

Local junior high students are building towers the Rodia way

By Hunter Drohojowska

The most notorious landmark in Los Angeles is, without a doubt, Sam Rodia's Towers in Watts. That elusive Italian immigrant left a gift to Los Angeles in the form of eight towers, two of them 10 stories high. Covering them with shards of pottery, seashells and glass, Rodia took 33 years to complete his task. This folk sculpture draws thousands of tourists annually, yet many Angelenos have never visited the place.

The Herald has mounted a campaign to generate awareness of Rodia's Towers and their importance to our cultural heritage. Along with establishing a committee to save the Towers, raise funds and produce a design *chalet* — a competition that takes place within a short amount of time — concerning the revitalization of the Watts neighborhood, the Herald is sponsoring a Watts Towers Contest among the junior high schools of the L.A. Unified School District.

Student groups were asked to construct models reflecting the spirit of Rodia's Towers. As Rodia named his Towers "Nuestra Pueblo" (Our Town) and incorporated information and artifacts from his native Italy, students were asked to reflect the images of their school and community. Their models can be made of any materials, either bought or found, but have to be assembled by hand without welding or bolting — just as Rodia built his Towers. They can be no larger than 4 feet wide and 5 feet tall.

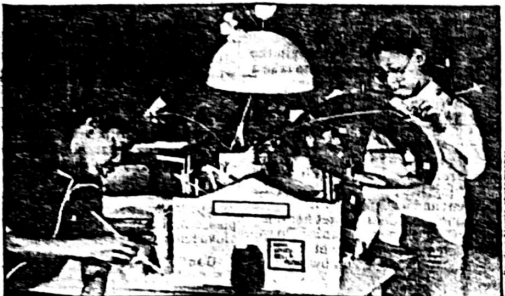
During recent visits to various schools, one fact was immediately and ironically apparent: Few of the students had ever been to the Watts Towers, and many of them had never even seen a picture of the structures. At Mid-City Alternative School, in a primarily black neighborhood on the corner of Adams and Arlington, student William Byrd, 14, shrugged off the Towers as "too much junk." He gestured toward his class's model as a vast improvement.

Mid-City is a small progressive school, kindergarten through 12th grade, with only 350 students and 13 teachers trying to foster one-on-one learning experiences. The students at Mid-City have composed their model on the base of a cardboard Spanish mission. On the front of the

Japanese and an illustration of the Watts Towers.

These students didn't pull any punches but expressed both the positive and the negative in this city's heritage. A freeway, with road signs and stalled cars, swoops over the roof, meeting a bend of railroad track — a symbol of the origins of the Chinese population. An airplane takes off to one side, on another there is a windsurfer hovering over a beach complete

panic, there are silhouettes representing four ethnic groups: a curly-haired black, a gold-colored Japanese in a kimono, a brown figure wearing a sombrero and a Caucasian in a pilgrim's hat. These figures, the teacher explained, will be in a circle, surrounded by cutouts of observing children. In the center will be a globe. "It's the idea of support and unity," she continued. "A circle within a circle."



At Mid-City Alternative School, students Deshauna Jones, left, and Carl Kemp are at work on their Watts Towers Contest entry, which includes a stretch of freeway.

with palm trees, sand, a sailboat and oil derricks standing in the blue water. Darning the structure is half of an orange, topped by a missile to represent the aerospace industry, a bunch of plastic grapes for agriculture and an Olympic button.

The button was donated by student James Partee, 14, who said, "I thought something about the Olympics would be necessary. It's only the second time and maybe the last time it will be held in L.A., and I thought we should pay tribute. It changed the city a lot for two weeks." The teacher, Pat Harriett, explained of the donated objects, "We could have purchased materials, but I don't think that would be as effective. The decisions had more to do with a sense of personal heritage and a sense of what was important. The model is more symbolic than traditionally realistic."

At Berendo Junior High School, the phone is answered "Beautiful Berendo." Indeed, the school, on 11th Street between Normandy and Vermont, was tidy. Children were playing baseball in the yard. Upstairs, teacher Carmen Monne had students in the hallway spray-painting figures cut out of card-

Oswaldo Gutierrez, 14, said, "It stands for people united together from different cultures and countries." Seated at a table, Lam Ha, 14, and Nancy Win, 13, both from Vietnam, and Chitra See-Loe, 14, from Thailand, were diligently cutting felt into the shapes of birds of paradise, the flower of L.A. Of their tower, Win remarked, "It's like all the students of Berendo, all nationalities coming together." Once again, none of the students had been to the Watts Towers.

Virgil Junior High School, on Vermont Avenue at First Street, is across from the Korea Times. According to teacher Katilin Stazer, Korea is just one of the 52 nationalities represented among 2,400 students at the school. Things are not so tidy here. "This is the first neighborhood many immigrants come to," said Stazer.

As the teacher tried to explain, exuberant pupils gathered around, eager for attention. "We wanted to show the front of the school, and the flags are to show all different cultures," enthused Davidson Mendes, 11, pointing to the model. Marcione Evans, 12, rushed over to indicate his contributions: the plastic flowers and painted lawn in



For their entry in the Herald's Watts Towers Contest, students at Virgil Junior High School have constructed a model of their school, topped by a Statue of Liberty and the flags of several countries. Students at the school represent 52 nationalities.



This article continues the Herald's effort to encourage the nurturing of the Watts Towers. Our purpose is to celebrate that magical monument and to explore the social and symbolic importance of the Towers to its neighborhood and to Los Angeles at large.

front of the school and the Statue of Liberty towering on top of the structure. "Welcoming the new immigrants," added Trang Ta, 11. Again, many had not been to the Towers and their teacher hadn't shown them a picture so they "wouldn't have any preconceptions." Instead, they incorporated their ideas by cutting pictures out of magazines of things that represent America to them and attaching them to a structure of green and gold mesh. There were pictures of Michael Jackson and Tom Selleck, of computers and hamburgers, of a sculpture from the Congo and a still from an old movie. On either side of the model were papier-mache dolls

dressed in the costumes of different cultures. Pointing to a wall of the model high school, Trang said, "And there is some graffiti which are on our walls." There followed some dispute as to who so expertly executed the graffiti. Another student presented a drawing of the flag of Guatemala to Stazer, something yet to be added to the United Nations collection already on the roof of the model. "Marcione is sensitive to Ethiopia," Stazer said of the globe topping the model and printed with, "We are the world, we are the children." The teacher continued, "They are conscious of the fact that things are not perfect in this world, and they feel a sense of responsibility."

"This is the first chance many of these students have had to work together," Stazer said. "Some didn't like each other when it started, but in the process, they got along. They came in on Saturdays and after school, shared each other's lunches." Asked why so few of the students had been to the Watts Towers, she said, "We don't have field trips. There is less of that all the time. There might be one year for an art department with three teachers and three tracks."

In Sherman Oaks, at Milliken Junior High, students are getting ready to go on a field trip. Phyllis Landman, head of the art department, is using special funds from the school system's Small Grants Program. Landman is teaching a course called Ethnic Art, and her students are learning the terms and forms of Japanese, Chinese and

Korean art. Their field trip is to Little Tokyo. Consequently, their interpretations of the Watts Towers, too, are inspired by pagodas and Japanese temples. Due to bus- ing, of 1,650 students at Milliken, about 56 percent are members of minority groups. Rene Sanchez, 15, and Cesar Mora, 14, built a three-story "Japanese tower." "The roof is pointing upwards to keep the bad spirits away," explained Sanchez. "We are still going to add a bamboo bridge and a pond." Neither of them had been to the Watts Towers, and neither saw any particular relationship between their model and Rodia's structure. Landman said, "They are learning about tatami mats, shoji screens and quiet colors, so they can apply them to the towers."

Armando Villasenor, 15, Antonio Reyes, 15, and Angela Jimenez, 15, gathered around their four-story tower, painted red. Jimenez indicated the characters on the walls and said, "They mean peace and faith." "The fishes on the wall are decoration," added Villasenor. None of them had ever seen the Watts Towers, either.

A group of judges from the art and architecture communities will judge the entries from different schools next week. Prizes to the schools will be \$1,000 for first, \$500 for second and \$250 for third.

A message to the winner: Please arrange a field trip to the Watts Towers.

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.