

SHORT REPORT

In Pursuit of an Impact: Local Outreach and Investment in the Context of the Watts Towers Conservation Project

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The Watts Towers, a US National Historic Landmark in Los Angeles, are a work of art created by Italian immigrant Sabato (also known as Simon) Rodia (1879–1965) between 1921 and 1954. Since 2011 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has worked to formulate a preservation and maintenance protocol for the Towers and has provided daily preservation maintenance. The Towers hold important value for Watts, a neighborhood that faces significant economic and social challenges. Responding to the project's context, LACMA pursued a local hiring policy and implemented a training program for local high school students. Challenges encountered in the development of an outreach program and ideas for future preservation-related outreach and local investment are discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Watts Towers; conservation; community; outreach; training; planning

The Watts Towers

Since 2011, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has worked on contract to the Cultural Affairs Department of the City of Los Angeles on the update of a comprehensive conservation plan for the restoration of the Watts Towers, a National Historic Landmark. Created by Italian immigrant Sabato (also known as Simon) Rodia (1879–1965) between 1921 and 1954, the seventeen sculptures range from 3 to more than 30 meters in height, and were constructed of scrap iron covered in Portland cement and ornamented with scavenged material including glass and tile fragments, shells, and stones (**Figure 1**). Rodia obtained this ornamental material from numerous sources including neighborhood trash collections, local tile factory waste, and (in the case of shells) the Pacific shoreline. LACMA's work in the planning phase, which commenced in 2011 and is still ongoing, has consisted of research into the nature of deterioration, development of treatment protocols, conservation materials evaluation, and daily maintenance. A fluctuating project staff of conservation scientists, conservators with experience in both art and architectural conservation, and project assistants from a variety of backgrounds have taken on the complicated range of tasks involved in the project's planning phase. While preservation is their primary mission, the LACMA team also engaged in outreach and investment in the surrounding community, including local hiring and a multi-year training program. However, finding partners

and platforms for community engagement has proved challenging, and LACMA's route towards community investment reflects these difficulties. This paper will outline the social, economic, and political contexts in which the project functioned and propose potential strategies to increase future community engagement.

Neighborhood Context

The Watts Towers are embraced by the South Los Angeles community for their artistic significance and as symbols of resilience. The Towers were threatened with demolition in 1959, when the City of Los Angeles declared them unsafe. The Committee for Simon Rodia in Watts, an organiza-



Figure 1: View of the tallest Towers, 2012 (Los Angeles County Museum of Art Watts Towers Conservation Project).

tion of artists, engineers, and local residents, petitioned to save the Towers and succeeded by commissioning a structural load test that demonstrated the sculptures' stability. Since their near-demolition, the Towers have been a rallying point for community redevelopment. The adjacent City-staffed and -funded Watts Towers Art Center (WTAC) has provided art and music education for local residents and served as an art exhibition venue since 1964 and is an important local stakeholder. The WTAC also runs the public tour program at the Towers, and has historic ties to the Towers' protection from demolition.

The neighborhood surrounding the Towers faces significant economic and social challenges. Watts has the fourth-lowest household median income of Los Angeles' 272 neighborhoods (Los Angeles Times, n.d.); median household income was \$32,514 in 2010, with one third of residents living below the poverty line (Censusreporter, n.d.). As of 2010, approximately 68% of residents had less than a high school education (Censusreporter, n.d.). Watts also has the lowest life expectancy of any neighborhood in California and needs increased access to healthy food and recreational opportunities (City of Los Angeles 2013). Hard-working Watts residents, approximately two-thirds of them Latino and one-third of them African-American, would benefit in numerous ways from increased business investment and more neighborhood amenities. However, neither tourism at the Towers nor public community development funding in their proximity has spurred significant local business investment. The creation of an Empowerment Zone by the federal government in the 1990s, which targeted tax credits, low cost loans, and grants to businesses in the area, did not increase overall economic activity (U.S. GAO 2006). Watts was a focus area of the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency before its dissolution in 2011, but most projects focused on affordable housing and cultural facilities rather than economic development (CRA/LA 2010). Although businesses line the commercial thoroughfare along 103rd Street four blocks away, there are relatively few neighborhood-serving cafes or shops within a half-mile radius of the Towers, and therefore few locations for locals and visitors to linger (and spend) in close proximity.

The Conservation Project and Community Outreach

LACMA's involvement in the project planning phase has brought increased attention to the site. In view of quickened media interest (Cooper 2011; Nagourney 2011; Jennings 2013) and in the context of project fundraising, staff members wondered whether such interest could be harnessed to benefit the community. Renewed public interest in the Towers might provide opportunities to raise awareness and investment and facilitate synergy with the efforts of other stakeholders. Long recognized as a cultural asset, the Towers could serve as an economic asset if their value could be capitalized on through neighborhood and community planning processes (Throsby 2001, 6–7). This idea was certainly not new, but the time was ripe for its re-exploration.

It was hoped at the beginning of LACMA's contract that the project team could partner with the WTAC to spread the message regarding the Towers and their catalyzing potential. LACMA envisioned this collaborative relationship to include community outreach, joint tours, and educational programming that integrated preservation topics; some of these activities were articulated in the project's initial 2011 memorandum of understanding between LACMA and the City. However, challenges were encountered that made partnering difficult. There is a long-standing history of competition for funding between contracted preservation teams and the WTAC. In the context of recession-era budget cuts that reduced the City's Cultural Affairs Department staff by up to a third, LACMA's work was in part supported by the City and may have been perceived as a funding threat (Boehm 2010; Schrank 2008, 289). Moreover, the operation of several City-owned arts and recreational facilities had recently been taken over by non-profit organizations, and fears of being co-opted by LACMA were not unjustified (Boehm 2010). While LACMA leadership worked to communicate the conservation project's mission and the nature of their program objectives, it is possible that their message was not framed from a common perspective or with enough emphasis to bridge the gap of distrust.

Faced with the need to move forward with their contract objectives, LACMA instead pursued an independent path of local hiring and employment-based training to connect to the Watts community. Over four years, LACMA has hired three local residents (two research assistants and one site maintenance worker) as part of a small, fluctuating onsite project team totaling three to six people. While hiring numbers were necessarily low due to the scale of the conservation project in the planning stage, it was felt to be an important part of the program. By hiring locally, LACMA provided professional growth opportunities to a few individuals and used the opportunity to transfer knowledge and build local capacities for employment in a skilled construction and preservation context. The local hiring program also invested in the local economy, providing income that was (at least in part) spent locally.

LACMA's program of intense study and research and small project staff size made it imperative that any educational program occur on a scale conducive to meeting the project goals and timeline. Funded by a donation from the Ahmanson Foundation, LACMA established a summer training program with students from the local all-male Verbum Dei High School. Project staff structured the program in a way that allowed them to focus more of their own efforts on conservation activities, by 'training the trainers': training recent graduates of the UCLA/Getty Master's Program in the Conservation of Archaeological and Ethnographic Materials, who in turn led and mentored local high school students onsite. Four mentors and four mentees worked over the summers of 2012–13, all as paid employees: conservation graduate mentors, conservators Lily Doan, Elizabeth Drolet, Molly Gleeson, and Suzanne Morris, were chosen by contacting UCLA Associate Professor Ellen Pearlstein, who solicited interested and available local conservators. The high school



Figure 2: Mentor–mentee team working onsite, 2012 (Los Angeles County Museum of Art Watts Towers Conservation Project).

mentees, Jesus Real, Hector Morataya, Rodrigo Reyes, and Raúl Valencia, applied to the program by submitting essays expressing their interest, which were reviewed by their art teacher and LACMA's project manager.

Mentors participated in a week of pre-program training, in which they were familiarized with the site and the proposed program activities; upon commencement of the program, they in turn trained the mentees with assistance from LACMA's site manager. The mentor–mentee teams completed conservation treatments, documented sculptures, and produced comprehensive histories of individual sculptures as final projects (**Figure 2**). The teams' accomplishments were especially impressive given the additional challenges of working outside and onsite in a location regularly toured by visitors. Mentors and mentees mastered the careful ballet of moving low scaffolding safely throughout the site, working on hot days and around tour groups, and documenting their work using tablet computers. The summer program provided valuable skills training and arts exposure for the local high school students and leadership training for conservator mentors.

Challenges and Future Work

One of the more challenging aspects of LACMA's program has involved communicating preservation-related activities to members of the community and visitors in the

most effective manner. Community members desire and deserve to know what is happening at the Towers. Without avenues to communicate the project staff's activities and enthusiasm, the museum will continue to occupy 'outsider' status, as the latest of several consultants that have participated in project management at the Towers over the years. With the exception of presentations at public meetings hosted by the City's Cultural Affairs Department, project members have mainly utilized informal opportunities to communicate with WTAC staff, neighbors, and visitors regarding their preservation goals and activities. In addition, a website was developed to serve as a research archive of the history of the site's restoration and to provide a summary of current work: <http://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/watts-towers>.

LACMA's efforts in the area of outreach have the opportunity to increase during the upcoming large-scale restoration phase. While full restoration (which has been estimated to cost around \$5 million) is not funded, it is anticipated that a combination of public and private funding will fall into place in the next few years – enough to support the restoration of the three tall towers, with additional work to take place on the others as more money becomes available. During restoration, part or all of the site may be inaccessible to visitors for reasons of safety and egress. To prepare the community for the changes ahead, the project team is considering a campaign of targeted outreach in partnership with the Department of Cultural Affairs (Kielb, *pers. comm.* 21 July 2016).

A multi-level approach would have the best chance of allowing the preservation of the Towers to resound on a larger community scale. In the realm of outreach, a campaign of specialized tours, community presentations, graphic displays, and social media messaging that explains preservation activities would raise public awareness of the value of the Towers as a cultural resource. In addition to highlighting their essential value, such communication would capitalize on the public's active interest in how the Towers were built and what is happening to them currently.

In terms of immediate economic benefits that could be achieved through project hiring, tentative plans include hiring approximately six technicians who are South Los Angeles residents during large-scale restoration (Kielb, *pers. comm.* 21 July 2016). These new above-living-wage jobs would invest tens of thousands of dollars in the lives and neighborhoods of staff members.

Moving up the chain, partnering with local stakeholder groups to spread and bolster complementary messages is key; LACMA has not yet formed a partnership with a local organization and become part of a larger narrative. By getting to know local organizations such as the Greater Watts-Willowbrook Chamber of Commerce, the Watts/Century Latino Organization, the Watts Labor Community Action Committee, and the Watts Neighborhood Council, the LACMA project team could communicate their mission, access neighborhood resources, and possibly identify other avenues of collaboration.

Finally, taking a place at the table in local planning and redevelopment initiatives could allow the museum to leverage its work in the context of the larger community

framework. For example, in 2011 Watts was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant through Our Town, a creative place-making program that seeks to revitalize neighborhoods through increased tourism and through urban design interventions. Watts' Our Town project involves the creation of an art-filled walkway from the Towers to the historic Watts train station, which will be re-used as an art gallery (National Endowment for the Arts 2014). Tying into this program in some way would seem a natural step in reinforcing the connection between cultural preservation and local development, though to date no participation by the LACMA team has occurred.

The nature of community outreach and development means there is no set formula: what is required depends on the nuanced identity and assets of each place and the ability to forge relationships within it. LACMA's outreach activities have been limited to date by a strained relationship with the primary, long-established local stakeholder. The project's local hiring policy and summer training program constituted a good start, bringing people from diverse backgrounds into the field of art and preservation. As LACMA's tenure with the Watts Towers project continues, it is hoped that growing knowledge of the community and strengthened relationships with its members will lead to more opportunities for connection, outreach, and far-reaching impacts of preservation. The Watts Towers Conservation Project team should aim for community impacts in both the near and far term: near-term impacts from sharing the excitement and mission of preservation with a wider audience and far-term impacts from working with local stakeholders to improve the neighborhood's prospects for economic growth and well-being.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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