

Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Art, Migration, and World Heritage¹

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the multiple resonances of the Watts Towers, created by a visionary Italian immigrant laborer from the province of Avellino, over the span of three decades (1921-1954), within local cartographies and global migrations, contested social and urban spaces, and the relationship between art and economic development. It reviews the many meanings of the Watts Towers within the context of Italian and Italian American culture and history, as well as within the communities that have embraced, defended, and advocated for them, beginning in the mid-1950's on to the current rallying around the monument and its community arts center. Finally, it makes a case for continuing to build common ground around it locally, nationally, and globally, and concludes with the proposed candidacy of the Watts Towers as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

KEY WORDS: Rodia, Watts Towers, Nuestro Pueblo, Italian, immigrant, art, world heritage

Sam, Simon (Sabato) Rodia, an unlettered Italian immigrant from Rivottoli di Serino (province of Avellino, Campania) born in 1879, is sent to the U.S. at about the age of 14 to live in Pennsylvania with an older brother, who was to die shortly after in a mining accident. Sam goes West, marries, then abandons wife and children in Oakland (California), wanders, hoboing (through the US, Canada, Central and S. America), only to resurface in 1919 in Long Beach, southern California, having given up drinking, and with a new purpose in life. He buys a triangular plot of land in Watts, and begins to build: "something big," something "they never got 'em in the world" (Segre 1962 in Del Giudice 379).

Alone, over the span of 33 years (1921–1954), day after day, nights,

¹ This essay is, in large measure, a synthesis of writings published elsewhere, especially my contributions to the volume, *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Art, Migrations, Development* (Del Giudice); that is, "Introduction: Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Search for Common Ground"; "Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Art, Migrations, and Italian Imaginaries" and "Afterword: Personal Reflections on the Watts Towers Common Ground Initiative".

weekends and holidays, he builds multiple towers—the tallest of which is 99 ½ ft. tall, on a 14" foundation, freeform, with no scaffolding, no bolts, rivets, or welding—alongside a ship, fountains, ovens.



He surrounds his complex with assorted garden art, embedding the reinforced concrete with bits of tile, glass, pottery, and seashells, picked up on the streets, beaches, and railroad tracks. He signs his assemblage both with his initials "SR," and with his pre-industrial hand tools, and he names his monumental work in Spanish, *Nuestro Pueblo* ("our town/our people"). After suffering a stroke (a skipping LP of Enrico Caruso alerted a neighbor that something was wrong and when she came to

Figure 1: Rodia's Towers in Watts ("Nuestro Pueblo").*



Figure 2: Rodia's "signature": impression of the hand tools he used in the construction of his monumental work.

* Figures 1 and 2 are published with the permission of the author.

check in on him, found him on the floor), he deeds the Towers to a neighbor, shuts the door and walks away, never to return. He dies in Martinez, California (ca 350 miles north), in 1965, where he had family (a niece and her family) because no one should die "alone like a dog." (I imagine he was thinking of the Italian phrase: "*solo come un cane*.") (Perhaps it was Rodia's reputation for being a loner that prompted the Beatles to include his portrait on their *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album cover, right next to Bob Dylan and Karl Marx.) During the final years of his life he is discovered and goes on to become an international *cause célèbre*.

It was Bill Cartwright, a University of Southern California film student, who, after having seen a short film by Bill Hale, went looking for the Towers, only to find them (abandoned, vandalized), and buys them for \$3,000, with the intention of conserving the towers, building a custodian's house, and opening them to the public. He soon discovers, however, that they are slated for demolition. A municipal Building and Safety inspector stated that he believed they were a "public hazard," but later admits that he really thought they were just "a pile of junk." Cartwright gathers a band of friends known as the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts, and together they save the monument through an international letter-writing campaign, media blitzes, public hearings, and a stress test (devised by aerospace engineer, Norman "Bud" Goldstone). The test simulates a 10,000 lb. lateral gale force by attaching a cable to the main tower from a truck and trying to pull it down. Not only does the tower continue to stand firm, but the truck's bed is actually hoisted skyward. Soon after, though, the Committee finds itself responding to the moral dilemma of also needing to care for the community of Watts. Internal debates pitted a *pro* argument (how can you care about a monument and not about people?) against the *con* (we're not a social agency). They begin offering free art classes to neighborhood youth, which lays the foundation for the still vibrant Watts Towers Arts Center. Only a month after Rodia's death in July 1965, much of Watts is consumed in a violent uprising known as the Watts Riots or Rebellion, resulting in deaths and \$40,000,000 in damages, yet the Towers are left untouched. Still today, 50 years later, they remain untagged, as they are perceived to be a common good or at least neutral ground. The stigma around the name "Watts" however endures to our day.

By all accounts, the story of Rodia and his Towers in Watts is an extraordinary one. However, the mystery around them persists: What are they? And what do we call them? *Naïf*, outsider, *avant-garde*, visionary art or folk art? What do they mean? Was this many-masted ship conceived to take him on a long and impossible journey "home" heading eastward toward Italy? Why did he build them? As an act of atone-

ment and redemption for a misspent life? As a distant remembrance of lost landscapes?

It was a photo-portrait of the artist, as much as anything else, that stirred my own curiosity about the Watts Towers, eventually leading to the publication of the book, edited by myself (Del Giudice). His face looked so familiar to me. He could have been one of my family members. His eyes were compelling, and when I heard his heavily accented voice in the sound archives at UCLA, he sounded still more familiar. He was not a well-integrated man but constantly an immigrant outsider, a wanderer, and yet he remained deeply embedded in his own Italian culture of origin. In fact, one of the most unique contributions we wanted to make in that volume was to refocus attention on Sabato Rodia, Uncle Sam himself, on his life and times as an Italian immigrant worker—a cultural history that had somehow become obscured over the years and, which few knew. Many, in fact, still believe the Watts Towers artist was African American, given the later demographic of the Watts community.

Yet Rodia's Italian and American experiences are significant and critical to understanding the artist and his work. For instance, in my contribution, "Sabato Rodia: Art, Migrations, and Italian Imaginaries," (in Del Giudice) I tried to restore his name, his voice, his cultural world, and his experiences in Italy and as a migrant laborer in America at the turn of the last century, between wars, during the second of which Italians were enemy aliens. I consider what he has to say about American society. He actually had much to say on the topic himself to anyone who would listen—always ranting about politics, economics and religion. Moreover, I explore Italian imaginaries at play in his monument. Why ships? Were these ships of his heroes, ocean-faring explorers, Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, John Cabot? Or were they immigrant ships? Why towers? We need to remember that bell towers are a symbol of place and local identity, in the so-called *campanilismo* or, literally, "bell towerism" that is central to Italians' worldview. Whence came his concept of treasure and his practice of treasure-hunting. Immigrants were told that in America the "streets are paved with gold"; the Watts Towers seem to be an elaborate pun on the dichotomy of "one man's treasure is another man's junk" since Rodia collects and reassembles discards into art. They are junk become treasure. I consider the contexts of festival and devotional practices for the artwork (cf. *infra*. the Gigli of Nola). I focus on his political ideology, that is, egalitarianism, defense of the working man and of the Constitution—"but they don't use it" he complained (King in Del Giudice 415)—as well as his anti-clericalism against the Catholic Church hierarchy (yet he himself participated in a tent revival movement and preached for a few years in Spanish). Other issues include his many cultural concerns and

ideas (e.g., strict gender roles, his abhorrence of dying alone), as well as his personal memory (e.g., he did not want to emigrate and blames his mother and father for that). I think the migration trauma is fundamental to understanding his restlessness, his art, his being constantly outside the box of institutions, family, community (cf. Dal Lago and Giordano). He knew that to be remembered there were two options: to do something “good good good,” or, “bad bad bad” (Ashley-David in Del Giudice 409).² Rodia wanted to leave his mark on History, to be remembered, just like his heroes Galileo and Marco Polo. Novelist, Tom DeLillo called the Towers a “Jazz Cathedral” (based on art as musical improvisation)—an evocative image and especially appropriate given the history of the Simon Rodia Watts Towers Jazz Festival. The suggestion being made here is that if we consider Rodia’s own Italian cultural context, we may also be persuaded that Rodia considered the Watts Towers to be a sort of perpetual public Street Festival. He says: “I build the tower, people like, everybody come” (King in Del Giudice 421). It seems he was throwing a street party.

There are many other contributors to *Sabato Rodia: Art, Migration, Development*, on the topic of Rodia within an Italian diaspora context. Laura Ruberto considers Rodia’s work in the context of Italian California material art in “A California Detour on the Road to Italy: The Hubcap Ranch, the Napa Valley, and Italian American Identity.” Joseph Sciorra looks at art and the philosophy of “work well done” among Italian Americans, in “‘Why a Man Makes the Shoes?’: Italian-American Art and Philosophy in Sabato Rodia’s Watts Towers.” Kenneth Scambray, in “California and the Italian Immigrant Experience: The Artistic and Literary Contexts of Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers,” explores Rodia’s artistic and literary contemporaries with his singular artistic work. Lastly, George Epolito considers Rodia from a South American perspective in “Parallel Expression: Revealing the Artistic Contributions of Italian Immigrants in South America During the Era of Simon Rodia.” The volume also revisits the hypothetical relationship between the Watts Towers and the dancing-tower tradition of the *Gigli* of Nola first suggested by Dan Ward and Sheldon Posen in the mid-1980s (cf. Katia Ballacchino, “Spires and Towers Between Tangible, Intangible and Contested Transnational Culture/Heritage,” and Felice Ceparano, “The Gigli of Nola Festival in the Nineteenth Century”). Had Rodia actually seen the *Gigli*? While we cannot be certain since he never mentions them, I consider the physical evidence of the towers-to-ship connection to be decisive. Who would have thought to juxtapose towers and ship if they had not witnessed the *Gigli*?

² Listen to the theme rap song of the recommended film, *I Build the Tower*, by Edward Landler and Rodia’s grand-nephew Brad Byer (Landler and Byer).

When asked, what are they? What do they mean? Rodia himself warned, when answering an insistent student at a UC Berkeley presentation that “They mean lotsa things, son” (Babitz and Morgan in Del Giudice 367). The Watts Towers have many meanings for the artists and the communities that have taken an interest in them over the decades—but it is a chorus *not* always in harmony. Multiracial and multiethnic Watts in the early 20th century became heavily African American beginning in the later 1930s and with the war effort, while today it is becoming largely Latino. The Arts Center has functioned as a nurturing mother to generations of artists, musicians, poets, and others, at the center of the Black Arts Movement, if one considers the sculpture “Mama Watts” outside the WTAC as its symbol. Many creative figures over the decades (musicians, poets, artists) have directly witnessed the role the Towers played in their lives, including John Outterbridge, a former director of the Watts Towers Arts Center, assemblage artist (cf. Del Giudice 309-326). Cecil Fergerson, the Black Art Movement leader in Los Angeles, who grew up in Watts in the late 1930s and went on to become a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, commented that “It’s a community of poverty. Always was. When they take care of that problem, the Towers will be bigger than the Statue of Liberty” (cf. Landler and Byer).

The Campaign to Save the Watts Tower, first from demolition, then again and again from damage caused by neglect, incompetence, underfunding, and the natural elements, was not the last time citizens had to fight for them, as the effort continues today. In the UCLA Special Collections archives I was so overwhelmed and awed to discover what it actually took to accomplish this task that I became convinced the original Committee members were heroic and deserved greater public recognition. Of the many members of that Committee, Jeanne Morgan (an artist herself, now in her 90’s) is among the few to survive. Over the decades she has been a constant inspiration to many of us who have been involved with the Towers. We honored her during the 2016 Watts Towers jazz festival where she spoke as eloquently as ever about her life’s work as well as the merits of the artist and his extraordinary work. It is evident to us that a new generation of activists needs to step up and continue this good work (cf. Morgan, “Interview with Jeanne S. Morgan” and “Fifty Years of Guardianship”). And we are that generation.

Added to the volume are also transcriptions of my oral interviews beginning with Brad Byer, Rodia’s aforementioned great-nephew, who addressed the explosive family dynamics which surrounded his Uncle Sam and the debates around whether he was a genius or an eccentric. There is then Edward Landler, filmmaker of *I Build the Tower* about Los Angeles politics, followed by Jeanne Morgan, who describes her visits with Rodia and her years of struggle as chair of the Committee; and,

finally, Rosie Lee Hooks, director of the Watts Towers Arts Center, who provides much information about the cultural politics surrounding the Institution.

This work has helped me understand the critical place of the Watts Towers in the history of Black Los Angeles (about which I knew little), and about overlapping maps in our thick web of migrations and settlements over time. To better understand the Watts Towers, we each needed to contribute our missing piece to the puzzle. I believe that the more communities take a stake in the Towers, the better it will be for the Towers' campus overall sustainability. Indeed, the Latino narrative is still missing despite the fact that it is likely significant since Rodia had two common law Latina wives, may have spoken Spanish better than he did English, and gave his artwork a Spanish name. It is heartening to know that a UCLA Ph.D. student, Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez, has recently begun tackling this cultural historical component of the Watts Towers narrative.

With the Watts Towers Common Ground Initiative we attempted to address many issues surrounding the Watts Towers / Watts Towers Arts Center / Community of Watts continuum, crossing cultural, geographic, and economic lines throughout Los Angeles by way of collaborative art, theater, music, and exhibitions, and thereby allowing all voices to be heard. I also took very much to heart Rosie Lee Hook's exhortation to "leave something behind" ["don't just take a piece of the Watts Towers and run"] (Lee Hooks in Del Giudice, online Appendices 34). An example of how we sought to do that was the Initiative's culminating program (in March, 2011) around a communal table, with a St. Joseph's Table in Watts, a Sicilian custom intended to feed the poor, to welcome the stranger, while creating a thing of artistic beauty (a food altar) for the benefit of all. As an open table, the St. Joseph's Table welcomes and provides nourishment for anyone in need. Thanks to many partners, among them the artists of the Watts Towers Arts Center and the community itself, as well as Los Angeles Italians, we shared food, hospitality, art, and distributed thousands of dollars' worth of food vouchers for local food banks at the church, the arts center, and the seniors' center in Watts.

I continue to think of ways large and small of contributing to the well being of the Watts Towers campus. For example, a portion of all sales of the book is dedicated to helping the WTAC. But I am also deeply convinced that the Watts Towers deserve a UNESCO World Heritage Site designation. Achieving this international recognition is a daunting task that I have been investigating and now preparing for years. Today we are all working hard to understand what is required, even as we assemble and coordinate the stakeholders who must put forward this candidacy. It was finally in April of 2016, after successfully con-

vincing the City of Los Angeles (the managers) and the California State Parks (the owners) to commit, that both agreed to take the first step on this arduous path. Yet again, it was only after I had completed my own successful letter-writing campaign to rally support, that this came to pass. On April 29, 2016, only one day before our deadline, the California State Parks finally submitted a letter asking the National Parks Service to add the Watts Towers (Nuestro Pueblo) to the U.S. "Tentative List" (on which it must remain for at least one year before advancing to candidacy). Since the U.S. UNESCO committee had not opened up this list since 2008 (the last time the committee met), this window of opportunity was quite narrow for us. The process of inscription, of course, is a very long one, but the first step has been taken. We continue to build on the concept of common ground as communities come together to achieve this goal. In some ways, it may be less about the ultimate designation and more about the process of achieving world heritage status, which promises long-term wellbeing for the Watts Towers.

It is, however, well to remember that despite the Watts Towers' divergent trajectories for their many stakeholders, on one matter there seems to be consensus: the Watts Towers remain a powerful symbol of spiritual resistance, personal initiative, vision, and creativity. They offer hope for transcendence and tangible proof of what inspired creativity can unleash. Even a loner and drifter like Rodia, unable to properly fit in, could call upon inner resources, cultural memory, and skills, to overcome defeat, to express the best of himself, and even to dazzle the world with his gifts. The Watts Towers are uplifting, dotted with hearts, and filled with love. They seem to literally say: "take heart," by showing us how to make something beautiful from the broken and discarded stuff of life. That is the common (spiritual or symbolic) ground of the Watts Towers. In this sense, they indeed already *are* a World Treasure of Humanity.

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