

“Something from Nothing”

Forestiery Underground Gardens

by Neil Goodman

The Visions of my mind almost overwhelm me.
Baldassare Forestiere

To make something with a lot of money, that is easy; But to make something out of nothing' now that is really something.

Baldassare Forestiere

Imagination is perhaps the most decisive characteristic of mankind.

Max Beckman

Although Simon Rodia's Watts Tower is well known, the Forestiere Underground Gardens in Fresno California is less so, although both are remarkable examples of what could be considered under the rubrics of outsider art and visionary architecture.

Baldassare Forestiere initially immigrated from Sicily in the early 1900s. After a short stint building underground for the newly constructed Holland tunnel in NYC, he journeyed west to Fresno California. With eighty dollars he bought eighty acres, originally intending it as a site for a future home and fruit orchard. Finding the searing Fresno heat and hard pan soil incompatible for either, he decided to dig down as opposed to building up. Hence, the beginning of a saga that lasted more than forty years. Although uncompleted at the time of his death at the age of sixty-seven, his underground villa included sixty-five rooms, three levels, and spanned ten acres.

My discovery of the underground villa was more happenstance than intent, as I was in Fresno for my son's engagement party. My son's future in-laws suggested the garden and as this was during covid, other more traditional art venues were limited. Finding the underground garden was equally unexpected, as it was located on a semi-deserted industrial four lane road sprinkled with



(Left) Interior with wheelbarrow and photo of Forestiere. Photo from <https://inhabitat.com/amazing-forestiere-underground-gardens-were-hand-carved-with-only-a-pick-and-shovel/forestiere4/>.



Baldassare Forestiere at the entrance to the Underground Garden. Photo from <http://www.undergroundgardens.com>.



Two underground trees in a hallway. Photos from <https://inhabitat.com/amazing-forestiere-underground-gardens-were-hand-carved-with-only-a-pick-and-shovel/forestiere4/>.

gas stations, a train crossing and a vintage motel. In some ways it was like wandering into the catacombs via Cicero Avenue, as the small pathway leading to the cavernous entrance was both surrounded by chain link fence and equally understated and innocuous.

Although Forestiere’s work could be thought of as utopian, his early intent was far more pragmatic, as he ultimately hoped to create an event and entertainment center, complete with an underground parking ground. Sometimes we can do all of the right things for unconventional reasons, and if his interest was financial, his means of realizing it were entirely inconvenient as well as labor intensive. Using largely a pickax, a wheelbarrow, and occasionally two mules, he built as he dug, using discarded material mixed with cement to create cavernous rooms and connecting hallways. If plans were largely intuitive, the results were intentional, as each room was succinct and considered in function and use. For natural light, he created a series of open-air portals, which could be closed with glass for the winter and reciprocally opened in the summer. The connecting passages were of various dimensions, which

constricted or expanded based upon cooling, heating, and air flow needs. His ecosystem included cisterns for collecting water, a solar bath, an underground fishpond, as well as winter and summer rooms on three levels. His villa also had fully functioning kitchens, bedrooms, seating, and multiple fireplaces. If other underground chambers were built for the dead, his was clearly for the living.

For sustenance, he planted fruit trees on various levels, which included above and below the surface. Plantings above sheltered the sun, while those below were planted on multiple levels which allowed harvest times to be lagged, insuring a steady supply of fruit throughout the year. Additionally, trees and grape vines were placed off center of the portals, giving them indirect light, which softened the direct sun. Trees were also grafted, producing multiple varieties of fruit from the same root. More than one hundred years later, many of these trees are still producing.

His Catholic heritage also influenced his design, as rooms were built in alcoves of seven or three, respectively relating to the seven sacraments as well as the trinity.

(Left) Subterranean garden with fruit tree. (Right) Underground orange tree. Photos from <https://inhabitat.com/amazing-forestiere-underground-gardens-were-hand-carved-with-only-a-pick-and-shovel/forestiere4/>.





(Left) Grape vines shading an opening. Photo from <https://inhabitat.com/amazing-forestiery-underground-gardens-were-hand-carved-with-only-a-pick-and-shovel/forestiery4/>.

Trees likewise were grafted with seven varieties of fruit. In short, Baldassare's underground villa blended spirituality, ecology, botany, and architecture. What is remarkable is not only the vastness of his underground villa, but also his single-minded ambition, his herculean labor, and the brilliance of his integrative and intuitive design.

Wade Davis in his book "One River" writes that "one must accept the possibility that the seed of one generation can be born in the next and that the spirit of one long dead can reach across time not merely to inspire but to mold the dreams of another." In the case of Forestiere, perhaps this is true, and if his intent differed, his work could certainly be linked to many other, contemporary artists. To name a few, the skylights harken to James Turrell, the earthworks to Robert Smithson, the excavations to Andy Goldsworthy and Michael Heizer, and the portals to Nancy Holt. Although separated by close to a century, we see his work as current because of who we are now, and in this way his accomplishments are both modern

and timely. If many contemporary artists are tributaries, his magnum opus "Underground Garden" is a river, which is broad and embracing and links him with some of the most profound and original thinkers and builders of the twentieth century.

In an age of massive amount of waste and on a planet choking on consumption, Forestiere's self-sustaining villa is an alternative model of ecology which is both ancient and contemporary. If he does not create a roadmap for the future, his accomplishments tempered with his proletarian work ethic are unparalleled and are a testament to what is possible with "Something from Nothing." ■

Neil Goodman is a sculptor formerly based in Chicago with an extensive exhibition history. Presently living in the central coast of California, he retired from Indiana University Northwest as Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by Carl Hammer Gallery as well as serving as the South Central California Region Editor for the *New Art Examiner*.



Bed nook and hallway. Photo from <https://inhabitat.com/amazing-forestiery-underground-gardens-were-hand-carved-with-only-a-pick-and-shovel/forestiery4/>.