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Saving the sculpture house

Supporters seek a plan to preserve Sid Boyum's iconoclastic residence and yard

by JAY RATH AUGUST 27, 2015



CHRIS COLLINS

Future plans for the east-side house and yard are yet to be determined.

His whimsical concrete sculptures dotting the east side are celebrated, but Sid Boyum's unseen work is threatened. The late artist's home, its contents and sculpture garden will be put up for auction Sept. 10.

Preservation efforts got a big boost last week with a grant of \$400,000 from Madison Kipp Corp. The company, near Boyum's home, has vowed to assist in other ways, too.

But fans and neighbors are still scrambling. There are few options.

"What some of us are hoping is for someone to acquire the property with an eye toward conserving the art as much as possible," says Brian Standing, a neighbor and art enthusiast who works for Dane County as a senior planner.

The house, 1 Waubesa St., has been seized by the county for nonpayment of taxes totaling more than \$400,000. It's mostly been vacant since Boyum's death in 1983. He



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was a practitioner of what has been variously called folk, intuitive, naïve and outsider art.

Without the blinkers of artistic convention, brilliance sometimes shines through. Perhaps folk art's most famous practitioner, Grandma Moses, was fortunate: The rural New York painter's childlike landscapes were praised by critics in her lifetime. A farmer near Arcadia, Wis., was lucky, too. Seven years after his death in '32, the Kohler Foundation acquired Herman Rusch's concrete sculptures and began restoring his [Prairie Moon Sculpture Garden and Museum](#).

Boyum may not be so lucky.



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City and county officials have struggled to find a way to preserve the property and its curious denizens.

The first issue is what to do with the artists' drawings, which are mixed with trash and the detritus of life, and some mold. "Sid was something of a hoarder," notes Standing.

Second, the house contains two bas relief sculptures, a Buddha fireplace and a parody of a Mayan calendar, built into interior walls. The third problem is the backyard, filled with massive sculptures anchored in deep foundations.

In addition to cash, Kipp has promised to donate labor and the use of its equipment, and temporary storage in its parking lot. Matching grants — and permanent solutions — are still being sought. Ald. Marsha Rummel was instrumental in gaining the company's assistance.

At the Madison Arts Commission, program administrator Karin Wolf worked for years to avoid this situation. She always ran into what Dane County Treasurer Adam Gallagher did when he warned Boyum heirs that they needed to take action or they'd lose the house. The response "bunded like, 'ust take it, whatever." "So we took it," he says.

By statute, the county has three options: Sell the property to the city of Madison, put it up for public auction or retain it.

The county doesn't have funds to maintain the property. The Kohler Foundation won't take it on, at least right now. The remaining option is the public auction.



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Interested people can submit bids between Sept. 10 and Oct. 1, and the minimum bid is \$4,000.

All concerned agree that Gallagher, the Arts Commission and its counterpart, **Dane Arts**, have bent over backwards to assist. But this is an emergency situation that would sorely test even a well-funded arts nonprofit, and the city and county are waiting for Boyum fans to organize and come up with a specific plan.

"I think it's extremely critical that we create a process by which [Boyum's] art can be preserved," says Mark Fraire, director of Dane Arts, "and if this loosely knit group of friends of Sid Boyum can find a way to do that, my office will help as best as we can."



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If a plan is forthcoming, chair Brad Hinkfuss says that the **Schenk-Atwood-Starkweather-Yahara** Neighborhood Association would consider offering its nonprofit status to receive gifts and grants. **Arts Wisconsin**, a state arts advocacy organization, has also agreed to participate.

"I think it's pretty amazing that this grassroots citizens' group has come together to preserve this piece of cultural legacy," says Wolf. "They're saying it's important."

For more information, visit the Facebook page of **Save the Sid Boyum Art House**.



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