

Four Crosses Over Waterbury

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I first visited Holy Land, U.S.A. in Waterbury, Connecticut on December 22, 2015.¹ I was there with my fiancée and her parents; we were spending Christmas with her grandmother, June Williams, who had lived her whole life in the neighboring city of Naugatuck. They had heard about the site most their lives, but neither of my in-laws had ever been to experience the hundreds of miniaturized replicas of biblical scenes and stories spread across 17 acres.

Local residents purchased Waterbury's Holy Land in 2013 with the aim of restoration, but it had been closed to visitors since 1984. We stepped around the "No Trespassing" sign and encountered the accumulated ravages of thirty years of weather, vandals, and neglect. Some replicas were totally indiscernible, others missing pieces and halves, and nearly all cracked and leaning. The colors of some painted signs and carvings were well faded, others barely visible. The sense of abandonment was heightened by the day's weather. The sky was densely overcast, clouds thick enough you could look directly at the sun's faint outline. The air temperature was below freezing, intensified by a steady wind that whipped and howled around and through the remaining structures.

Standing atop Pine Hill, the panoramic view is unobstructed. You look out onto diverging rivers, crisscrossing freeways, residential neighborhoods, church steeples, treetop hills in the distance, and the imprint of a de-industrialized economy – sprawling, aging factories that inspired the name "Rust Belt." We walked, careful of our footing and tensed up by the cold, snapping pictures and trying to imagine the site prior to ruination. But, it was not all bleak.

Amid the gray sky, dead winter brush, and deteriorating replicas stood a newly built pillar. About four feet high, composed of stone and mortar, it takes the shape of a large tree stump because it is built around one. Three words on one side – red letters on white background – read "Tower of Babel." The fresh paint stood out starkly against the surroundings, suggesting a new life was stirring. Standing above the Tower, the source was revealed by a small plaque screwed into the exposed tree rings:

Eagle Project
by
Jacob Dinklocker
Troop 41 BSA
June 1, 2015

A Local Place

Sites like Holy Land, U.S.A. are an often-written about, often-photographed presence on the U.S. landscape. Public discourse is dominated by two interpretive frames: *kitsch* and *folk art*. In the *kitsch* frame these sites are gawked at, objects of bemusement and/or ridicule. They are spectacles, oddities, fascinating for their utter strangeness. They appear regularly in books like *Weird New England* (2005: 237). A popular travel guide, *Roadside America* (1986), describes Holy Land, U.S.A. as a “post-nuclear, *Road Warrior* vision of the Holy Land. Most of the rambling spread consists of impenetrable assemblages of junk” (154). In November 2002, the site was spoofed by Stephen Colbert on *The Daily Show*. In his characteristic style, Colbert dons a tan cargo vest to explore “a religious Epcot.” In the *kitsch* frame, such sites are fun to engage with, but worthy of lampooning not aspiration.

A second way to understand such sites is to attribute the status of *folk art*. This frame circulates less widely and resonates in a more specialized register. In this frame, sites like Holy Land, U.S.A. have value because they represent the creative work of a “folk,” visionary,” or “outsider” artist. The preferred term varies, but the spirit remains: someone who expresses their artistic vision through unpredictable media and without formal training. The subject matter is far less important than the location, the style, and the relation between the artist’s work and their biography (cf. Promey 2018). *The Clarion*, published by the American Folk Art Museum, featured a profile of Holy Land, U.S.A. soon after its peak popularity. While critical of the theology, the author praised the artistry: “I felt that I was sharing an inner-vision made real, a manifestation of a man’s lifelong dream come true and it was this feeling that made me exclaim that surely this was the real thing” (Ludwig 1979: 31).

These frames work for audiences because they render sites sensible in particular ways: valued for parodic or artistic worth. These frames also perform some erasure; that is, they obscure or make invisible other forms of value. Each in their own way, *kitsch* and *folk art* extract sites from their local resonances. I concluded the opening vignette with a Boy Scout’s contribution as an example of how sites are locally valued, invested in by community members and emerging from collective labor (devotional and otherwise). The following sketch of Holy Land, U.S.A. follows suit, demonstrating the necessity of an alternative interpretive frame, one attentive to the local significance of Waterbury’s Holy Land.

Waterbury’s Holy Land

The site that was eventually named Holy Land, U.S.A. was envisioned by a man named John Greco. Born in Waterbury in 1895 to Italian immigrants, he was part of the working-class, the son of a shoemaker. His family returned to Italy for part of his youth, returning to Waterbury when he was 13. Born into a devout Roman Catholic family, John initially sought the priesthood before health concerns forced a change. He graduated from Yale Law School and started a practice in Waterbury. Part of the lore around Greco is a lifelong loyalty to Waterbury’s poor, providing discounted or free legal help as needed. He remained a committed Catholic his entire life and prior to starting Holy Land he founded two Catholic evangelist organizations: one focused on street preaching and one (anticipating the culture wars to come) focused on “putting Christ back into Christmas.”² These organizations traveled outside the region and his efforts with them earned him broader recognition (in 1957, for example, he was

named a Knight of Saint Gregory by Pope Pius XII). But, the local memory of Greco is centered on his enduring bond with Waterbury: born there, returned there, lived there, served there, created there, died and buried there.

1956-1984

Greco was 61 years old when Waterbury's Holy Land began. It was October 1956, and with the help of volunteers from his evangelist group they installed the first of four crosses that would stand onsite. Archival sources report varying heights, from 20 to 35 feet, though all emphasize the use of light to make the cross visible at night from the city below. A local sign maker, Ralph Giuliano, designed the cross, which included a series of neon tubes. They emitted a bright glow, and were interchangeable to follow the colors of the liturgical calendar. It was a community effort, Giuliano remembers: "Three was no money involved, it was all, you know, everybody chipped in."³

Greco's inspiration for creating the site also varies. In one version, he was moved by a friend's description of seeing the Mount Royal Cross on a trip through Montreal.⁴ In another, Greco drew from his experience as a traveling evangelist teaching youth in the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the success of visual aids to arrest attention.⁵ A third story recalls the popularity of nativity scenes his evangelist organization created for Waterbury and other cities at Christmas time, and the idea of a permanent, more elaborate biblical representation.⁶ A final version centers on landscape affinities between Pine Hill and biblical stories. Greco described it this way in one news interview: "Everything in the Bible took place on the heights and all the cities were built on the heights. The laws of Moses came on the heights, Christ preached his first sermon on a mount, and he died on a mountain. All these things took place on a hill like we have here."⁷

A lone cross on a hilltop was never the plan, and in December 1958 the first series of Greco's miniature replicas opened for public touring. Initially called Bethlehem Village, later changed to Bible Land, and finally Holy Land, U.S.A., the replicas grew to over 200 structures. Arranged in no particular narrative sequence, and interspersed with hand-painted signs of biblical quotes, people in biblical dress, and animals mentioned in the Bible were scenes from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (e.g., Garden of Eden), Catholic tradition (e.g., Scala Sancta), and primarily the New Testament (e.g., the Bethlehem Inn where Mary and Joseph were refused). One of the last additions was an exhibit donated from the Vatican Pavilion at the 1964-65 New York World's Fair.

With the exception of the Vatican Pavilion donation, Waterbury's Holy Land is a *mélange* of discarded materials. No single archival source lists every material used, but the following inventory emerged from reading across sources: plaster, concrete, statues of saints, pews, and stained glass from churches, lumber, tin, plastic sheeting, plastic plants, marble, chicken wire, stone, brick, scrap metal, aluminum, copper, cement, radio and television cases, hand rails, soup pots, stovepipes, mannequins, tires, oil drums, window frames, bathtubs, freezers, water heaters, ashcans, and a mobile home trailer.

The *kitsch* and *folk art* frames celebrate the transformation of this "motley detritus."⁸ In the former it is part of the gawking, in the latter it is an integral element of a visionary art

environment. Alternatively, we can understand this materiality as part of the bond between site and city. Waterbury's Holy Land was, quite literally, built from the stuff of Waterbury. Frank Davino – a friend of Greco, urban planner for the city, and longtime advocate for the site's preservation – described it this way: "A good 35 percent, maybe 40 percent or more, of all the material up there came from the house and buildings, factories, that we tore down during the course of the urban renewal process."⁹

In 1969, a taller cross was installed and the subsequent years saw the site at its tourist zenith. An August 1971 story reported 2,000 visitors a week during the summer months and a May 1974 story reported a peak of 44,000 annual visitors.¹⁰ The site was always open eight months a year (April through December), and news reports emphasized the excited busyness of tour busses queuing to navigate the hill's ascent. These stories also emphasize the diversity of visitors: Catholic and non-Catholic, from multiple states, youth and older adults, African Americans, whites, and immigrants from various places. Remembering her first visit in 1976, historian Mary Baine Campbell recalled "Salvadoran, Filipino, and Haitian immigrants, on actual pilgrimages from New York City, Newark, and Hartford."¹¹

The first account of troubles comes in 1977. In the course of a year brush fire destroyed the Garden of Eden display, a road closure due to highway expansion confused and turned away would-be visitors, and the first of what would be many vandalism cases was reported. The number of annual visitors declined to 20,000 and Greco, then 82, was increasingly unable to maintain his levels of physical care for the site.¹² By the time *The Clarion* profile was published, its author described the site as being "in virtual ruin" (Ludwig 1979: 39).

Holy Land, U.S.A.'s decline closely parallels the economic decline of Waterbury, another bond between site and city. From the Civil War through World War II, Waterbury rose to industrial prominence, leading the nation in brass manufacturing.¹³ This attracted an ethnically diverse workforce, and the city developed a working-class culture known for immigrant enclaves. When World War II ended, factories attempted to maintain production levels, but commercial interests could not maintain the wartime pace. By 1950, factory jobs were being eliminated that would not come back. This coincided with automation, the relocation of labor domestically and globally, industry diversification (away from brass and toward metals like aluminum), and an aging infrastructure that was costly to sustain. By 1980, fewer than 5,000 factory jobs remained of the 50,000 that were available during WWII.

1984-2013

In April 1984, the original Holy Land, U.S.A. was closed for the first time in its history. Greco hoped to re-open the site after making repairs, but volunteer labor was scarce and fundraising efforts yielded little. Greco died in March 1986, leaving the site without a visionary leader. In 1980, he had willed the site to a Catholic order of nuns, the Religious Teachers Filippini, who began staffing two sisters onsite in 1972. The Filippini Sisters are treated ambivalently in news stories. In some reporting, they are dedicated custodians who cared for Greco in his later years and did everything they could to help the site survive. In other cases, they are neglectful of the site and resistant to any creative way of reviving it.

After Greco's death, the replicas decayed, vandalism and theft increased, and the site developed a local reputation as seedy. An attempt in 1988 to demolish portions of the site was halted only by a group of protesters who placed their bodies in front of bulldozers.¹⁴ The Committee to Preserve Holy Land was formed at this time, and received support from artists committed to the site's *folk art* value.¹⁵ The Committee reported nearly 3000 signatures in an August 1988 letter to the Museum of American Folk Art.

The rallying support of local residents and folk art advocates impeded any large-scale destruction, but did not generate the support needed for significant restoration. The site continued to decay and its reputation worsened, fueled by the sad event of a murdered body being stashed onsite in 1988.¹⁶ The next renewal effort came in 2000, led by a local retired priest and backed by the Hartford Archbishop. Despite an initially optimistic tone, the effort was characterized as "failed" by 2005.¹⁷ This was not the first time Holy Land, U.S.A. had received support from the Archdiocese, previous Archbishops had blessed new additions created by Greco.¹⁸ The relationship between the site and the Archdiocese is yet another case of ambivalence. While moments of legitimation occur, no financial help was provided during post-1984 fundraising campaigns and diocesan representatives would sometimes distance "the Church" from the site, saying once that it did "not reflect contemporary Christian thought."¹⁹

By 2008, the 1969 cross had become unstable and the Sisters organized to replace it with a third iteration. Again blessed by the Archbishop, it was shorter, thinner, and lit by exterior spotlights rather than illuminated from within. The 2008 cross was widely rebuked by local residents. A *Republican-American* story derided the cross as "wimpy," failing "to have a presence" or make a "real statement in the environment it touches."²⁰ A local resident wrote a letter to the editor offering "kudos" to the story's writer "for having the guts to report what almost everyone in the Greater Waterbury [area] has been thinking."²¹ Four years later the sentiment lingered. A city resident bemoaned the new cross and remembered growing up in an immigrant household near Pine Hill. Her father, a Muslim from Kosovo, loved the cross because it symbolized "religious freedom." For her, the "two toothpicks on a hill" did not have the same landmark affect: "Paris has the Eiffel Tower; London has Big Ben; New York has the Statue of Liberty; and Waterbury had the cross."²²

The site's reputation worsened tragically in July 2010 when a 16-year old girl was raped and murdered onsite. This prompted some to call for a total razing, to transform the abandoned site into a public park.²³ This tragedy also prompted the Sisters to list the land for sale. They set the initial price at \$775,000, over a million dollars less than the city's assessed value, and for two years multiple bidders came forward only to be rejected, including a \$200,000 cash offer from a group organized by Frank Davino.

2013-present

In June 2013, the Sisters agreed to a sale of \$350,000, with the proviso that the site be guaranteed to remain as Holy Land, U.S.A. in perpetuity. The buyer was a private non-profit, led by the city mayor and a local business owner. The story the mayor tells most often is that the idea traces to his 2011 election campaign. He repeatedly encountered requests from older adults to restore the cross, perhaps requests akin to the 2012 editorial quoted above.²⁴

The city response was overwhelmingly positive, but did not always speak in one accord. A July 2013 editorial recommended adding symbols to represent Jewish and Muslim citizens, a multi-cultural suggestion that was not explored. The newly formed non-profit did not have cash in hand, but raised the funds swiftly and closed the sale in October. By all accounts it was a broadly supported effort; over 900 contributors, from 46 towns in Connecticut and five states, giving between one dollar and \$100,000. By 2016, they had reported 4,500 contributors.²⁵

Their first priority was to replace the 2008 cross. This fourth iteration would approximate the height of the 1969 cross and again be illuminated from within (though, with a technological upgrade, exchanging neon tubing for 5,000 LED bulbs). Like the 1956 cross, the 2013 cross designer was a Waterbury native with family ties to John Greco. Joe Pisani owns a steel fabrication company in Naugatuck and built the cross free of charge (an estimated \$375,000 gift). Pisani described it as a kind of generalized reciprocity, as it was Greco who helped his father secure citizenship free of charge. The site was dear to his family growing up, especially his mother, who he honored by placing her rosary beads in the concrete pedestal that supports the new cross.²⁶

The cross was lit on December 22, 2013, a ceremony attended by 1,000 city residents. For many, the site's revival was an emotionally charged process. A priest speaking at a dedication mass for the new cross choked back tears when describing its significance: "I came back from a few tours in Vietnam. I flew into Bradley airport. My father picked me up and we came into Waterbury. I saw the cross; I was home again. The fact that it's up again in the glory that it was, is so important to the people of this city."²⁷ Many of the stories leading up to, and reporting on, the December lighting ceremony quoted residents who fondly recalled memories of experiencing the original Holy Land, U.S.A. during its peak years: picking blueberries on the hillside, helping Greco care for the replicas, taking pictures onsite after First Communion and Confirmations, having Sunday picnics onsite after church, and walking the pathways in prayerful meditation.

As of January 2020, the non-profit has not yet re-opened the park, but in the years after the cross lighting they have organized several events to attract people and attention. Three public masses have been held (September 2014, August 2018, and April 2019). The Hartford Archdiocese again lent its approval, with the Archbishop presiding over the August 2018 mass. Two of the masses were held in honor of another Waterbury native, Father Michael McGivney, who founded the Knights of Columbus. McGivney is under papal consideration for sainthood, and would be the first U.S.-born male saint. Like the revival of Holy Land, McGivney's cause has become a city cause. The other major event works in a more popular register. Beginning in July 2015, the city relocated its fireworks display from its traditional site at a public park to Holy Land, U.S.A. The same editorial writer who called for a multi-cultural display on Pine Hill seized this moment to remind *Republican-American* readers that this ritual is an opportunity for inclusion: "for Waterburians to get together in recognizing the site as public property, welcoming people of all religious and ethnic backgrounds."

In the *kitsch* and *folk art* frames, Holy Land, U.S.A. is remembered primarily as the work of a lone individual (respectively, Greco as eccentric zealot or Greco as dedicated artist). This erases the fact that for both Greco and for the new owners the labor of building and caretaking has always been a collective endeavor. Pisani donated the cross and numerous other hands have been at work. Land clearing and paving companies donated equipment and labor to

building new roads onsite. The “Tower of Babel” is one of at least four Boy Scout contributions onsite. Another Eagle project rebuilt the base of an original statue made by Greco. “I wanted to do something that would last and contribute to Waterbury,” the Scout said of his work.²⁸ In April 2019, a Catholic school teacher tweeted a photo of her students working together: “My 6th grade teamed up with their 1st grade buddies to paint rocks for our beautify Holy Land Waterbury project. Middle school students will go to Holy Land tomorrow to clean.” Numerous obituaries in the *Republican-American* post-2013 request that donations be made to “Holy Land USA – Waterbury” in lieu of gifts to families.

The relationship between site and city has been reciprocal. In April 2014, the cross was illumined blue to support National Autism Awareness Month, and in October 2018 it glowed pink for National Breast Cancer Awareness Month.²⁹ Along with acts of publicity and solidarity, some of the site has been re-distributed for continued use. Most notably, the much maligned 2008 cross found a new home in November 2019. A local Assemblies of God church transported, cleaned, and re-installed the cross in their parking lot.³⁰ While it was the lesser of four crosses, it was still a piece of Waterbury’s Holy Land.

Conclusion

When John Greco was designing his initial series of miniature replicas he traveled to Palestine for the first time. He wanted to see the sites he sought to re-create at home. Like thousands of other pilgrims before and after him, he collected landscape items (rocks and soil) and he incorporated them into his Bethlehem Village.³¹ Creating a bond with scripture was always Greco’s stated mission: “to open the Bible to the public” he would often say.³² Like so many other sites discussed in this book, this is one framework for understanding the original Holy Land, U.S.A. – the affective intimacy produced through materializing the Bible. This chapter, though, is concerned with more than just the original Holy Land, U.S.A. It has taken up the life course of the site. The primary analytical aim has been to work against the erasure of local resonance, to draw out the significance not of Holy Land, U.S.A. as a tourist attraction, but of Waterbury’s Holy Land as a localized place.

To fully apprehend Greco, we might also remember his identity as an Italian Catholic and the way his work fits within a cultural tradition of shrine creation (Sciorra 1989). And certainly, this story of four crosses resonates with scholarship on the symbolic power of crosses to shape landscapes (Kaell 2017). As Promey (2018) observes, the cross is effective as a form of display because it draws together a general yet unambiguous proclamation of religious identity with a ubiquitous cultural penchant for publicity. In her discussion of the cross at California’s Salvation Mountain, Promey also notes that an appeal to the *folk art* frame draws attention away from the site’s localized history and context, secularizing it for broader appreciation and use.

Whichever frameworks we prefer, we must keep visible the social dynamics by which Holy Land, U.S.A. came to symbolize local belonging. While plenty of heartfelt nostalgia and attachment is evident in the archival sources, my clearest sense of this has come from wife’s grandmother, June. This chapter owes a great debt to her diligence in mailing me newspaper stories. She would often include a short note with the clippings, expressing her hopes for the

site's (and, by extension, the city's) revival. Attached to a February 2017 story about the new cross being vandalized with spray paint, she lamented: "one step forward, two steps back." To accompany a May 2018 story about a new road being constructed onsite, she wrote: "I wish the message was Holy Land totally restored. By bits and pieces perhaps one day that will be the message." And, she cheered in a note included with an April 2019 story about the installation of a new welcome gate: "from all indications of the frequency of articles in the Rep-Am progress is being made on the reconstruction of the park. Good news!" Voices like June's, Joe Pisani's, the many letters to the editor, and even aspects of John Greco are so easily lost when we engage sites as *kitsch* or as *folk art*. Sites like Holy Land, U.S.A. are always also home places, bound in manifold ways to local lives.

Notes

¹ This chapter is informed by our visit in December 2015, though the analysis focused largely on archival materials. I examined 45 news stories and 12 letters to the editor from the *Republican-American* (2008-2019), 37 news stories and one letter to the editor from regional (e.g., *Hartford Courant*) and national (e.g., *New York Times*) outlets, 1960-2018. The project archive for Holy Land, U.S.A. includes a diverse set of additional materials (e.g., visitor guidebooks). I am especially grateful to June Williams for her diligent contribution of sending me Holy Land-related *Republican-American* stories.

² Silas Bronson Library (Waterbury, Connecticut) "Hall of Fame" biography.

³ Interview with Ralph Giuliano for "HolyLand," a 20-minute promotional video produced for the non-profit Holy Land USA – Waterbury founded in 2013. Source: <https://vimeo.com/user3158424/review/92159554/359198587b> (accessed January 4, 2020).

⁴ "Lawyer Builds 12-acre Holy Land replica in Connecticut," *The Boston Globe*, October 13, 1975.

⁵ "'Holy Land' Draws 44,000 to Waterbury," *The Hartford Courant*, May 18, 1974.

⁶ "A Pilgrimage to Waterbury: where a lighted cross stood sentinel over a miniature Holy Land," *Connecticut Explored*, Summer 2008.

⁷ "17-acre 'Holy Land' in Waterbury Nearly Finished," *The New York Times*, March 4, 1974.

⁸ "Connecticut Holy Land Seeks Help," *The Boston Globe*, October 14, 1986.

⁹ Oral history interview with Frank Davino, August 5, 2013. Source: <http://frankdavino.com/tag/holy-land-usa/> (accessed January 4, 2020).

¹⁰ "Waterbury 'Holy Land' Draws Crowds," *The Catholic Transcript*, August 13, 1971; "'Holy Land' Draws 44,000 to Waterbury," *The Hartford Courant*, May 18, 1974.

¹¹ See Campbell (2003).

¹² "Miniature Holy Land Undergoes Ordeal," *The New York Times*, August 20, 1977.

¹³ The following account is compiled from the project's archival sources, as well as Maher (2015).

¹⁴ "7 protest demolition of 'Holy Land' park," *The Journal News*, July 10, 1988.

¹⁵ "Kitsch Crusade: Artists Rally for Holy Land," *The New York Times*, August 5, 1988.

¹⁶ "At Waterbury's Holy Land, a dream falls into decay," *The Hartford Courant*, September 28, 1988.

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- ¹⁷ “A Hilltop Landmark Undergoes a Revival,” *The New York Times*, November 4, 2001; “Some Still Hope to Revive Holy Land USA,” *The Hartford Courant*, August 26, 2005.
- ¹⁸ “New Holy Land Exhibits are Dedicated,” *The Catholic Transcript*, December 16, 1976.
- ¹⁹ “Work at Holy Land a concern to defenders of complex,” *The Hartford Courant*, February 21, 1990.
- ²⁰ “New Holy Land cross fails to live up to site’s potential,” *Republican-American*, September 1, 2008.
- ²¹ “Holy Land’s new cross completely underwhelming,” *Republican-American*, September 5, 2008.
- ²² “Some in Waterbury still miss seeing the lighted cross,” *Republican-American*, August 13, 2012.
- ²³ “Bulldoze Holy Land to make way for park,” *Republican-American*, August 9, 2010.
- ²⁴ “Resurrecting Holy Land,” *The New Journal: The Magazine about Yale and New Haven*, November 18, 2016.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ “2014 Newsmaker: Joe Pisani, Naugatuck businessman,” *Republican-American*, January 2, 2015.
- ²⁷ Source: Holy Land USA – Waterbury promotional video: <https://vimeo.com/user3158424/review/92159554/359198587b> (accessed January 4, 2020).
- ²⁸ “Resurrecting Holy Land,” *Republican-American*, August 23, 2015.
- ²⁹ “‘Light It Blue’ for Autism Awareness,” *The Waterbury Observer*, March 26, 2014; “Holy Land cross to glow pink,” *Republican-American*, October 19, 2018.
- ³⁰ “Rising Up,” *Republican-American*, November 14, 2019.
- ³¹ “A Pilgrimage to Waterbury: where a lighted cross stood sentinel over a miniature Holy Land,” *Connecticut Explored*, Summer 2008.
- ³² “Waterbury ‘Holy Land’ Draws Crowds,” *The Catholic Transcript*, August 13, 1971.