

The father of modern day earth sheltering, the late Malcolm Wells, built the Underground Art Gallery in 1988 for his wife's fine art gallery and studio as well as his own architecture practice. The cover photo on one of Mr. Wells' last and perhaps most influential books, Recovering America, shows Mac standing in front of the gallery in effect leading by example. The designer and artist was a giant among us, so very far ahead of his time, promoting an underlying message of living a sustainable life with earth sheltering as fundamental to restoring the health of the planet.

As for health, unfortunately the gallery has developed some serious leaks. Long time gallery employee Jenna and myself have spent a great deal of time and effort on investigating the situation. Though more has to be dug up to come to final conclusions, it is apparent the source of the leaks is primarily one that Mac talks about in some of his books: really just a detailing problem. Regrettably these leaks have led to significant damage to the south wall. Ants and termites have caused further serious damage to wood and insulation alike.

Roots, however, are the greatest problem affecting the insulation. Roots have bored their way through, under, and around the insulation. This has caused earth to be washed and packed in-between and underneath the Styrofoam sheets. Concerning as well is the evident slight forward movement of the membrane itself presumably from earth sliding ever so slowly down hill. Remember, Mac built the gallery in 1988, and there is no mention of root barriers in the literature of the time. Rather, it is only now that technology has caught up with ways to build a green roof that will last a very long time.

I want to be very clear here that Mac's ideas are no less relevant due to these unforeseen circumstances. The visionary's ideas of an architecture that honors Nature are more important than ever. Indeed, earth sheltering is essential to a sustainable future. I am certain that Mac himself would want us to learn from these issues – he would have written yet another inspiring and witty book filled with his wisdom. As Mac's widow pointed out to me recently, he was a true intellectual.

The Underground Art Gallery is teaching us all lessons for the future! I am joined by many from across the world who feel Mac's architecture must be preserved, and equally important is making sure that the gallery can continue to serve the livelihood of Mac's widow as an artist. Mrs. Wells simply doesn't have the financial resources necessary to restore the gallery. I appeal to your help in any way you can, be it a financial donation (via PayPal) on the www.undergroundartgallery.com website, or contributing labor in removing earth from the roof at an upcoming but yet to be determined date.

I feel this project is so important that I have donated 250.00 USD, three 480 mile round trips as well as whole lot of effort. We anticipate really getting into the thick of the project in late September and early October.

Respectfully,

Oliver W. Solmitz, BA-Arch, AAS, EMT-P

“Why do all the openings on your row house have dropped headers?” asked Organic Architect James Schindroth. As a second year architecture student I thought I had a pretty good answer when I explained “in order to allow the structure to span over the opening the depth of beam has to be significant”. In fact, I didn’t know how to build with the headers concealed in the ceiling plane, nor did I understand the incredible importance of allowing glazing to butt up against (in this case) the ceiling. What followed was Mr. Schindroth taking me aside to explain how the headers can, and usually should, be hidden up in the framing. This was completed with sketches showing how the framing worked, to create what I now consider fundamental to one of the three most important aspects of architecture – *space*. The other two fundamental elements are scale and light, and architecture does not happen unless all three work together as a whole. That day in my second year studio turned out to be just the beginning of my understanding of Organic Architecture. Through the rest of my college education I would continue to be mentored by Mr. Schindroth in the principles of Mr. Frank Lloyd Wright’s architecture – Organic Architecture. Interestingly, there seems to be a slow awakening to the need for architecture, even if the underlying force is economic. Fundamentally, however, Organic Architecture has come of age! The “build green” trend is really a return to the practices of an architecture that is responsible to the earth, its peoples, and indeed human experience.