

Our Towns

Kitsch Crusade: Artists Rally For Holy Land

By NICK RAVO

WATERBURY, Conn.

Maybe it's the department-store mannequin dressed to look like Mary Magdalene. Maybe it's the giant rosaries fashioned out of anchor chain. Maybe it's the five-story-high cross made of neon and steel. Then again, maybe it's just the weather: thunder pealing through the heavens, rainclouds roiling overhead.

Regardless, the atmosphere can sure seem strange up here in Holy Land U.S.A., a 17-acre biblical theme park and miniature Palestine that looks more like a museum of kitsch than a monument to Christianity. After all, this is a long-abandoned and often vandalized shrine fabricated from cinder blocks, bathtubs and junkyard discards, a Roman Catholic pantheon built by a passion as eccentric as it was religious.

Even so, it is one of the wonders of Waterbury. "It's a landmark," said Jerry Raimo, an official with the Catholic Campaigners for Christ, which owns the property. "Eighty thousand people see the cross every day when they drive by on I-84. When the lights don't come on at night, I get calls from prominent business people saying: 'The cross is out! The cross is out!'"



Despite his work as the lightkeeper of Holy Land, Mr. Raimo is not very popular these days. Some people believe the 68-year-old real-estate appraiser from nearby Middlebury is part of a cabal plotting to demolish Holy Land, possibly because of its growing land value, possibly because it is an eyesore.

The park, which once attracted thousands of visitors annually, opened in 1957 but was closed in 1984, two years after the death of its creator, John Baptist Greco, a local lawyer who built the shrine in a lifelong fit of religious

zeal.

"They feel it's an old form of piety no longer accepted or sanctioned by their church," said Marjorie Tractenberg, 41, of Windsor, who recently started the Committee to Preserve Holy Land. "It's like it's out of style."

Committee members noted that last month a bulldozer mysteriously ap-

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peared at Holy Land. No one knows who called for it. No one even knows how it managed to get through the front gates. A few days later, though, it vanished, leaving only a few tread marks in the asphalt.

Shortly afterward, however, the Catholic Campaigners, responding to questions about the bulldozer, announced that it would tear down the park's chapel and fill in its 200-foot-long replica of the catacombs.

The group cited safety problems and insurance costs. Work is expected to start at the end of August. "We are not destroying Holy Land," said Mr. Raimo. "Just a small part — the chapel and the catacombs."

The Committee to Preserve Holy Land is skeptical. So far, its leaders have amassed 1,000 signatures on a petition urging that the site remain intact.

They have also organized demonstrations at the park twice, started a "Save Holy Land" quilt and one member has vowed to chain himself and a 12-foot wooden cross to the park's front gate. A radio station is contemplating broadcasting live from Holy Land as part of the campaign.

Curiously, though, much of the support to save Holy Land has come from art lovers rather than from religious leaders in this ethnically diverse but predominantly Catholic city of 106,000 in the heart of the Naugatuck Valley.

Those preservationists believe that Holy Land is art. Folk art, but art nonetheless.



Experts, who also call Holy Land environmental art, assert it is the only art of its kind in Connecticut and one of only 10 folk-art centers in the country. They say the park, with its eclectic collection of aphorism-covered tablets surrounding Stations of the Cross and models of the villages of the 12 tribes of Israel, rivals spectacles such as Holy Ghost Park in Dickeyville, Wis., and Ave Maria Grotto in Cullman, Ala.

"It is art," said Daniel Prince, 37, of Stamford, a curator at the Museum of American Folk Art in Manhattan. "This is the Pyramids of backyard projects."

"Some people would call it junk, but some people think Jackson Pollock is junk," said Seymour Rosen, 53, director of Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments in Los Angeles. "If it were in a museum, you'd treat it in a different manner."

Perhaps. It can be hard not to wince, though, when Mr. Raimo lights up the cross and the accompanying six-foot-high "Holy Land U.S.A." sign that glows at night over Waterbury. "It's beautiful," he said. "Why would we want to tear it down?"

As he spoke, a bolt of lightning cracked the sky.