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ARCHITECTURE

Mr. 76759 Designs His Dream House

By CHRIS COLIN

MINOR improvements still occur to him, but Herman Wallace has more or less finished his dream house. It's got a yellow kitchen, a hobby shop and custom-made pecan cabinets. It should be noted that no actual house exists, but this is understandable. Mr. Wallace has been in solitary confinement at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola for the last 34 years.

Mr. Wallace's virtual home is the subject of a new book, "The House That Herman Built," and an art installation with three-dimensional models of the house is on tour in Europe. The project — which walks a thin line between art and activism — is a result of a question posed to Mr. Wallace five years ago: What kind of house does a man who has lived in a 6-by-9-foot cell for three decades dream of?

The woman who asked the question, and later produced the book and the installation, is Jackie Sumell, a 32-year-old white artist who at the time lived in San Francisco. Her work, often political, has been shown in galleries in San Francisco, Cincinnati and Portland, Ore. Mr. Wallace, a 65-year-old Black Panther originally imprisoned for robbery, was convicted in 1972 of murdering a prison guard. In November a state court commissioner recommended that his conviction be overturned, and a decision is pending on whether to adopt that recommendation.

In the four years it took to design the house, Ms. Sumell and Mr. Wallace developed a close rapport. Their intimacy can be glimpsed in the more than 300 letters they exchanged, many of which are included in the book. Their correspondence was initiated by Ms. Sumell after she attended a talk by an exonerated prisoner, a fellow Black Panther who had been put in solitary around the same time as Mr. Wallace. (They and a third inmate, also in solitary for decades, became known as the Angola Three.)

Nearly a year after her postal friendship with Prisoner No. 76759 began, Ms. Sumell entered the M.F.A. program at [Stanford University](#) and, in a class devoted to investigating spatial relationships and architecture, she was assigned to interview a faculty member about his home.

But she had a more interesting candidate.

Her next letter to Mr. Wallace described the assignment and asked him: What kind of house do you dream about after all these years in a cell?

Mr. Wallace's cell is part of the 18,000-acre maximum-security prison in Angola, La. It was once a complex of plantations, named for the African country from which most of the slaves there were transported. The inmates still pick cotton and other crops in the fields.

“The house is going to need a swimming pool, with a light-green bottom and a large panther painted in the center,” Mr. Wallace wrote to Ms. Sumell.

Yet for the most part the house invented by a man in solitary confinement reflects the thoroughly ordinary existence that he lost in prison. Mr. Wallace, who grew up in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, focused on amenities he longed for and old-fashioned building details he can remember.

The imagined house is the antithesis of Mr. Wallace’s current quarters: a suburban home of about 3,500 square feet surrounded by flowers; he specified roses, gloxinia and delphiniums. There is also a guest house, reserved for visiting activists. A second-floor master bedroom looks out over a marble patio, landscaped garden and massive oak tree.

Steel and concrete — prison materials — have no role here. Birch and pecan are everywhere, their special qualities carefully explained in Mr. Wallace’s letters.

Ms. Sumell said that Mr. Wallace, his view so abbreviated for so long, focused well on minute details — the potatoes and Tabasco sauce in the pantry, the notebooks laid out on the conference table — but had a harder time imagining open spaces.

Traces of a prison mindset crop up. When the placement of his computer meant his back would face the office door, Ms. Sumell said that he asked that a mirror be installed above, so he could see anyone entering the room. A sense of security is important to him, she explained. The master bedroom sits safely above the very center of the house. A wraparound porch adds a layer of perimeter, as does the surrounding garden. There is even a special door leading to an underground bunker, equipped with its own water supply. The goal, Ms. Sumell said, was never to feel trapped.

The time capsule of prison can be glimpsed in his preference for a 1970s aesthetic: shag carpeting flows through the three bedrooms, one decorated entirely in white. The master bedroom’s furniture is mahogany. The purple barstools were rejected: Ms. Sumell complained that she didn’t know how to draw them. In one concession to changing times, Mr. Wallace asked that the bearskin rug be made of fake fur.

As the details accumulated, Ms. Sumell added, the house became something Mr. Wallace could fully visualize and, consequently, served as a kind of escape. (Such powers of visualization are not uncommon for him after years of solitude: Ms. Sumell described a chess tournament he helped organize in which games were played by inmates calling out their moves, cell to cell.)

Though Ms. Sumell estimates that she made at least 20 trips to visit him at the prison over the four years they worked on designing the house, many of the descriptions and measurements were exchanged by mail and were subject to the prison’s censors. Once officials confiscated an elaborate floor plan Mr. Wallace had drawn; Ms. Sumell was told that it could have enabled another criminal to rob the (virtual) home.

The house would probably win no design awards. Except for the panther peering up from the pool bottom, Mr. Wallace’s ideal is resolutely plain by contemporary architectural standards. (In a telephone conversation from prison Mr. Wallace recalled photographs of some more experimental houses sent to him by Ms. Sumell: “They had houses in trees,” he said disapprovingly.)

What's arresting about the design is the singular approach to architectural planning that brought it into being — Ms. Sumell calls herself the “tube Herman's ideas go through” — and the emotional candor that infused the process. The letters in the book reveal excitement but also pain. In them Mr. Wallace refers to Ms. Sumell as a daughter, and at other times as a sister.

“We're family,” she said matter of factly. “He's my best friend.”

He gave advice on relationships and even fashion critiques. (After seeing her new mohawk, Ms. Sumell recalled, he said, “It's not that bad.”) She discovered someone animated and thoughtful, a man who creates elaborate paper flowers in his cell.

There were surprises too. As the project neared completion, Ms. Sumell learned that her mother was dying. With the first exhibition of the house models coming up — a chance to attract attention to Mr. Wallace's legal case — he insisted she cancel it.

“You just focus on your mom,” she said he instructed.

Is a project like this art? Or is it activism? And how significant are those questions in the context of a man spending three decades in a concrete box? Ms. Sumell says that she believes her only option is to push ahead, merging art with activism wherever possible. Her next goal is to build the actual house, right outside the prison if possible.

Mr. Wallace now has a copy of the book. (Merz and Solitude of Stuttgart, Germany, printed 800 copies, which are being sold for \$20 each at the Angola3.org Web site.) Though he found it a little strange to have “people peeping inside my head,” he said, his voice sounded proud, if tentatively so.

“It expresses something different from the public perception of us prisoners,” he said. “We have dreams too.”

Mr. Wallace's most pressing dream is another courtroom, and a chance at freedom. In the months to come the state will rule on the court commissioner's recommendation that Wallace be released. Meanwhile, he said, he continues to think about his house.

“Once you build something in your mind, you're free,” he said.

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