



PHOTOGRAPH: KEVIN SCANLON

A NEW LEGACY FOR WATTS

The wiry spires of the Watts Towers seem almost obtrusive on the working-class skyline of South Los Angeles. While the historic landmarks remind some of the artistic innovation of Italian architect Simon Rodia, who built the sculptures out of steel; mortar; and a mosaic of recycled glass, sea shells, pottery and tile, they have been engraved in so many memories for the poverty, discrimination and violent riots that occurred in their midst. But a sweeping neighborhood revitalization effort may change that by connecting residents with the artistic legacy of the towers and enhancing community in the process.

Each year, thousands of tourists visit the monuments, which stand just a few miles from the scene where African-American residents fought back against police brutality during the 1965 Watts Riots that killed 34 people. Those who live in the Towers' shadows have rarely benefited from the cultural capital they offer, says **EDGAR ARCENEAUX** (right), executive director of the Watts House Project. To address this disparity, the project enlists artists, architects, residents and volunteers to revive the surrounding neighborhood by renovating homes and building art and community space. "We see the towers as a lightning rod, and the energy from them could be spread throughout the neighborhood," says Arceneaux. By 2018, he plans to have remodeled 20 properties on East 107th Street opposite the soaring Towers. Seven projects are in the works, from a living room expansion in the oldest property on the block, to a second-story addition to another home with a sculpture of the word "love" erected on top. Other plans include building exhibition space, a resident-run café, organic gardens and offices; adding social services; and establishing a lease-to-own program to help all renters on the street become owners.

He hopes to take advantage of the talented cross-section of skilled labor in the neighborhood, from blacksmiths and painters to roofers and contractors, and provide job training in green technology and business management. "We see the houses as a visible catalyst to produce not only an aesthetic and quality-of-life change," says Arceneaux, "but also to be an economic engine for the neighborhood itself." | SERENA RENNER

WATCH A VIDEO ABOUT THE WATTS HOUSE PROJECT: ODEMAGAZINE.COM/WATTSHOUSE