

JOE FUREY'S URBAN GROTTO: FOUND AND LOST

By Holly Metz

Sometimes it's only when out-of-town guests come calling that we break with daily patterns and go see prized local sights. So when Seymour Rosen, the Los Angeles-based founder of the preservation organization SPACES, called me in early February, 1989, I knew I was about to encounter something fantastic in my own backyard. A grassroots art site, he announced, had been discovered in a 5-room apartment in the Prospect Park section of Brooklyn, just a tunnel and bridge-crossing away from my home on the Jersey side of the Hudson River. Brooklyn Museum associate curator of painting and sculpture, Barbara Millstein, had — on the recommendation of the Museum of American Folk Art — called SPACES for guidance, after learning about the art environment from one of the building's owners.

Rosen asked: Would I go to Brooklyn with my partner, photographer Robert Foster, and see what could be done to save the site? Bob and I had spent several years documenting and trying to preserve environmental artworks in the tri-state area. As members of SPACES, we had reported on new and — all too frequently — endangered sites. During 1988 alone, we saw three New Jersey sites go down — victims of municipal destruction, neglect,

and, in urban areas, rising real estate costs. We were eager to provide the Brooklyn site's owners with information on the successful, on-site preservation of other grassroots art environments. Some of these formerly private spaces had been adopted by non-profits, then deeded to county caretakers.

Unfortunately, said Rosen, even if the owners of the row house agreed to donate the apartment to a non-profit organization, SPACES was unable to accept it. He concluded with a request: Would we agree to publish our findings first in SPACES's occasional newsletter, before publishing anywhere else? After all, Rosen said, he had been the first to pass along the tip. I agreed to send SPACES photos and text right away.

I then called Barbara Millstein for background. She was flabbergasted, she said, when she first entered the railroad apartment at 447 Sixteenth Street. Its last occupant, retired ironworker Joseph E. Furey, had completely covered every surface (but the floors) with brightly painted cardboard appliques, shells, and other found objects. Beginning the apartment's transformation after the death of his wife Lillian in 1981, Furey had moved out seven years later, in

July 1988, after he was twice attacked and robbed by crack addicts. The 83-year-old, self-taught artist had moved in with his son and family in Chester, New York. Maintenance men, sent to work on the newly vacated apartment in early 1989, alerted the owners, George Davis, and brothers Kevin and Vince Kelley, to the unusual condition of the apartment. Properly awed, Vince Kelley had called the Brooklyn Museum.

I asked the curator: Could the Brooklyn Museum become involved in on-site preservation? Millstein thought relocation more probable. I noted James Hampton's elaborate, gold and tin foil-covered construction, "Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly," had been preserved in its entirety by removal to the Smithsonian Institution's National Collection of Fine Arts. Millstein was unsure whether the mosaics, attached with Elmer's glue, could be removed from the apartment walls. I was planning to go see it, I said, and hoped to bring a restoration expert with me. At the close of our conversation, Millstein requested to conduct an in-depth interview with the site's creator. I readily agreed.

Next was a call to Vince

Intuit members were fortunate to have visited Joseph Furey's apartment in 1994, before it was demolished.

Kelley, to make an appointment to see the apartment and to discuss its preservation. Bob would take documentary black-and-white photographs and color slides. Kelley said he was unclear about plans for the artwork, but he spoke about it with a sense of wonder and amazement — a very promising sign. And though he said partner George Davis thought the art environment was "dreck," and sought only to be compensated for its "as-is" value (estimated at \$65,000 to \$80,000 despite its 50-year-old plumbing and electrical systems), Kelley listened attentively when I offered a few examples of on-site restoration.

Non-profit groups, I explained, had saved postman Jeff McKissack's "The Orange Show," a singular attraction celebrating the citrus in Houston, Texas, and restored Tressa "Grandma" Prisbrey's "Bottle Village" in Simi Valley, California (until the most recent round of earthquakes). The private Kohler Foundation's devotion to preserving Wisconsin grassroots art environments on site (with the expert advice of preservationists Don Howlett and Lisa Stone) had not yet been replicated on the east coast, but it seemed absurd to me that a "folk art environment," located



Photo: Robert Foster

within minutes of Manhattan and its flourishing folk art market, would not be able to find comparable patrons. We made an appointment for later that week. Representatives from the Museum of American Folk Art, he said, would be touring the site the same morning.

More phone calls followed. Lisa Stone was excited about the Furey site but also worried about its fate. She

recommended I contact Eliot Medow, a paint conservator who had worked with her on the Kohler Foundation-sponsored restoration of the symbolic landscape painting known as the "Painted Forest," which covers the interior of a fraternal lodge hall in Valton, Wisconsin. Medow had moved to Brooklyn. When I called him about the Furey apartment, he offered to meet us at the site, to assess its condition.

"Touring day" arrived and I tried to temper my enthusiasm with prudence. I've heard tantalizing descriptions of art sites that were in ruins by the time I got there. I've had people describe places that sounded like grassroots art sites but turned out to be dump sites.

Joseph Furey's creation, however, was the real thing: a pedestrian railroad transformed into a wondrous and joyful work

of art. We stood inside the narrow walkup with mouths agape, along with the three representatives of the Museum of American Folk Art: Didi Barrett, then editor of the Museum's *Clarion* quarterly, who had boldly used its pages to champion contemporary grassroots art sites, linking them with the tradition established by 19th century folk artists; assistant editor Willa Rosenberg; and Museum fellow Lee Kogan. The walls were

teeming with stippled dots of black, green, beige, and red paint, covering thousands of clam shells and hand-cut cardboard shapes: bow-ties (and the negative space left from those cut-outs), hearts, cross shapes, and diamonds. Plaster birds, on tiny pedestals, edged the walls, like pigeons lining a work-site. Mussel shells, spread open to resemble butterflies, were bordered by colored tile and chips of mirror, lima beans, and glass beads. Bits of collage - pictures of monkeys, butterflies, and dogs - dotted the wallpaper landscape mural.

Bob set up his tripod and began to shoot. Medow toured the rooms, testing areas damaged by water, studying browned glue and cement-filled shells nailed to plaster.

Much to our surprise, Joseph Furey and his son (also named Joe) suddenly arrived. Vigorous, with a dry wit, the tall, formally-attired artist answered questions from his new admirers. Joe Jr. occasionally added his own observations.

He was born in Camden, New Jersey, said Joe Sr., but soon after, his family returned to Newfoundland, their ancestral home. His wife was also of Newfoundland heritage, though the two met in the United States, and lived here for more than fifty years. More than forty of those, he added, were spent in the Prospect Park apartment.

A light-heavyweight

prizefighter in his youth, the elder Furey still had tremendous stamina, said his son. Joe Sr. had produced the vast majority of his wall art over a six-year period, beginning at age 75, when his life changed dramatically. His wife had died, and the men he used to gather with in the park, fellow unionists with whom he talked and played cards, had begun to pass away. (In the Newfoundland card game, "Auction," hearts were trump, explained Joe Jr., looking over to walls dotted with hearts.) His father was lonely, he said, but didn't want to leave the area.

Joe Sr. said he'd simply intended to make the apartment "look nice." Bob asked if he considered himself an artist. "More or less. An artiste," he replied, with a laugh. His son noted that his dad had never been to an art museum. He was best known as a crossword puzzle enthusiast. Over the years, however, Joe Sr. had also made discrete objects - mostly utilitarian, and always embellished with tile or painted plaster: jewelry boxes, patterned tables, a spanning knick-knack shelf he liked to call "the bridge," and later, bird-topped towers and castles he sold at flea markets. (A few of the surviving objects were later acquired by the Museum of American Folk Art and the Brooklyn Museum.)

Medow advised Vince Kelley that preservation was feasible, and stressed that even if the applied art could be

successfully removed in panels, the cost of removal and storage would be prohibitive. The owner seemed committed to on-site preservation. "I know I'll have some explaining to do to God if I don't take care of this right!" he exclaimed. He added that the owners were willing to wait several months to resolve the work's disposition, and encouraged us to send a proposal regarding non-profit adoption and preservation.

We left dazzled, and more than a little grateful for Kelley's enlightened response to this thorny (but splendid) impediment to speedy co-op conversion. Soon after the visit, I filled out a SPACES "field survey" of what we'd seen and discovered, and sent it to Seymour Rosen, along with several of Bob's black-and-white photographs. I also began to search for an appropriate non-profit organization to accept the property.

I began with the Kansas Grassroots Art Association, which had organized the restoration of Ed Galloway's magnificent carved concrete "Totem Pole Park" in Foyil, Oklahoma, and had overseen its transfer to the county historical society. But the long-standing preservationist and educational organization could not accept the property. The director of the New York City-based center for urban folk culture, City Lore, agreed to meet with me and Bob, after I noted that saving Joseph Furey's apartment was

consistent with the mission of their "Endangered Spaces" project, in which they advocated for the preservation of cherished, unofficial cultural sites. I assured them I would do all the legal and tax research necessary for adoption.

Through New York's Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts and Accountants for the Public Interest, I learned the apartment could be appraised for either its real estate value or its value as artwork; if donated to a federally tax-exempt non-profit, the former owners would be permitted a considerable deduction. Jon Carlin, an arts attorney and independent curator, offered his services as a pro bono consultant. Medow offered to restore the site, acting as caretaker during restoration. He proposed to exchange his labor for rent.

After considering this information, City Lore agreed in April to adopt the site, and to send the owners a letter outlining the advice I'd received. The letter was sent May 1. But by then the owners had decided they preferred to sell the apartment. Dejected, I inquired at the Foundation Center about possible grants from private foundations. I was advised that they were unlikely to provide funds for the purchase of property.

In the meantime, the Clarion published the first account of the site in its Spring 1989 issue. A small wave of enthusiastic press, retelling



Photo: Robert Postex

the story of the Brooklyn Museum's involvement, followed in late Spring and Summer. Furey's art, once seen only by family members, appeared in cable and local TV spots, in *Life* magazine, and in features in the *New York Times* and the *Daily News*.

Barbara Millstein put her energy into the work's complete photographic documentation. In early 1990, the Brooklyn Museum hired architectural photographer Addison Thompson to document the Furey apartment. Thompson, and his wife Lea Westerman, also a photographer, had been intrigued by the work after reading about it in the local press, but when Westerman saw her husband's images of the site, she suggested they live in and preserve Furey's creation. After some negotiation with the owners, the couple moved in.

Pleased that the site was now protected by knowledgeable and understanding caretakers, I proceeded to make my biggest mistake: I turned my attention away, to other environments in immediate

danger. I never met the Furey apartment's new caretakers or offered help.

Continuing stories about the couple's preservation work — in the press and by word of mouth — were impressive and reassuring. By all accounts the work of Thompson and Westerman was exquisite, painstakingly faithful to the original (including repainting walls; by painting around each individual piece). A Spring 1990 *Clarion* article noted the couple had gone to contract with Davis Kelley Associates.

On November 12, 1990, Joseph E. Furey died in Goshen, New York, a month after he had returned to Brooklyn to see the restored art environment.

Over the next few years, Thompson and Westerman allowed small groups to visit the site, including members of Intuit. Then, in January 1995, I received disturbing news from Lisa Stone, who had coordinated the Intuit visit; Lee Kogan, now director of the Folk Art Institute at the Museum of American Folk Art, had mentioned in passing that the Furey site had been destroyed. Was it true?

I called Barbara Millstein. "Yes," she said, "The artwork had been destroyed over the summer, after Thompson and Westerman moved out." She did not know many details, but said she believed the Furey site simply did not have the necessary constituency, an advocacy group, to mobilize effectively and

save it. Recalling the amount of favorable publicity it received, and the involvement of several New York City cultural organizations, I wondered about the fate of other, more confrontational sites, if this sweet, urban grotto could not find support. I was angry with myself for not providing support and backup to Westerman and Thompson, especially the knowledge that statutory moral rights for artists are operative in New York State. Such rights were successfully asserted recently by two academically-trained artists seeking to prevent their landlord from destroying the site-specific art environment they had constructed in his building. Perhaps a case could have been made for the Furey apartment, recognized by two major art museums as a significant artistic work.

I called Thompson for more details on the work's destruction. Davis Kelley Associates, he said, went bankrupt not long after he and Westerman moved in. The co-op plan was declared ineffective. No one took care of the building for over two years, despite court action. Then "two real estate sharks" bought the building, he said. Problems with the building continued, with tenants alleging mismanagement.

When Westerman and Thompson had their first child, he said, they began to consider moving to a larger apartment. The two photographers had kept Joseph Furey's

vision alive for four years, and wanted to ensure that its preservation would continue. They located several sympathetic artists willing to replace them as tenants and preservationists, and provided the building's owners with their names, before moving out in August.

The day after they moved, Thompson said, the bathroom and kitchen were torn out — a possibility the couple had considered, since those rooms were in desperate need of modernization and structural stabilization. But the following day, Thompson recalled bitterly, workers gutted the rest of the apartment, tossing its contents down a chute to the backyard, for cartage.

My last call was to Lee Kogan at the Museum of American Folk Art. "It kind of got away from me," Kogan said, when I asked her how involved the Museum had been during this final stage. But, she added, she had visited the site during its restoration phase, and had then talked with the Furey family. She had much more as-yet-unpublished information on Furey's art that she would eventually present in manuscript form. I said I looked forward to seeing more scholarly writing on the work. But right now, I'm still trying to understand how, in the shadow of the New York City art world, we could not find the resources and the will to save the gift Joe Furey left us, that we had all loved so well.