and that of these hand-crafted houses. "Up until now, the story of gentrification and architectural philosophy [in Watts] didn't include this."

Arceneaux's project broadens the concept of both art and its process. "It demonstrates that art has the audacity to be anything that it needs to be."

The effort was first conceived by Rick Lowe, the mastermind behind Project Row Houses, a still-flourishing, public art project that grew up in Houston's once-crumbling Third Ward. Lowe's idea there was to rehab 22 former tenant shacks, and convert them into living -- and live-in -- works of art for the residents. It transformed the neighborhood from blemish to jewel. "These projects are a way of challenging the notion that low-income neighborhoods have to be poor neighborhoods," says Lowe.

In 1995, Lowe had attempted to create a similar project in L.A., here on 107th, as part of MOCA's "Uncommon Sense" show. "I'd visited before," says Lowe, "but this time it just became obvious to me that the symbol of the towers was significant nationally in terms [of] the black power movement." Lowe began talking to people in the area, including Greenfield, about an idea to bridge the gap between the Towers, the Art Center and the community.

It was all rooted in his belief that through reflection and dialogue, an artist-in-residency can elevate the quality of life and amplify the meaning of place. "Artists," says Lowe, "add a different kind of layering to 'development.'"

"What I started to observe was that the *residents* were potentially the best ambassadors to the neighborhood. But they weren't always treated well," says Lowe. And though it is a tourists' draw, the street lacks sufficient parking [and] it floods when it rains.

"You don't want to be at the center of things when you're not at your best." In other words, "How do you create that? How do you weave the art across the street?"

But it was a "slow drag," says Lowe, who admits, "I didn't understand the politics of L.A." On top of it he was flying between Houston and L.A. tending to both projects. "I began to understand that in order to be effective there needed to be someone there to forge that residency and anchor it -- someone from here who understood it."

Arceneaux, who now lives in Pasadena, didn't grow up in Watts but he could parse it. He'd spent part of his childhood living near Florence and Western in a neighborhood that looked and felt like this one. He understood the struggles, the particular dynamic of race and class and how it played here. So, when Lowe was ready to pass the baton, Arceneaux was there, still in art school, waiting, willing to give it a try.

At the time he'd felt more isolated than alienated at Art Center in Pasadena. As an African American artist, he'd been looking for mentors and happened to meet Lowe while he was visiting Outerbridge's studio. Seeing his work, which bridged his interests -- a visual artist who was interested in social change -- "I fell in love with what artists can do," says Arceneaux. "I told him that I wanted to be involved. Three months later, he called and said I was the only one who showed real interest."

That has been a big part of Arceneaux's success, says Greenfield -- his enthusiasm and persistence. "He was always around. He has the kind of support in the local arts community, and he's really cut through some of the bureaucracy. Sometimes it takes years for people in the community to trust you. I've seen people come down there and get beat up on emotionally. You know, 'We took our best shot.' This time, they took their best shot and he's still standing."

Wrapped up in his work

Arceneaux isn't so much standing in the thick of it, he has become a part of the weave of it -- of 107th Street, of a Watts transforming.

As afternoon bears down, Arceneaux listens as craftsman Edward Pine Stevens edges up with wood samples for the Madrigals' new front door; the interlocking pieces, Stevens says, will echo the pattern in the living room chairs, which he brought from his hometown in Mexico; and right behind him, designer Francisco Arias runs by his latest renderings. "The metaphor was that he has always opened up his home to the community," says Arias. "So I extended his living room out to the street."

Felix Madrigal studies them. Makes suggestions. He's not sure about Stevens' colors of wood for the door, not sure about the size of Arias' window. Arceneaux stands by, then quietly asks questions. It's still just the beginning of the story, Arceneaux knows.

"One of the things Rick said to me early on was: 'If the people don't want it, you shouldn't do it,' he says. "So it's taken awhile."

But who knew that he would go from student -- not much older than the crew he's now delegating duties to -- to a husband and a father of a 2 1/2 -year-old daughter. In that time he's seen the neighborhood ease from black to brown, the city swear in three mayors, and he has also been able to witness his own art career bloom (most recently with a gallery show of his drawings, sculpture and video installation, and as a participant in the California Biennale). "He's gained a reputation as a great L.A. artist outside the community base," says Lowe, "and it's great that he's been able to leverage that. . . ."

In reality those identities have buttressed each other. In fact, says Arceneaux, it's becoming like any art process: "It's moving the tiles around." This metaphorical canvas just happens to be quite a large, contested one.

"The process is reflexive. You do something and you let the work talk back to you. But," he adds, "I can't imagine a more sort of indeterminate background than Watts."

George is a former Times staff writer.