

Sarah Modiano, “Magical Mosaics: Preserving Isaiah Zagar’s Philadelphia Art Environment.” Advisor: Mary Jablonski. Readers: Kay Healy and Ward Dennis.

One of the nation’s most amazing, yet least known, art environments is concentrated in the southern quadrant of one of the largest cities in America. It is the product of an eccentric and brilliant Philadelphia artist who through decades of prolific mosaicking, has turned the city into his own art environment. The colorful and vivacious art environment embodies the character of its creator, Isaiah Zagar.

This paper contextualizes the work of Philadelphia mosaic artist, Isaiah Zagar within the genre of art environments and the development of South Philadelphia, and articulates an argument for the significance of Zagar’s work.

Zagar creates large-scale architectural mosaics that use non-traditional materials, such as South American folk art, cut mirror, found objects, and re-glazed industrial tiles embedded in brightly colored grout. His unusual mosaics can be found on building facades, garages, and walls throughout Philadelphia.

The most significant of Zagar’s mosaics is Philadelphia’s Magic Gardens (“PMG”), which is an elaborate complex of inter-woven spaces with decorated architectural surfaces. PMG is Zagar’s opus, and an art environment unto itself. But, Zagar’s Philadelphia art environment is far greater than PMG alone; it encompasses the city of Philadelphia. Zagar’s more than 125 mosaics throughout the city constitute one exceptional art environment, which has become both a source of pride and an emblem of the city.

To date, this exceptional creation has received little attention and no conservation treatment. This paper articulates the wide array of preservation challenges Zagar’s fragile work faces, such as real estate issues and materials deterioration, and offers specific preservation recommendations that address those challenges.



Figure 1 Philadelphia's Magic Gardens.



Figure 2 Homage to Mike Mattio, Master Plumber.