For some artists, their canvas is their home—literally. Called by various titles—visionary artists, outsider artists, intuitive artists, environment builders—these creators transform their personal space in extraordinary ways that transcend cultural norms. Through spectacular material means, these artists integrate their work with their local environment, resulting in highly unique forms of place making.

The art forms that these artists use vary widely and might range from two-dimensional written tracts on plywood to metal sculptures of recycled “junk” to concrete buildings with embedded mosaics to unusual decorative additions made to a home or yard. Often the artists rely on inventive techniques to achieve their visions, including reworking their technical methods, revisiting existing pieces, and evolving their process of creation. The resulting installations might be immense, in size or quantity or both. They are personal statements, reflecting both the place where they are situated and the person who created them.

The Chauvin Sculpture Garden in South Louisiana is such an art environment, but it is not alone. Dotted across the U.S. and the rest of the world, these environments are considered treasures of creativity by some and neighborhood embarrassments by others. They are a type of cultural landscape worthy of study and preservation but typically quirky enough to fall outside the purview of regular heritage preservation or cultural resource management efforts.

Luckily for art environments and their artists, the Kohler Foundation and the John Michael Kohler Art Center (JMKAC), both of Sheboygan County, Wisconsin, are committed to preserving

About the photo: An intern does preservation work at the Wisconsin Concrete Park.
All photos by Anne Pryor, courtesy Wisconsin Teachers of Local Culture.
extraordinary art environments nationally and internationally through education, conservation, and creative exchange. Educators will also appreciate that JMKAC has developed a series of lessons on the art environments curated by the Kohler Foundation.

Educators can approach the JMKAC materials through the biographies of 11 different artists or through eight cross-curricular big ideas: story, transformation, place, devotion, identity, healing and well-being, nature, or objects. There also are nine beautifully designed and sometimes extensive lesson plans available for download as PDFs.

Another resource for educators is SPACES (Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments), an organization that maintains an expansive archive on art environments and self-taught artistic activity around the world. The SPACES team has digitized and made available online documentation of sites on six continents and all 50 states. Educators can use the available artist biographies, photos, videos, and maps for student exploration and inspiration. Searchable by site name or location, the online archive can also be searched by types of art environments, such as Homes Fully Transformed, Figures and Animals, Kinetic Environments, or Smaller-than-Life—all concepts that are intriguing to young imaginations.

Folkvine.org has a highly artistic design and is less straightforward to navigate than more contemporary sites. Nevertheless, its material is valuable. Created by an interdisciplinary team at the University of Central Florida, Folkvine features ten traditional artists in Florida, among whom are several who have transformed their environments in monumental ways. Each featured artist has imagery, video and audio clips, and text. One example is Taft Richardson’s garden, which includes many of his visionary bone sculptures and evokes both a community that has been displaced and the spirituality he learned from that community when it was vibrant.

Art environments can be sourced as curriculum by educators in multiple ways.

• They can serve as a jumping-off place for hands-on art making for young artists and an engaging pathway into curriculum organized around big ideas, such as “Transformation” (See JMKAC lesson plan, “Kinetic Collaborations,” pg. 178).

• A focus on art can pair with a focus on creative writing, as many visionary art environment builders concoct elaborate narratives to accompany their material creations. Upon leaving the salvage and wreckage business, Tom Every became Dr. Evermore, builder of the Forevertron, a 50-foot-long and 120-foot-tall “space capsule,” as well as many other scrap metal machines with fantastical imagined purposes. Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art offers a Scarecrow Flamingo Sculptures lesson plan inspired by Dr. Evermore’s Forevertron.

• STEM educators can expand into STEAM by exploring the engineering aspects of visionary sculptures, as in this lesson plan from TeachEngineering on different types of forces or this lesson from STEAM Art Room on aerodynamics.

• Place-based educators can have their students employ ethnographic research to explore the local culture, history, economy, and environment that influenced the production of the visionary environment. The Kids’ Guide to Local Culture, produced by the Madison Children’s Museum, can provide conceptual grounding and specific queries for students studying the cultural ecology of extraordinary artistic (or everyday ordinary) places in their own communities.
A folkloristic approach to visionary art environments sees them as a form of place making by individuals in dialogue with their natural and cultural environment. Folkloristic principles require focus on the artist as much as on the artwork itself, with interviews being a primary methodology for understanding the context of the creation. For example, interviews conducted with Fred Smith, the builder of the Wisconsin Concrete Park in rural Phillips, Wisconsin, reveal that some of the Park’s 237 embellished concrete statues represent community members Smith admired for occupational skills in homesteading or logging, two occupations practiced by Smith himself and key to the area’s economic identity of the 20th century. Other statues represent Native Americans, which might raise contemporary questions of appropriation for visitors to the site. In interviews conducted by Stephen Beal and Jim Zanzi in 1975, Smith explained that he was upset with racist treatment of the Ojibwe of Wisconsin and defended their right to live in their ancestral homelands not far from Phillips (Friends of Fred Smith, Wisconsin Concrete Park). The larger-than-life statues are meant to convey Smith’s belief that Native Americans should be looked up to.

Folklorists look for expressions of cultural identity in artistic creations, including visionary art environments. Visionary art environments often push up against the boundaries of what a community finds acceptable, and by exploring that prickly edge we learn about what matters most to the locality regarding its self-representation. Often, a visionary art environment becomes a safe and accepted place only after the artists’ death, when they are no longer a threat to the norm. Some members of the Phillips community found the Wisconsin Concrete Park an eyesore and hoped it would be destroyed. The Kohler Foundation, and then the nonprofit organization The Friends of Fred Smith, helped to prevent that outcome and eventually turned the site into an anchoring point for touristic and cultural activities in the community.

A similar struggle has occurred since the 2001 passing of artist Mary Nohl of Fox Point, Wisconsin, who was so ostracized during her life as to be labeled “The Witch of Fox Point.” Local critique of Nohl derogatorily reflects sexist disapproval of a single woman who eschewed social norms. Over four decades, Nohl transformed her childhood home and yard on a bluff above Lake Michigan into a visionary art environment filled with statues, paintings, carvings, assemblages, and other artistic designs inspired by the wind, sky, water, and land of her locale. Her visionary place making stood in contrast to the refined tastes of an exclusive neighborhood that grew up around her cottage, creating a conflict in the community about its identity. Since 2015, the John Michael Kohler Art Center has been leading preservation efforts of the site and working to find resolution with the local community.

Visionary art environments can be of interest and value to educators and folklorists as they can reveal fascinating intersections between design, art, engineering, physics, culture, environment, society, and place.

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