



Everything New Orleans

Artist Jackie Sumell designs a house based on the wishes of Angola inmate Herman Wallace

Published: Saturday, December 13, 2008, 5:00 AM Updated: Saturday, December 13, 2008, 5:10 AM



By **Doug MacCash, The Times-Picayune**



Kathy Anderson / The Times-Picayune Portrait of Herman Wallace by Angola inmate Smak

PRISONER DREAMS UP A HOME

THE HOME: The House that Herman Built

THE OWNERS: Jackie Sumell and Herman Wallace

THE SPACE: A Prospect.1 New Orleans exhibition featuring renderings of an imaginary house described by an Angola inmate and designed by a conceptual artist

ON VIEW: At the Contemporary Arts Center, 900 Camp St., Wednesdays through Sundays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., through Jan. 18.

WHY THEY LOVE IT: 'It gets people who would never talk about these issues to talk about them,' Sumell says.

DREAM HOUSE:



Kathy Anderson / The Times-Picayune
A model of the House that Herman Built.

Brooklyn-born Jackie Sumell has lived in New Orleans on and off since Hurricane Katrina. Now, the 35-year-old conceptual artist plans to build a one-of-a-kind dream house here -- as soon as she raises the \$400,000 she needs to do it. The house will have some ordinary south Louisiana features: a steeply sloped roof to shed rain, extensive gardens, a wrap-around porch and a huge kitchen for entertaining.

Kathy Anderson / The Times-Picayune
Artist and sometime carpenter Jackie Sumell in a wooden cell based on Wallace's solitary confinement cell.

But it will have some rarely heard-of features as well. The picture windows will be bullet-proof. The raised bedroom will offer views of the yard in all directions, like a prison guard tower. A secret escape hatch will allow the resident to flee from the bedroom, down the chimney like Santa Claus in reverse. It will lead to a tunnel that ends in a survivalist bunker beneath the pool. The house will be made almost entirely of wood, in part so it can be burned to the ground if it comes under attack.

Sumell's dream house seems to blend a craving for spaciousness and comfort with an unnatural fear of persecution. That's no wonder, since it isn't based on her own wishes, but the imaginings of Herman Wallace, 67, a prisoner serving a life sentence at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, where he's spent 36 years in "closed-cell restriction," also known as solitary confinement.

Kathy Anderson / The Times-Picayune
Sumell's wooden replica of Wallace's cell

Wallace dreams of a private bathroom equipped with a hot tub as large as his 6-by-9-foot cell; a greenhouse and gardens so he's never far from growing things; and a bank of six microwave ovens to accommodate streams of party guests.

Wallace described his dream house in a series of letters to Sumell, who's done her best to weave his wishes into a buildable design. An exhibit of the letters, blueprints, a model of the home, a computerized virtual tour and a hand-built, full-sized wooden version of Wallace's cell comprise one of the most penetrating of the Prospect.¹ New Orleans exhibits on display at the Contemporary Arts Center.

Sumell describes "The House that Herman Built" exhibit as a sort of "Trojan Horse," designed to expose a prison system that she considers akin to slavery.

RADICAL DESIGNS: With bouncy brown hair, Lucille Ball-era eye glasses, a broad smile and -- on the day we spoke -- green hoop earrings and polka-dot pink blouse, Sumell doesn't seem the angry activist type.

But when asked if she sees herself as a radical, she said, "Absolutely, yeah, without a doubt."

Her collaboration with Wallace, originally convicted of armed robbery in 1972, began with a lecture she attended in San Francisco in 2001. The speaker was Robert King Wilkerson, a former inmate who'd just been released after serving 31 years at Angola.

Wilkerson and two other New Orleans men, Albert Woodfox and Wallace, are widely known as "the Angola 3." Early in their incarceration, they helped organized a chapter of the Black Panthers at the prison in an effort, they said, to end violence and improve living conditions.

When a guard was stabbed to death in 1972, Wallace and Woodfox were convicted of the murder, and all three men were placed in solitary confinement, where they stayed for more than three decades. Supporters contend that this constitutes "inhumane and unconstitutional" treatment.

Sumell was swept up in their story. After Wilkerson's lecture, she asked what she could do to help the two men still behind bars. Wilkerson, Sumell said, advised her to write to them.

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH: Unsure of how to break the ice, Sumell took the conceptual art route. She taped a disposable camera to her wrist, set her alarm watch to ring on the hour, then snapped pictures of her surroundings as the day evolved. She sent copies of the photos to each man, with a letter that said, "Here's 24 hours of my simple life. I can't imagine what yours is like."

A correspondence started between the artist and Wallace.

About a year later, Sumell received a class assignment to ask someone of importance to describe his or her home. With the professor's permission, she tweaked the requirements. To help Wallace mentally reach beyond his prison cell, she asked him what has become the signature question of her art career: "What kind of house does a man who has lived in a 6-foot-by-9-foot cell for over 30 years dream of?"

For the next six years, Wallace outlined his ideas in letters, phone conversations and during Sumell's occasional visits. Sumell says she has come to consider Wallace her best friend. For his part, in one letter Wallace writes that Sumell is "a daughter I never had."

"My life is completely committed to freeing Herman Wallace and Albert Woodfox, " Sumell said, "and to unmasking a history of absolute oppression and injustice, particularly in Louisiana, but in the United States in general. It's a huge dragon to slay, but it's my work and right now I'm doing it by building this man's house."

COLLABORATIONS: The house is, among other things, a symbol of their bond. Yet, like any pair of collaborators, Sumell and Wallace have apparently had their differences.

In one letter, Wallace sounds much like the aggrieved client of an architect when he writes: "You recall you spoke of lots of windows, right? Then why are your drawings so closed in? A house within a house within a house is not really a house at all, it becomes a shelter."

At the CAC exhibit, a computer-animated tour of Wallace's dream house draws upon his written descriptions of it, read aloud by Wilkerson. Every detail is articulated in a spare architectural style, from the roses, gloxinias and delphiniums in the garden to the antique typewriters he plans to repair in his hobby shop, from the photos of abolitionists such as John Brown and Harriet Tubman displayed on the living room walls to the soft blue tone of the bedroom lighting.

Wallace's very first design request was a swimming pool with a Black Panther symbol painted on the bottom.

Sumell has displayed the plans and models for Herman's House, as well as a life-size wooden model of his Angola cell, 13 times. She hopes it spreads awareness of Wallace, Woodfox and other Louisiana prisoners' plights. When she presented the "The House the Herman Built" in Ireland in 2006, so many people wrote Wallace that he asked Sumell to get them to stop and find another way to show support.

Woodfox's conviction was overturned by a federal judge in September, though he has yet to leave Angola. Sumell visited Wallace last week. She said he is being held in a maximum-security section of the prison known as The Dungeon.

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