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THE ORANGE SHOW:

How Jeff McKissack's Vision Changed Houston

by Rebecca J. Jacobs-Pollez

The Orange Show is considered by many to be one of the most important visionary environments in the world. The American Institute of Architects called it the product of rare genius.[1] Its creator, Jeff Davis McKissack, wrote his autobiography when he built the Show, incorporating significant events from his life into his creation. Although described differently by every one who has visited it, McKissack thought of it as a monument to the orange, good health, nutrition, and hard work.

The Museum. Paul Hester 1984

Sideshow foyer. Paul Hester 1984

Wheels and tractor seats overlooking the pond. Alain Pollez 2001

McKissack was born in Fort Gaines, Georgia, on January 28, 1902, to a mercantile family. The town, surrounded by dense green woods, looked down on the Chattahoochee River from a tall bluff. Living in one of the major ports along the river, McKissack became enchanted by the steamboats which traveled slowly past the town, propelled by paddle wheels churning the water behind them.[2] He left Fort Gaines to attend Mercer College in Macon, Georgia, where he received a degree in commerce in 1925. In 1929 he took and failed one of Thomas Edison's recruitment tests for college graduates. Edison told him that he would never amount to anything, a rejection that profoundly changed McKissack's life. That same year his father died and while his brother became proprietor of the family store, McKissack wandered from job to job.[3] During the Great Depression he returned to Fort Gaines where he opened a fruit store and café in a small building next to his brother's store, grew fruit and vegetables on a tiny truck farm, and hauled oranges and produce from Florida to the Atlanta farmers' markets.[4] Next to his mother's house he built a small concrete-block dwelling, with a detached brick garage, that he rented. Although he had taken a class to learn concrete building construction, water seeped through the walls of the small structure during a storm. He developed a reputation as a likeable, but unusual, man and began to have difficulties with his siblings, who expected him to behave like a serious businessman.[5]

McKissack moved to Jacksonville in the early 1940s. When the United States became involved in World War II, he joined the Army Air Corps but withdrew after only five months. He continued to support his country by building liberty ships at the St. John's River Shipbuilding Company in Jacksonville. At the end of the war he used his GI bill funds to obtain a beautician's license.[6] He lived in apartments in downtown Jacksonville before purchasing property where he built his second concrete-block house, using some features that he later repeated or expanded at the Orange Show. He also probably operated a small nursery, selling his plants at the large farmers' market a few blocks away. While in Florida, he made his only proposal of marriage to a lady who refused him.[7]

The death of his mother in 1948 caused McKissack significant emotional strain. Adding to his stress were increasingly difficult relations with his siblings. Eventually, either driven by true concern or simply the desire to eliminate his often-embarrassing behavior, some of his sisters had him committed to a mental institution for evaluation. The experience was traumatic. Released after a short time, he found continued existence in Fort Gaines intolerable. He returned to Florida, sold his house and began a new life in Houston, Texas. He probably worked for a short while as a produce truck driver before becoming employed in 1952 at the post office, carrying special delivery mail. He first rented rooms in a downtown hotel, then moved to an apartment behind a house on Munger Street. In 1952 he purchased a lot on Munger and built another concrete-block house, filling it with the things that would eventually become part of the Orange Show.[8]

On December 12, 1955, McKissack bought the property at 2401 Munger, across the street from his house. He began building on it immediately, although apparently business was not his only intent when he acquired a permit for a beauty salon in 1956. He thought a salon would give him the opportunity to meet women.[9] He never built it, though. Instead he opened the American Tree Nursery and Worm Ranch, constructing high planters so that customers would not have to bend down to examine the seedlings. Those same planters surround the Orange Show today. The constant work and lack of income finally prompted him to close the nursery in 1968.[10] His next idea proved to be inspired. He said that one day while standing in the street looking at the lot the words "Orange Show" just came to him. Although he admitted to having trouble getting started, working on the show seemed to make him happy and he captivated visitors, talking constantly and enthusiastically about everything in the Show.[11]

In 1960, McKissack self-published the book *How You Can Live 100 Years . . . and Still be Spry*, providing all the information anyone would need to live for 100 years. The Orange Show is, in many respects, a physical representation of the book. The book describes the body's processing of food while a chemical plant model in the Show demonstrates that the body is a chemical converter transforming nutrients into energy. McKissack followed his own advice. He repeatedly claimed that he would live to be 100 years old and wrote his nephew that one of his goals was to be the oldest man who ever lived in Houston. Believing it would help him live to the age of 160, he ate three oranges a day.[12]

McKissack kept firm control of his finances. He invested conservatively with Paine Webber where, ironically, one of his investments was General Funeral Services. To save money, he replaced his car with a bicycle, often pushing it down the street loaded high with objects he scavenged.[13] He figured he spent $40,000 on the construction of the Orange Show, but estimated that "at $4 an hour it's worth much more than $250,000 and you couldn't duplicate it for $15 million."[14] As might be expected, McKissack had some interesting relationships with his neighbors. Some praised his work but others snickered and he knew it. While he took disparaging comments as a challenge, declaring that it took courage to build the Show, at times the negative statements depressed him. He also had difficulties with city hall and the county inspection agencies.[15]

On opening day, wearing orange pants, a white shirt, and an orange Panama hat, McKissack happily guided his 150 visitors through his creation. He installed a large drum where visitors could drop their invitations after they voted on whether the Show was the work of a genius. His goal was to have enough yes votes that Paramount Pictures would document his life in a movie titled *A Genius is Born*. He also hoped that a large orange juice company would use the Show to promote its product, and provide him some income at the same time. Convinced that "ninety per cent of the people in the United States will want to see it," he believed the Orange Show would make his fortune.[16] Sadly, the anticipated thousands never appeared.[17] It also distressed McKissack that the media called the Orange Show "odd" when he thought it was so beautiful. While he still worked on the Show every day, he began spending more time inside his house. Worried neighbors checked on him, only to find a sad, subdued man.[18]

On the afternoon of January 20, 1980, McKissack suffered a stroke. He died that night, 22 years short of one hundred. He had often said he did not like the idea of being buried. In a touching gesture, those who loved him placed him to rest in the place he loved best: his ashes were scattered over the Orange Show. At his request, his house was destroyed, but the Show remains, a monu-

ment to his extraordinary vision and passion.[19]

A tour of the Orange Show begins a block away, at the end of Munger Street, where the towering glass and granite forest of downtown Houston is visible. The view when McKissack arrived in Houston was entirely different. The elaborately carved masonry buildings that he saw were steadily demolished to make room for the oil industry's behemoths. It was from this destruction that McKissack obtained the materials to construct the Show.

McKissack created a two-story extravaganza of color, texture, and shape with rooms and courtyards connected in maze-like complexity. Tile, wrought iron, an incredible variety of wheels, vibrantly colored tractor seats, umbrellas, and flags all cheerfully mix. A bright white wall surrounds the entire structure. The Show represents the sum of McKissack's artistic, scientific, and philosophic ideas melded into a single construction. He also intended to educate visitors. In addition to nutrition information, he placed a mobile above the exterior wall surrounding the pond, depicting the "earth going around the sun and the moon going around the earth."[20] McKissack's choice of colors at first seems incongruous. However, as with the impressionist's pallet, the bright, cheerful colors combine with an overall harmonious effect. Elaborate shadows produced by the fences and railings weave intricate and complex geometric patterns across the walls and floors. Repeating patterns such as diamond tiles surrounded by a tile frame, rows of multi-colored tractor seats, walls of antique wheels, pink and red hearts, all sometimes resemble the view through a kaleidoscope.

Looking through the wheel atop the Museum staircase.
Paul Hester 1984

The Show consists of several sections. The exterior walls are topped by crests of painted metal filigree. Arkansas rocks lining the base are from the many trips McKissack made to Hot Springs to absorb what he believed were the water's healing properties. The entrance is elaborately decorated. Past the entrance are the Oasis, which rests under an inaccessible terrace, the Ladies Room, and a series of displays affirming the nutritional value of the orange. A gift shop is located in front of the museum with its roof top observation deck. A monument to orange growers was constructed from a replica of the San Jacinto monument that once sat in the Texas State Hotel. The major educational area is the museum. Within it, McKissack both again expounded the virtues of the orange and provided examples of the benefits of hard work and persistence.[21] The tools displayed in the museum were commonly used for laborious physical tasks during McKissack's childhood. Behind the museum is a fountain and the wishing well, one of the many pieces McKissack added to ensure that he had something for everyone.

Next to the museum is one of McKissack's beloved steam engines, like those he had admired during his childhood, also covered by an observation deck. He tied together his two passions by "associating" the energy of the orange to the clean, non-polluting energy of steam engines.[22] Next to the steam engine, the pond is framed by terraced bench seats on two sides and rows of candy colored tractor seats on the other sides. The pond is a symbolic Chattahoochee River, its walls labeled with the river's four major steamboat stops. Within the pond, as if ready to dock at the stops along the way is the Tri-States Showboat, reminiscent of the brightly-lit steamboats where McKissack had danced as a youth. From one corner of the pond area a long hall begins with a fountain and ends at the men's room. Within the hall are the foyer and steps leading to the side show. Near the completion of the project McKissack, realizing he needed some live entertainment, came up with the idea of a side show like those he had seen in old-time circuses. He built a stage with seats for 175 people where he planned to "give a spiel on oranges," then have a beautiful lady play the organ on a revolving stage while a young boy tap danced. McKissack strategically placed some of his most prized items, his beautiful, historic wheels, some one hundred years old, to keep traffic flowing and to keep people from falling off the second floor observation decks.[23]

The Orange Show is only one of many environments created by self-trained artists. Because the artists work primarily for their own pleasure, they often baffle or amaze viewers. Their use of non-traditional materials and construction techniques, however, often create maintenance problems. At McKissack's death, rust already disfigured the iron railings and goo-goo-eyed birds, his cherished steam engine had stopped, and the steamboat would no longer turn in its pond.[24] The deteriorating structure was not fit for public visits.

One of the people who visited McKissack as he had diligently worked was Marilyn Oshman, who first saw the show in 1975. Returning many times, she became a good friend to McKissack, who left his heirs a note naming her as someone who would be willing to preserve his monument.[25] Oshman was an excellent choice. Involved in the Houston arts and accustomed to handling challenging situations, she had worked in the city's anti-gang office and had been chair of the board at the Contemporary Arts Museum between 1972 and 1978, and was a former Museum of Fine Arts board member.[26] She began a series of meetings with McKissack's heirs to discuss a plan for purchasing, preserving, and administering the show. She originally hoped the City of Houston would manage the show, however, it slowly became apparent that the city was reluctant to take up this challenge. As a result, while gathering public support to save the show, she also began the tedious chore of finding financial sponsors. Hoping the media could help, she invited Ann Holmes, the influential art editor for the Houston Chronicle, to the initial meetings to discuss the plans for saving the monument.[27] Several local magazines ran articles of support. Her timing and planning were lucky. In 1980, Houston's non-profit organizations had not yet begun to feel the financial pressures that

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would come less than two years later.[28] Oshman's enthusiasm helped her convince an eclectic mix of twenty-two academics, rock musicians, artists, architects, and business people to donate funds to buy the Show. On September 15, 1980, Marilyn Oshman, Trustee for the donors, purchased the Orange Show.[29]

The donors determined that a community-based private foundation was needed to make the Show an integral part of Houston's culture. On December 3, 1980, the Orange Show Foundation was incorporated. A board of directors was chosen and the processes begun to obtain tax-exempt status, insurance, and to search for grants and funding. The earliest funds came from private individuals and from the sale of the 1982 Houston International Festival posters which featured the Orange Show.[30] In the fall of 1982, the foundation received its first grant from the Atlantic Richfield Foundation. Through its existence, the foundation has operated the Show with no major debts except mortgages; virtually all money received has been used for programming or maintenance.[31]

Initially, the Orange Show was a hazard for visitors with its structural problems, faulty handrails, and dangerous steps. Restoration was needed immediately to return the Show to its full glory while saving its integrity and protecting it for the future. One of the first difficulties facing the foundation was acquisition of a building permit because the structure was outside the classification scheme for permits. It was finally classified as a cultural monument. Before the work began, volunteers catalogued all the items in the Show. Since McKissack had used hundreds of colors, all metal surfaces were color-coded. In addition to painting, McKissack's unfinished wooden boat was given a metal superstructure and floated. Walls were braced, the rotted wood and plaster ceilings were replaced by galvanized steel, and new awnings and flags were installed.[32] The exceptional results prompted the American Association of Architects to honor Barry Moore, who lead the restoration effort. Both the American Institute of Architects Journal and Texas Architect featured the restoration in articles. A subsequent yearly maintenance program has been a success. A visitor to the Show in December 2000 noted that it looked the same as it had when he first saw it during McKissack's life.[33]

A ribbon-cutting ceremony on September 25, 1982, initiated a two day fund-raising party before the official "unpeeling" on October 9. A year later, a second benefit was also held at the Show. The overcrowding at both benefits prompted the board to institute a membership program and a yearly gala. Since the galas are held within days of Halloween, guests are encouraged to dress in costume, and the orange is, of course, a decorating and menu staple. The featured entertainers are usually blues legends. Sometimes a raffle or unusual game raised additional funds. In 2000, self-taught artist Mr. Imagination donated a charming bottle cap covered guitar to be auctioned.[34] While the money raised by the gala is significant, production costs are also high with efforts made to save expenses. The budget for the first galas could not include funds to buy the expensive party favors usually provided to guests by other non-profit organizations. Instead, in true Orange Show fashion, each year volunteers craft handmade, sometimes goofy, gifts such as bead encrusted shoes, giant sunglasses, and picture frames.[35]

Continuous operation required a permanent director. In January, 1983, the board hired Susanne Theis, who had been program coordinator in the office of the chancellor of the University of Houston. The number of other staff members has varied and have predominantly been women. Staff members have always been overworked, each having to perform several tasks. To meet with volunteers who have their own jobs, the staff is often required to work evenings and weekends. This stress has caused several resignations.[36] Despite the overwork, the staff seems very proud to work at the Show, maintaining a sense of humor, joking with each other, with visitors, and returning to attend events even after their departures. Some board members work closely with the staff and participate significantly in the various committees. The board provides policy guidance, makes all major programming decisions, performs strategic planning, and assists in acquiring remuneration. To provide programs that benefit not only the foundation, but also the city of Houston, people with diverse community or ethnic interests are sought as board members.[37] Volunteers are essential to help with the annual Show maintenance, to guide tours, conduct art workshops, and ensure successful events. The media are also an integral part of the foundation's success by keeping Orange Show activities before the eyes of the public.[38]

Fulfilling one of McKissack's wishes, many activities sponsored by the foundation are directed toward children. Programs are evaluated to determine whether they would meet with McKissack's approval.[39] Youngsters have been entranced by puppet shows, concerts for children, story-telling, and a tribute to dinosaurs in honor of the dinosaur diorama built into the Show. The programs have become increasingly varied, accentuating education and interactive activities, specifically hands-on workshops where children and adults, guided by artists, are encouraged to experience the creative process in an uncritical environment. Events often center around presentations of unusual or ignored art forms, especially those that showcase the artist in everyone. Children's classes have included dancing, making decorated envelopes, books, masks, jewelry, collages, handmade percussion instruments, and wearable art from junk. Programs for youth have helped "fill in the gaps created by cuts in funding to the arts and elementary schools."[40] To assist and encourage educators to teach folk and visionary art in the classroom, staff members have presented numerous workshops to Houston Independent School District teachers. Children's' programs have also been shown on Houston's public television channel.[41] Special programs have been developed for students attending Harper Alternative School for juvenile offenders. Recognizing the need to combat increasing gang violence in its community, in 1994 the foundation began an effort to reach the at-risk youth in the neighborhoods surrounding the Show. A long-term program to paint murals on buildings scarred by graffiti has successfully helped many local youth relinquish gang activities. The teens learn problem solving, self-discipline and teamwork, begin to see themselves as contributors to their community, and improve their school grades.[42]

Education programs for adults encourage self-expression and self-esteem, but public interest is usually first captured simply by the fun. Music has been the focus of numerous programs. One of the more unusual performances was given in 1988 by the Austin group Liquid Mice, who played a multifarious collection of traditional instruments together with percussion and stringed instruments they had "made from found objects like bicycle wheels and washing machine parts." In October 1993, one of many multi-

The St. Louis Banana Bike Brigade entries at the 1997 Art Car Ball. Tom LaFaver 1997

cultural programs was a celebration of Sukkot, the Jewish festival commemorating the wandering of the Israelites. In August of the next year, Taoist monks from the Teen How Temple blessed the Show with goodwill and prosperity.[43]

The Foundation supports the scholarly aspects of folk and visionary art study by publishing articles, maintaining a library, and working with other educators, local universities, and scholars. The newsletter includes scholarly articles on visionary art, and information about environments in areas other than Houston.[44] Lectures offered by the foundation have provided the public with an opportunity to hear first-hand from scholars. In 1988, Dr. Robert Bishop, director of the Museum of American Folk Art, presented the historical perspective of visionary environments. In October 1997, curator Genevieve Roulin presented a survey of the 5,000 objects held in the Collection de l'Art Brut of Lausanne, Switzerland. The museum holdings include one of McKissack's birds. Films, such as the series *Visions of Paradise*, documenting several American visionary environments, also provide an avenue to explain and foster appreciation for visionary environments.[45] Foundation members have been invited to speak at other visionary environments, at symposiums, and to write articles. In 1992, Theis was the second presenter for Fantastic Spaces, the first lecture series produced by the Chicago-based Intuit: Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art. Jennifer McKay was co-author of an article on art cars for the British outsider art magazine *Raw Vision*. In 1998, thanks to the work of board members John and Stephanie Smither, the foundation was one of the hosts of the eleventh annual conference of the Folk Art Society of America.[46]

In the early 1980s, the steadily increasing number of visitors prompted the foundation to publish the *Visitors Guide*. The staff collected information on McKissack's life, writing to everyone they could find who had known him. They then produced a 1986 exhibit chronicling McKissack's life and revealing his construction techniques. Coinciding with the exhibit was What Did the Neighbors Think? a presentation by Rice University Professor Dr. William Martin.[47] The year 1986 also saw the introduction of two major programs. The foundation's art car, the Fruitmobile, had been created in 1984 to be auctioned at the gala. When the purchasers donated it back to the foundation, it became a "roving ambassador of goodwill." Inspired by the Fruitmobile, on June 29, 1986, the Foundation held a Road Show that featured 12 painted and decorated automobiles including lowriders, pin striping demonstrations, and workshops for children. The Road Show drew 1,400 admirers and was broadcast on WFAA-TV and National Public Radio. The event was such a success that the Houston International Festival asked the Orange Show Foundation to organize an artist's parade for the 1988 festival. When the foundation proposed a parade of art mobiles, the festival agreed. On April 9, 1988, the world's first Art Car Parade, 40 vehicles, plus a few marching bands, cruised the streets as part of the Houston International Festival.[48] Roadside Attractions: The Artist Parade, more popularly known as the Art Car Parade, has grown to an entire weekend of events with over 1500 participants and 255 "decorated, augmented or otherwise embellished" vehicles from 36 states, watched by 250,000 spectators, and has captured the interest of media worldwide.[49]

While the number of entries in the first parade was small, several well-known artists participated. Dallas resident Willard Watson, "The Texas Kid," was renowned for his art car and glittering costumes. Susan Stone of Austin drove her Holstein Car featuring a grill made of pink lips.[50] In the following years, cars have arrived from Canada and Mexico, and caravans of art cars have traveled from California, picking up additional vehicles on the trek to Houston. Many parade spectators return in later years to drive art cars of their own.[51] Like the Orange Show, art cars are highly original, unique works of art. Vehicles that have participated in the parade are generally awash in color, covered in beads, glass, toys, feathers, tennis balls, tile mosaics, beans, mirrors, or living grass, and many feature gyrating movement. Some of the loudest cheers are given to contraptions, motorized sculpture on wheels no longer recognizable as autos. Virtually every parade contains entries making political statements. The 1991 Exxon Valdeath protested the damage done to the Alaska coast by the Exxon Valdez. Some partici-

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pants have chosen to express themselves with a non-auto entry. The banana, giraffe, cow, hot dog on a bun, and other transformed bicycles of the St. Louis Banana Bike Brigade are frequent parade participants.[52] Vehicles compete for monetary prizes and trophies. Judges, usually artists, museum curators, or art patrons, decide all winners except the participants' and people's choice. The miniscule budget for trophies for the first parade inspired the foundation staff to create their own by decorating old bowling trophies with dried macaroni, and found objects, creating awards as unique as the cars they honored. Each year since, the public is invited to participate in trophy-making workshops.[53]

In addition to the parade, Art Car Weekend includes a series of other events. In 1990, the day before the parade, an impromptu procession of cars visited the Texas Medical Center. This mini-parade has become an annual event much appreciated by the hospitals, schools, community centers, and assisted living centers that are visited. The Art Car Symposium was begun in 1991 to promote public dialogue about art cars. Discussions have included the motivations for modifying vehicles, the effect of an art car on the lives of the owners, and the social impacts of the art car phenomenon. In 1988, the out-of-town participants in the parade were welcomed with a party. This party evolved into the first Art Car Ball, held on May 1, 1991. While the entry fees partially defrayed the parade costs, the balls also provided the public an opportunity to examine each vehicle closely, although without the motion that adds to the drama of many cars during the parade. The Art Car Ball was probably the only ball held in a parking garage. By the late 1990s, up to 6,000 exuberant people were attending the party, which featured live music, food, drinks, and unique entertainers. In 2002, when the ball was replaced by a free party held after the parade, art car artists produced a ball of their own. Two years later, the foundation's party moved to the streets of downtown Houston on the evening before the parade.[54]

As several teachers have attested, students who create art cars learn problem solving, self-discipline, teamwork, the ability to compromise and resolve conflicts, as well as color theory and design. Art teacher Rebecca Bass believed that participation in the art car project kept several of her pupils from dropping out. Inclusion in the Houston Art Car Parade increases the students self-esteem and sense of community involvement. Recognizing the benefits of student created art cars, the Foundation published *Start-Up Advice: The How Tos of Art Cars*, given to over 300 Houston area schools and libraries.[55] Due in part to the popularity of the parade, Houston has evolved an entire art car subculture including an Art Car Klub, Art Car Museum, and numerous events and parties.[56]

The art car phenomenon has spread throughout the United States and the world. The success of the Houston parade prompted Minneapolis, San Francisco, Atlanta, Portland, St. Louis, Chicago, Tallahassee, and other cities to institute their own art car parades. In 1992, two art cars created by Louis Perrin, whose *Quetzalcoatl* later won first prize in the 1993 Houston parade, intrigued audiences during a parade in Mulhouse, France. Four art cars from the 2000 parade were displayed at the world's second largest motor show, the Essen Motor Show in Germany.[57] While the media usually emphasizes the fun of Art Car Weekend, ignoring the importance of self-expression and artistic achievement, the excitement generated by the mobile wonders is a tribute to the artists and a testament to the success of the event.

The second major program begun in 1986, the aptly named Eyeopeners Tour, initially was an effort to inform the public about visionary environments. Because visionary environments do not fit into the standard art classifications, board members, staff, and volunteers had collected information on similar sites to provide a context for the Show and to establish its importance. They discovered that Houston has an unusually large number of visionary environments. Since these environments are fragile constructions and families often cannot maintain them after their creators die, the foundation began to document the sites it discovered. This documentation in many cases outlives the creation itself. Once a site is identified, both the environment and the artist are documented. Photographs, video tapes, interviews, and secondary source material, including newspaper and magazine articles, are collected.

Detail of the Frog Mobile hood, by Liz Hornick and the High School for Law Enforcement, winner of the 1999 First Place Youth category. Tom LaFaver 1999

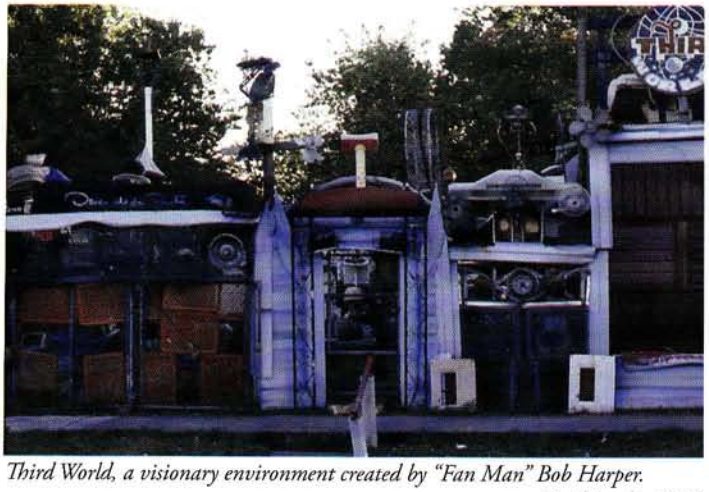
Documentation of folk art sites has continued and increased in professionalism. A library was established to house the books and other literature collected during the years of research. Part of the library was a database of local visionary environments that eventually expanded to a world-wide list. The documents in the library have been used by educators as well as researchers from the *New York Times*, *Time-Life Books*, and *USA Today*, by museums such as The San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, the Institute for Texas Cultures, and by students from local universities and high schools. When planning its display of self-taught artists, Texas Children's Hospital researched the artists using material in the library.[58]

The Eyeopeners Committee continues the search for visionary environments, to bring the public to the environments,

and to foster appreciation and understanding of the art inherent in each environment. The brochures supplied with the tours describe Eyeopeners as "places that make you stop and look, and look again!" While not everyone may appreciate all the sites visited, participant responses make it clear that few people walk away without learning something new, or rethinking how they view the world. The Beer Can house is one of the most popular stops. John Milkovisch, tired of mowing the grass, covered his front yard in cement into which he set thousands of marbles. 50,000 flat beer cans cover the house sides. Third World was a popular environment created by the late "Fan Man," Bob Harper, so named because he incorporated numerous box fans in his creations. With little money, but enormous ingenuity, Harper created sculptures from the debris tossed out by his neighbors. Part of the charm of Harper's environment was that each person could see different things in the various assemblages. Unfortunately, upon his death, his environment was dismantled. While most environments are created outdoors, Grace Greene converted the entire interior of her 15-room house into a spectacular memorial to her daughter. The quintessential pack rat, Greene mixed everyday objects such as food bottles, buttons and shoes, with items purchased at antique sales, and fashioned shadow boxes, mannequins covered in buttons and jewelry, and a wreath from old toys. One of the most memorable items was a shawl created by sewing together hundreds of pieces of antique lace.[59]

Occasionally, the foundation has been asked to help save a site. When D. D. Smalley's Hyde Park Miniature Museum had to be removed from its original home, volunteers documented and moved all of the 1,620 items which had each been meticulously labeled and catalogued by Smalley. Another emergency rescue saved the work of Pasadena, Texas artist, Ida Kingsbury, whose yard sculptures were subsequently shown at an exhibit at the Houston Children's Museum and the Webb Folk Art Gallery in Waxahachie, Texas.[60] The foundation has assisted artists on numerous occasions. When the house of Cleveland Turner, the "Flower Man", was set afire by vandals, the discouraged artist tore the colorful façade from the front of his house and uprooted his garden. The foundation held a fund raiser, requesting donations of plants, bulbs, and seeds to help him start a garden at a new home. When a 1992 fire destroyed Bob Harper's house and killed his mother, the foundation set up a fund to help him acquire new lodgings, and rebuild his sculpture garden.[61]

Eventually, the committee decided to use the tours to encourage an appreciation of Houston's history and ethnic diversity. Participants have gone to places of worship, cemeteries, the houses of extreme collectors, ethnic grocery stores, and blues clubs. The popularity of the tours prompted the committee to look for sites outside Houston, such as Galveston, Beaumont, and the churches of Fayette County, Texas. The first out-of-state trip, in May 1995, went to many well-known sites in various parts of the South, including St. EOM's Land of Pasaquan in Georgia, the Ave Maria Grotto in Alabama, and the Folk Art Center of the High Museum in Atlanta. Since then, a yearly tour has been given to sites outside Texas. On New Years, 1999, the Eyeopeners tours became international when a group traveled to Xilitla, Mexico, to visit the environment created by Edward James. When organizations began to request individual Eyeopener tours, the Foundation responded with Private Eyes Tours, tailored to meet the interests of each group.[62]



Third World, a visionary environment created by "Fan Man" Bob Harper.
David Beasley 1992

Initially, the staff worked from Oshman's property. In the mid-1980s, the increased workload and the need to house the library prompted the foundation to search for new headquarters, finally settling on a dilapidated frame house at 2402 Munger, across the street from the Orange Show. To celebrate both the 10th anniversary of the original opening and the renovation of the new offices, a party at the Show featured entertainment originally planned by McKissack: ballroom dance music was played while the steamboat circled the pond carrying bales of cotton upon which sat battery-powered clacking monkeys, and a beautiful woman played an organ.[63] By late 1999, when the small office had become too cramped for the number of staff, the library, and workshops, the foundation rented the property immediately behind the office as an Annex.[64] In 2003, the foundation changed its name to the Orange Show Center for Visionary Arts to better reflect its increasing scope. One of the expansions was the purchase of the Beer Can House to save it from potential demolition by developers constructing town homes in the neighborhood.[65]

The foundation continues to ensure the continuity of the Show while maintaining the unique perspective that the Show inspires. As the first organization of its type, the foundation has served as a model for an increasing number of similar groups.[66] From its inception, the foundation planned to make the Show a community resource. It has become not only an important part of the Houston art culture, but also a strong force for art education in the city. Its many programs have increased public understanding and appreciation of visionary art. Its chief outreach program, the yearly Art Car Parade, has been a catalyst for the phenomenal growth of art cars throughout the United States and the world. One can argue that building the Orange Show helped McKissack work through the pain and humiliation that he felt when he left Fort Gaines and that the resulting structure is one man's triumph over adversity. As such, the Orange Show is not just a physical object, but is also a symbol of dedication, self-belief, creative effort, and healing.