

God's Architects;

Documenting the Materials, Methods, and Self-Taught Builders of the South

Abstract for: Divine Disorder, Conserving the Chaos: Conference on the Conservation of Folk and Outsider Art



"God is the greatest Architect. I am only his assistant" - Reverend HD Dennis

Scattered about remote back roads and highways are self-taught builders operating tirelessly on folk art environments. They dedicate decades to building colorful spires, Dixie cup castles, and paint covered mountains as a matter of faith and singular vision. These artists create backyard worlds which challenge our ideas of architecture, the effects of training on creativity, and man's relationship with God. This presentation tells the story of an exploration in documenting outsider art environments including the materials, methods, and personalities that start to form a self-taught typology.

In the summer of 2005 Emilie Taylor received a travel grant to research and document self-taught and visionary builders around the south. As an Architectural educator and Design Build instructor she set out to document the details, building process, and uncommon use of materials relevant to design professionals. While searching for the themes that bound these built environments together she soon realized that understanding the personalities behind buildings was a crucial part of understanding the creations. These creators conflate and exaggerate our shared human struggle in their work, incorporating their sorrows, insights, and culture, as well as strong religious

beliefs, into original spaces that function as relics of their unique time and place. Emilie shared her findings with filmmaker and professor Zack Godshall and together the two decided that film was the medium most able to capture the spirit and scope of these spaces.

In November 2005, Godshall set out from south Louisiana with a camera, tripod, and microphone to interview and document the work of Floyd Banks Jr., a divinely inspired castle builder living in the east Tennessee hill country. Three years later the team completed a feature-length film that examines and celebrates the work of Banks along with four other solitary builders who have constructed similar environments. This documentary, *God's Architects*, tells the stories of five divinely inspired builders and their enigmatic creations. The film details how and why these marginalized creators, with neither funding nor blueprints, construct their self-made environments.

While focusing on the process that led to a feature length documentary, this presentation also includes information on the individuals featured in that film; Floyd Banks Jr (The Castle), Reverend H.D. Dennis (Margaret's Grocery), Leonard Knight (Salvation Mountain), Kenny Hill (Chauvin Sculpture Garden), and Shelby Ravellette (Lacey Michele's Castle)

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A native of South Louisiana, Emilie works at the Tulane School of Architecture as an adjunct professor and design build manager at the Tulane City Center. Taylor's education includes a technical building background at the University of Southern Mississippi followed by a Masters Degree in Architecture at Tulane. Through the Tulane City Center Emilie works on projects and community partnerships that provide opportunities for faculty and students to engage real issues in the community through design. Taylor's recent community design build studios include Grow Dat Youth Farm, Project Ish at Hagar's House, and the Storypod at the Neighborhood Story Project. Emilie's creative practice includes exploring the intersection between formal and informal architectural practice.

The film, *God's Architects*, was directed and edited by Zach Godshall. Godshall earned an MFA in Film Directing from UCLA in 2005 and returned to south Louisiana where he continues to live and work. He has completed three feature films, *LOW AND BEHOLD*, *GOD'S ARCHITECTS*, and *LORD BYRON*, two of which have been Official Selections of the Sundance Film Festival. Godshall currently teaches film and screen writing at LSU in Baton Rouge where he is currently working on a documentary about the wetlands.