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## **Divine Disorder, Conserving the Chaos: Conference on the Conservation of Folk and Outsider Art**

Oral Presentation Submission:

### **Buttressing American Folk Architecture as a Cultural and Community Resource**

ABSTRACT:

Folk Architecture, characterized as a vernacular architectural style with visionary or folk art components, speckles the American landscape and serves as a physical representation of creative exploration in combination with spatial utility. Typically created by persons not trained in building design or structural engineering, folk architecture sites often exhibit connections, materials, configurations and aesthetics found in no other type of structure. These works comprise a unique sculptural building typology based on self-taught craftsmanship and decorative desires. In preserving these structures, challenges are not only found in the technical difficulties in repairing and replacing atypical materials and forms, but also in saving cultural landmarks that by definition defy common perceptions of architectural significance; often laying at odds within their surroundings or local context. Folk Architecture sites are often misunderstood and misinterpreted, causing a lack of appreciation for the sites as both a unique vernacular and as works of art. This has led to a lack of preservation options for Folk Arch sites, and many of our country's finest examples are experiencing high levels of neglect, abandonment and destruction.

For the past several years I have been researching, visiting and documenting folk architecture sites across the country. The goal of these studies is to gain an understanding of why people build these types of artistic architectural structures; how the local populations relate to these objects; and how these sites come together to tell a larger story about American life. Explored Folk Architecture sites include, but are not limited to:

Beer Can House - Houston, TX  
Bottle Houses - Cap-Egmont, PEI, Canada  
Cathedral of Junk - Austin, TX  
Dinsmoor's Garden of Eden - Lucas, KS  
House on Revere - San Francisco, CA  
Mystery Castle - Phoenix, AZ  
Nit Witt Ridge - Cambria, CA

Orange Show - Houston, TX  
Peterson Rock Garden - Redmond, OR  
Pignatoro Castle - Santa Fe, TX  
RichArt's Art Yard - Centralia, WA  
Salvation Mountain - Niland, CA  
Swetzville Zoo - Fort Collins, CO  
Watts Towers - Los Angeles, CA

Protecting our country's Folk Architecture sites is going to take a reevaluation of our standards of preservation as they are not adaptable for application to lesser-known, unclassifiable cultural resources. Many different methods have been engaged to promote, protect and re-use these sites - at varying levels of success. As individual locations, Folk Arch structures often face both love and hate within their local community; as a 'special site' and/or the "strange place". Cataloging and presenting Folk Architecture as a widely dispersed group, a succinctly defined genre, may be the key to broadening the acceptance of each sites value. Parallel to the nature of the works themselves, the art of promoting such structures often falls in the hands of untrained, yet creative minds. As a professional, I struggle with acceptance of this level of preservation despite its parallelism to the characteristic of the vernacular. Perhaps in combination with a professional guide of best practices of Folk Architecture as a vibrant community asset will provide a strong foundation for preserving America's Folk Architecture.

#### BIOGRAPHY:

Delaney Harris-Finch is a historic preservationist residing in Brooklyn, New York with past addresses in Denver, LA and Houston. After earning a Bachelor of Architecture at the University of Houston, she jumped coasts to obtain a Masters of Science in Historic Preservation at Pratt Institute in 2009. Shortly after, Delaney hit the road on [Folk Architecture Tour](#), an ongoing independent research project documenting folk art/arch structures, novelty architecture, and American roadside attractions. When not driving solo across the country, Delaney works as a creative consultant focusing on new media applications in historic preservation; a topic she will be teaching at Columbia University in Fall 2011. Delaney's professional goals revolve around providing holistic and creative approaches in merging architectural design, preservation and planning for under represented communities and cultural resources.