

Charles Simonds

b. 1945

18. **Growth House** (proposed), 1975

Ink on paper, 25 x 29½

Collection of the artist

19. **Park Model/Fantasy**, 1976

Clay, wood, and photographs, 6 x 30 x 20

Collection of the artist

20. **Proposal for Stanley Tankel Memorial Hanging Gardens at Breezy Point**, 1976–77

Ink on photostat, 12 x 17¾

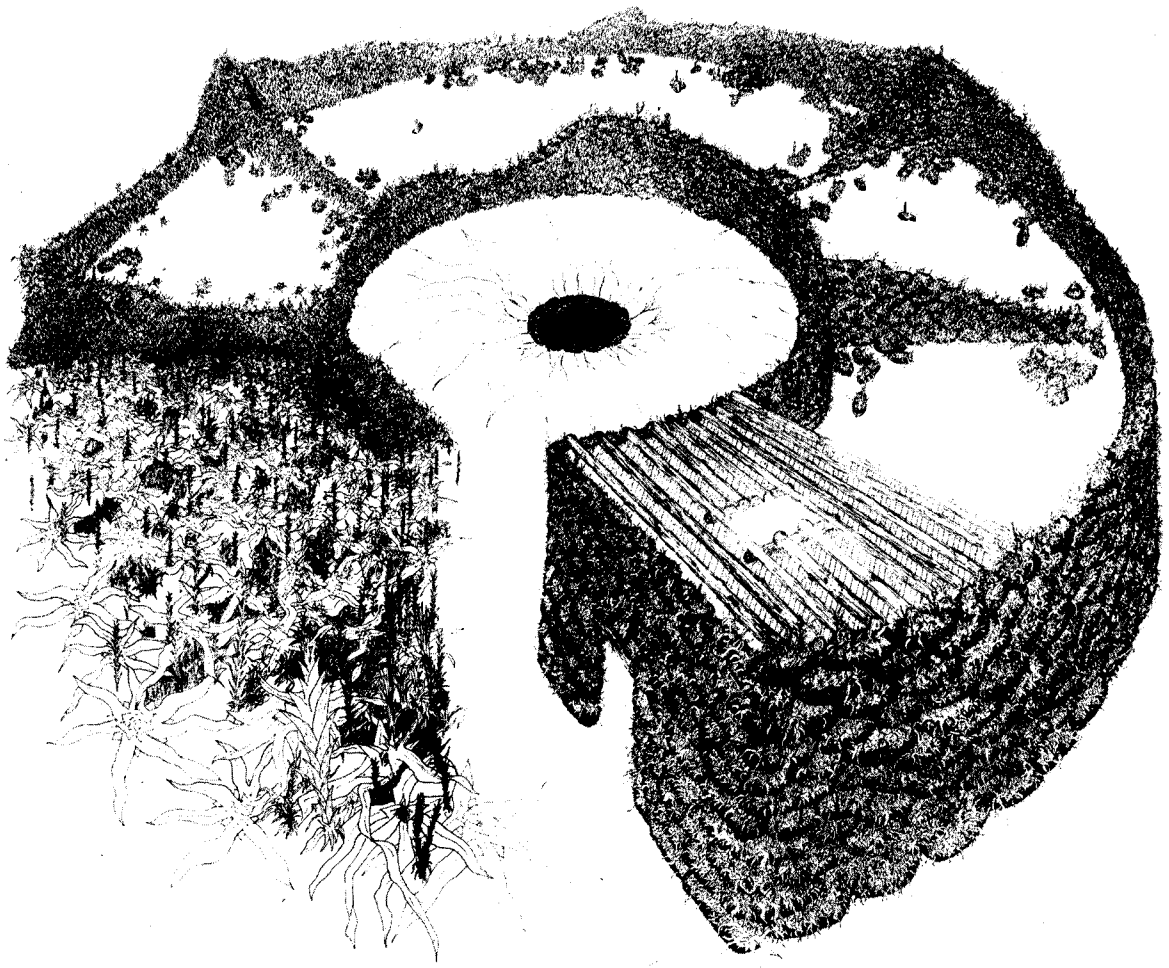
Collection of the artist

COMMENTS: For the past several years, there has been an apparent dichotomy in Simonds's work: it is two different endeavors to two different communities. To the art community, Simonds is known for his miniature clay landscapes and dwellings, the remains of an imaginary race of diminutive people whose history and beliefs the dwellings elucidate. This imaginary race, conceived by Simonds in 1970, made its first public appearance in 1971 in tiny dwellings which Simonds constructed outside in New York's Soho. Since then, Simonds has built several hundred of these dwellings, all the while elaborating his notions of the social structure, work habits, and beliefs of his civilization. Different kinds of dwellings have come to characterize different periods in the civilization's history, with the various structures fulfilling different symbolic or ritualistic functions. Often, certain land forms and dwellings are utilized at an early stage of the civilization's history for one purpose, then abandoned, and subsequently used again for a new purpose.¹

While many of the dwellings have been constructed on the Lower East Side, Simonds is not known to the people of that area solely as an artist. He is better known for his work with the Lower East Side Coalition for Human Housing and other community groups, assisting in efforts to revitalize the neighborhood and allow its residents a larger part in determining its use and character. With the cooperation of these groups, Simonds made a direct physical contribution to revitalizing the neighborhood through the construction, in 1974, of a combined park and playlot in a vacant lot owned by the city on East Second Street. Known as Project Uphill – La Placita, the park was proposed by Simonds to the city through the Coalition for Human Housing, but took its form from the collective efforts of the people who worked on it.

This apparent dichotomy – between Simonds's artistic endeavors and his work on the Lower East Side – is resolved when one realizes that his dwellings, and works such as *Park Model/Fantasy*, are emblematic of his concern for the past and present of the Lower East Side. His invention of a complete history and belief system for his imaginary civilization is paralleled by his interest in the history of the Lower East Side and the use and reuse of its land and structures. The imaginary civilization provides a framework within which Simonds perceives the processes which affect our own civilization, and provides a model for changing those processes.

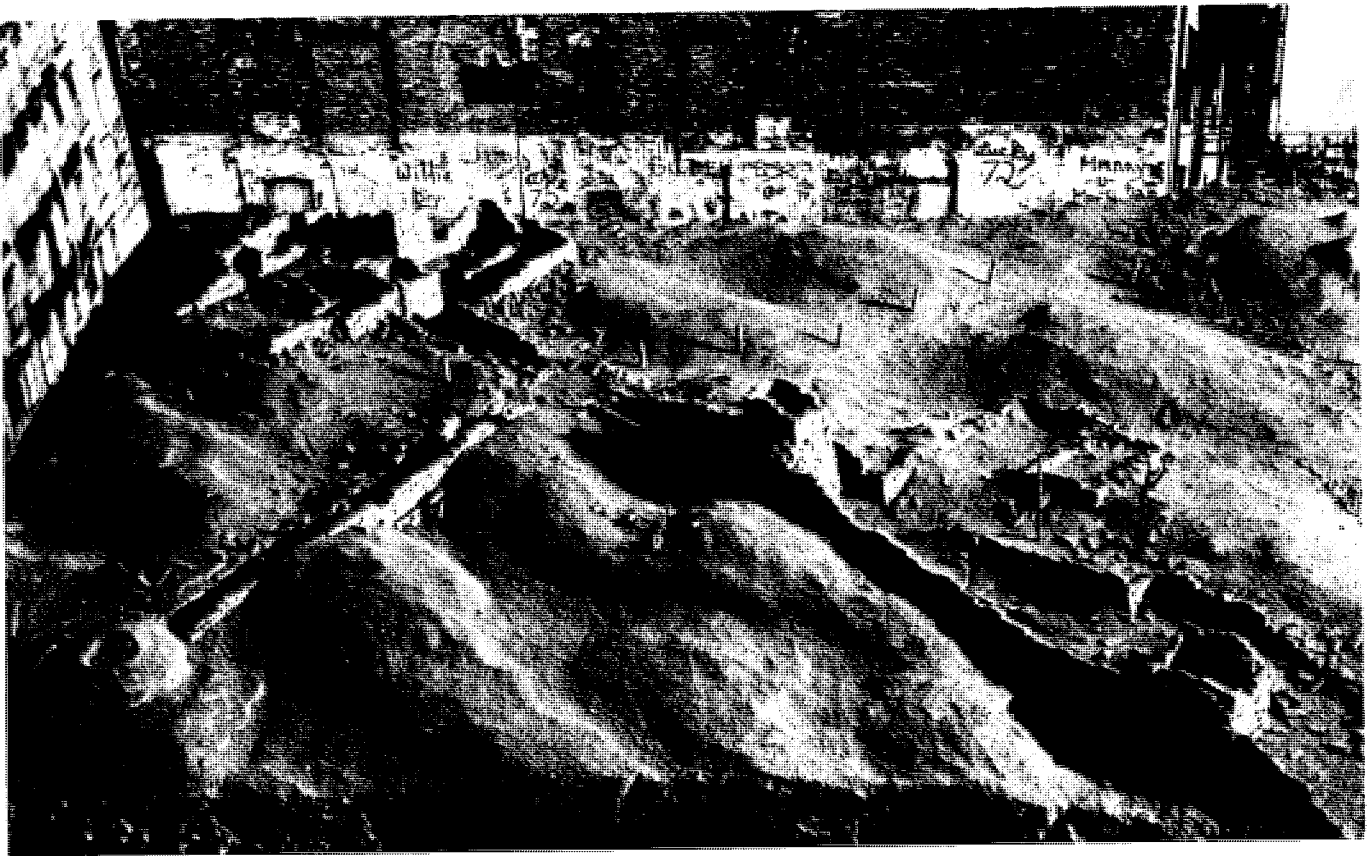
Park Model is not a proposal for a specific park. However, the photographs which line



18. *Growth House*.

both sides of the model and place it conceptually on the Lower East Side make it symbolic of Simonds's involvement with the continuing history of the people on the Lower East Side and of the land they inhabit. As Simonds explained about La Placita, "the dwellings and the park [La Placita] both articulate the earth, how people live on it and what they believe about it. . . . The park reinstates an image of the earth which becomes a receptacle for the energies of the people already living there."² In an urban area like New York, a peoples' relationship to land is conditioned by an unusually complex set of economic and social factors. Yet, just as Simonds has his imaginary race change its values and reuse its landscape and dwellings for different purposes, so he implies that the people of the Lower East Side can reuse their land and structures for their own purposes.

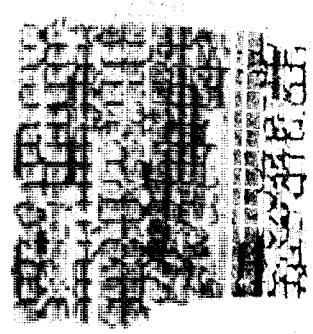
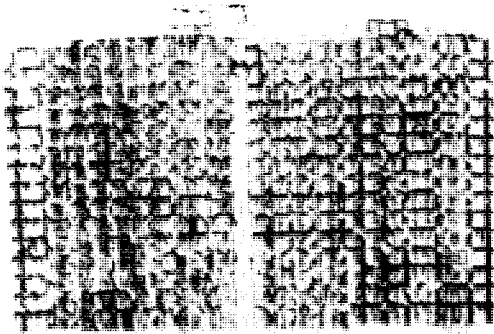
This emblematic relationship between Simonds's small-scale works and his efforts on behalf of the Lower East Side continues in his more recent projects. *Growth House*, one of the imaginary peoples' ritual dwellings, has been built to human scale at Artpark in Lewiston, New York (1975). Constructed of sacks filled with soil and a variety of vegetable and flower seeds, it was transformed by the growth of the plants from shelter to food as the plants were harvested and eaten. *Growth House* is among the structures Simonds conceives of building on the Lower East Side. Its significance to his imaginary civilization –



19. *Park Model/Fantasy.*

as a symbol of regeneration and an expression of the nourishing character of the earth – would also, presumably, be its significance to the people of the Lower East Side.

The proposal for *Stanley Tankel Memorial Hanging Gardens at Breezy Point* extends Simonds's involvement with the history of land use on the Lower East Side to another part of the city. The project would utilize two skeletal high-rise structures, abandoned during construction when the efforts of a group of citizens, including Stanley Tankel, resulted in the revocation of the permit which had authorized construction of the buildings. Construction had been opposed on the grounds that Breezy Point was one of the few relatively undeveloped areas remaining near the city and, as such, should not have high-rise structures. Citizens' efforts led ultimately to the formation of Gateway National Park, which includes the land on which the abandoned structures stand. Simonds's proposal would have the buildings covered with wisteria rooted around the base of the structures, converting them into a kind of hanging garden. Like La Placita, this represents an effort at creative reclama-



20. *Proposal for Stanley Tankel Memorial Hanging Gardens at Breezy Point.*

tion of a misused space, with the hope of preventing similar misuse in the future. It is a proposal analogous to the imaginary civilization's reuse of abandoned structures, but, again like La Placita, it represents the application of the ideas of the imaginary civilization to the problems of our civilization.

NOTES

1. A more complete description of this imaginary civilization can be found in Charles Simonds, *Three Peoples* (Genoa: Samanedizione, 1975).
2. In Lucy Lippard and Charles Simonds, "Microcosm to Macrocosm/Fantasy World to Real World," *Artforum* 12 (February 1974): 36.