

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

*file copy*

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC

Watts Towers of Simon Rodia

AND/OR COMMON

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

1765 East 107th Street

NOT FOR PUBLICATION 29

CITY, TOWN

Los Angeles

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

VICINITY OF Watts Community

STATE

California

CODE

900002

COUNTY

Los Angeles

CODE

037

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

- DISTRICT
- BUILDING(S)
- STRUCTURE
- SITE
- OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

- PUBLIC
- PRIVATE
- BOTH
- PUBLIC ACQUISITION
- IN PROCESS
- BEING CONSIDERED

STATUS

- OCCUPIED (patrolled)
- UNOCCUPIED
- WORK IN PROGRESS
- ACCESSIBLE
- YES: RESTRICTED
- YES: UNRESTRICTED
- NO

PRESENT USE

- AGRICULTURE
- MUSEUM
- COMMERCIAL
- PARK
- EDUCATIONAL
- PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- ENTERTAINMENT
- RELIGIOUS
- GOVERNMENT
- SCIENTIFIC
- INDUSTRIAL
- TRANSPORTATION
- MILITARY
- OTHER:

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

City of Los Angeles - Municipal Arts Department, Administrator

STREET & NUMBER

200 North Spring Street - Room 1500

California

CITY, TOWN

Los Angeles

VICINITY OF Civic Center

STATE

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Los Angeles County Recorder

STREET & NUMBER

227 North Broadway

California

CITY, TOWN

Los Angeles

STATE

90012

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

The Towers of Simon Rodia - Historic-Cultural Monument No. 15

DATE

March 1, 1963

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR

SURVEY RECORDS Cultural Heritage Board, Municipal Arts Department - City of Los Angeles

CITY, TOWN

Los Angeles

STATE

California

**MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Follies and Grottoes by Barbara Jones, London, 1949  
Arts and Architecture magazine, July, 1951  
The New Yorker magazine, May 29, 1965  
Art Forum magazine, October 1969  
Ascent of Man by Bronowsky  
Ford Times magazine, August 1976

(see continuation sheet for remaining list)

**GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY Less than one acre - U.S. Geological Survey Map attached  
 UTM REFERENCES

A	1   1	3   8   5   4   6   0	3   7   5   5   8   6   0	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

**FORM PREPARED BY**

NAME / TITLE

Kenneth Ross, Director

August 6, 1976

ORGANIZATION

Municipal Arts Department

DATE

STREET & NUMBER

200 North Spring Street - Room 1500

TELEPHONE

213-485-2433

CITY OR TOWN

Los Angeles

STATE

California 90012

**STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION**

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 9

PAGE 1

- Life magazine, August 1964  
New York Times, May 6, 1968  
Saturday Book - Pleasure Dome in Los Angeles, 1967  
Nuestro Pueblo Los Angeles, City of Romance, Introduction by Lee Shippey,  
Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1940, pp.56-57.  
Arts and Architecture, "Sam of Watts," by Jules Langsner. July 1951, Vol.58,  
pp.23-25.  
Sunset magazine, Feb. 1957, Vol.118, No. 2, p. 5.  
Frankenstein, A. "Los Angeles' Monument to Non-Conformity." San Francisco  
Chronicle, August 23, 1961.  
Goldstone, M.B. "The Structural Test of Simon Rodia's Tower." Conference,  
Society for Experimental Stress Analysis, Washington, D.C., April 20, 1961.  
Goldstone, M.B. "Structural Test of Hand-Built Tower." Technical Paper for the  
Society of Experimental Stress Analysis at Dallas, Texas, May 18, 1962.  
Goldstone, Phoebe, "Watts Towers show Structural Capacity of Lathing." Prog-  
ressive Architecture, April, 1960.  
Langsner, Jules. "Los Angeles." Art News, September, 1959.  
Langsner, Jules. Craft Horizon, Vol.XIX, 6; November, December, 1959.  
Laughlin, Clarence, "The Watts Towers." Article and photographs, Vogue,  
Vol.13, 3. February 2, 1961.  
Rau, Peggy. "Monument Found in Rodia Towers." Citizen News, June 1, 1961.  
Wolff, Virginia. Aufbau (German American Newspaper). January 1, 1960.  
Conrads, U. and Sperlich, H. Phantastische Architecture. Stuttgart, Hatje,  
1950.  
New World Writing, No. 2, Mentor Series 79. "The Artist Nobody Knows" by  
Seldon Rodman, 1952.  
Seitz, W.C. The Art of Assemblage. New York. The Museum of Modern Art, 1961.  
Ameryka, U.S. Information Agency No. 13, 1959 (in Polish).  
L'Arte Milan. "A Unique Masterpiece of Bizarre Construction." by Kate T.  
Steinitz. October-December, 1959.  
Aujourd'hui, "Les Tours de Watts de Simon Rodilla." June 8, 1956.  
Domus Milan, "Gli straordinarie torre di Watts." December, 1951.  
Evening Herald, Dublin. June 5, 1959.  
Neue Zuercher Zeitung, "Simon Rodia's Tuerme von Watts," by Kate T. Steinitz.  
January 30, 1960.  
Christian Science Monitor, April 8, 1953, May 23, June 8, 1959.  
Harper's Bazaar, December, 1952.  
Los Angeles Examiner, Sunday Highlights, March 7, 1961; Numerous articles  
1959 to present day.  
Los Angeles Mirror News. Numerous articles 1959 to present day.  
Los Angeles Times. Numerous articles 1937 to present day.  
New York Daily News, May 19, 1960.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 9

PAGE 2

- New York Times, May 31, July 10, 12, 16; October 12, 1959; August 23, 1960.  
Newsweek, July 20, 1959.  
Time magazine, New York, "Labyrinths of Watts." September 3, 1951.  
Architectural Review London, July 1962. Reyner Banham, "The Spec Builders on Trial. Towards a Pop Architecture". Page 44. The Watts Towers mentioned.  
Goldstone, N.J. "Structural Test of a Hand-Built Tower", Experimental Mechanics, January 1963, pp.8-13.  
Lincoln Log, October 1962, published by Lincoln Savings and Loan Association. pp. 2 & 6, "Simon Rodia's strangely beautiful monument to his city". III  
Beljon, J.J. "Bouwmeesters van morgen". Pantoscop. Amsterdam, Weentenschappelijke Uitgeverij, N.V., 1964.  
Architectural Forum, Sept. 1965, "Death of an Enigma."  
Art Forum, October 1965.  
Art Treasures in the West by William Davenport and the Sunset Editors. Lane Magazine and Book Company, Menlo Park, California 1966.  
Connaissance Des Arts, No. 170, Avril 1966, "Les Tours de Watts", p.110-113.  
The Engineer of Southern California, Vol. 18, No. 12, December 1965, p. 17.  
Du/Atlantis, Oct. 1965, 26th Vol., p. 780, editorial "Die Watts Towers".  
Look magazine, California Issue, June 23, 1966, p. 54 "Don't forget the story of Simon Rodia".  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art. 1965, Illustrated handbook, first edition, p. 2.  
Christian Science Monitor, March 11, 1963, "Towers Scale Art Hurdle" (Watts Towers declared Cultural Monument).  
New York Times, March 1963, "Watts Towers Declared National Monument".  
New York Times, June 23, 1963, "Change of Heart", pp.XX-25, "Towers Priceless Art".  
New Yorker, December 4, 1971, U.S.Journal: Watts, by Calvin Trillin, pp. 136-143.  
Los Angeles Times, August 24, 1964, Part IV, p. 2. "Spectator. Government's Role in Art" by State Senator Thomas M. Rees.  
Sunset magazine, May 1965, p. 42. "The Wonderful Towers of Sabatino Rodia".

(Only a partial bibliography for the Watts Towers.)

# DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

## DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The eight towers and garden occupy a pie shaped plot in South Central Los Angeles. There are 3 principal towers and 5 smaller ones. Two towers soar 10 stories high, nearly 100 feet; the other six average 40 feet in height. The two tallest towers contain the longest slender reinforced concrete columns in the world constructed without rectangles, triangles, bolts, welds or rivets. The second tallest tower is encircled with rings that taper in size proportionately as they rise toward the tower's top. The two other principal towers reflect these rounded forms but within their interior structure instead.

Each tower has its own rhythm and proportion. There is an infinite variation in the creator's patterns, in construction as well as mosaic detail. The towers are supported by buttresses made from pipes and pieces of iron and steel, each one covered with waterproof cement in which pieces of glass, shells and other objects are embedded. As each tower soars another 4 or 5 feet, just enough so a short man could reach the next rung, the upright strands are encircled by a supporting, glistening ring of reinforced concrete.

The principal towers almost appear to have smaller separate towers enclosed within them. Two of the towers are linked between with airy bands of steel, reminding one of the sails of a ship, one of the author's original themes.

The towers are surrounded by a 300 foot long, 7 foot high scalloped and decorated wall that also enclosed a garden containing a variety of sculpted and decorated shapes and forms. Materials include about 7,000 sacks of cement, 75,000 seashells, and uncounted pieces of broken crockery, tile, and broken bottles, all used as ornamentation, as well as steel reinforcing rods and chicken wire.

Simon Rodia, the creator, initially began his project by paving the back yard, dividing it up into different sized squares of brown, red or green cement. Into the wet cement he impressed odd objects; wire baskets, ears of corn, pieces of metal, broken crockery, doormats, cracked phonograph records, broken Victorian furniture, tiles, tools to create patterns and play of light and shadow, pieces of mirrors, broken bottles, and various bits and pieces of "junk" collected during various wanderings or from neighborhood children whom he 'paid' with fruit or pennies.

Then Rodia began a concrete garden with a patch of cement cactus, then an open-work gazebo, with sides formed of mosaiced strands of cement over chicken wire and over long steel rods bent into graceful curves. He collected 72,000 equal-sized seashells and grouped them rhythmically in various locations of the garden. He impressed iron forms into the concrete and also incised his monogram, SR, and the inscription "Nuestro Pueblo", as homage to his Spanish neighborhood.

This garden around the towers ultimately contained labyrinths, pavillions, love seats, fountains, a bird bath, a tilt, glass and shell-decorated bench supporting a few short towers, an outdoor fireplace, ponds, a fountain, and

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE 1

a little passage, roofed with broken mirror glass.

Rodia built the garden, walls and towers entirely alone. He never had anyone to help him because, he said, 'most of the time I didn't know what to do myself'. He climbed the towers with his lineman's safety belt, carrying a trowel, a bucket of cement hanging from one elbow, and a bucket of broken tiles, glass and seashells hanging from the other. Rodia worked for 33 years on the towers and garden. When he reached his 75th year, in 1954, he gave his house, garden and the towers to a neighbor and simply disappeared.

# SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Watts Towers are internationally recognized as an extremely significant and unique expression of folk art, architecture, and sculpture. The creation of a semi-literate Italian immigrant, the towers have been variously described as a "cultural treasure", a "manifestation of idealism and hope", an "affirmation of the world", a "paramount achievement of 20th Century folk art in the United States", and a "triumph of the creative and intuitive mind over the technical outlook which dominates our age".

The towers are the largest work of art ever built by one man without aid. Simon Rodia, builder of the towers, came from Italy to the United States at the age of 12. He worked at a variety of routine jobs available to a semi-literate young man with an accent and partial knowledge of the English language. Two of those jobs helped Rodia with the project that later occupied so much of his life. As a tile setter, he learned the mechanics that would later help him create the intricate mosaics decorating the towers, walls, fountains and the ornate gazebo. His subsequent work as a lineman with the phone company taught him the tricks of handling a safety belt, allowing him to build his towers to their present considerable height.

A volume of primer language essays about Italians of great accomplishment inspired Rodia to a feat matching those of his countrymen. "I do something big" he told a neighbor. At the age of 42, he suddenly decided to build, in his back garden, those tremendous structures out of chicken wire, bits of railway tie, steel rods, cement, sea shells, bits of broken glass, and tile - anything he or the neighborhood children could find. It took him 33 years to complete the towers and garden below.

In 1952, Bill Hale, now a Hollywood film director, made a documentary about Rodia and the towers, and marveled that Rodia, a frail 73-year-old man at the time, was still working alone, climbing the tower with his buckets of cement and decorations. James Johnson Sweeney has described Rodia as 'an intuitive genius of construction'. His is a pioneer work in a new kind of non-utilitarian architecture. One of the very few valid comparisons is with the work of Antonio Gaudi, architect of the Familia Sagrada in Barcelona. It is an example of a truly contemporary kind of beauty since its materials come very largely from scrap heaps, the discarded remnants of our city civilization. Including the reinforced concrete and steel, the materials used well reflect our contemporary society. It is also a superb demonstration of what is so often lacking in modern building - the use and function of color.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 7

The towers display an infinite variety of ornamentation while utilizing certain unifying design forms. The repetition and variation of certain shapes in the towers and in the wall and garden, provide an overall unity of design. The consistency of material, though varied in many ways, also provides a unifying factor that serves to relate the various elements of tower, garden and wall.

Architecturally, there are similarities in feeling and design between the work of the Spanish architect Gaudi and Rodia's work. The arched or scalloped wall may be a reflection of the Mission Revival or Spanish-Mediterranean architecture prevalent in the Los Angeles area. Associations with the Catholic Church may have influenced his decision to involve these forms in his work. It must also be remembered that at this particular time, parts of Los Angeles were literally crowded with oil drilling towers whose forms may have also influenced Rodia's work.

Rodia used his materials as any naive creator of folk art would handle his medium. He discovered color, form and beauty in simple objects around him. The trivial material loses its identity and becomes a legitimate medium equivalent to any traditional medium. The towers are a monument to human skill, energy, and a creative and intuitive mind.

In the late 1950's, the towers were declared unsafe by the City of Los Angeles and ordered torn down. A Committee was formed to preserve the towers. Hearings are held to determine the safety of the towers and decide their future. Attempts to enter into the record testimony regarding the aesthetic values of the towers were denied. The City finally agreed to abide by the results of a test devised by aeronautical engineer Bud Goldstone. Goldstone had earlier asserted that the towers contained a built-in redundancy making them particularly able to withstand stresses. Force equal to that of a full-blown hurricane was applied to the tallest towers. The testing device buckled, but the towers did not, and the City agreed to accept the towers as a gift and maintain them as part of a community center.

Remarking about the Watts Towers, Carl Sandburg said, "I am told that the Towers of Simon Rodia have withstood earthquakes that damaged official city buildings around them. If that is true, then they cannot be as unsafe as their opponents make it; I am also told that those who want to keep the towers standing have engaged qualified engineers who challenge the condemnation on technical grounds. If this remarkable modern primitive architecture has survived nature's blows, let us hope it will survive its critics too, and be spared the hand of the wrecker. To destroy the towers now would be an irrevocable deed.



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8

PAGE 2

There might be regrets about it later, but of what use are regrets?"

Jacob Bronowski, in his book The Ascent of Man, refers to the towers as his "favourite monuments, built by a man who had no more scientific equipment than a Gothic mason. These are the Watts Towers in Los Angeles, built by an Italian called Simon Rodia....'I had in mind to do something big', Simon Rodia had said, 'and I did'. ...He had learned his engineering skill as he went along, by doing, and by taking pleasure in the doing. ...the Watts Towers have survived, a monument in the twentieth century to take us back to the simple, happy, and fundamental skill from which all our knowledge of the laws of mechanics grows."