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# Structural Reality

By Nancy Sokoler Steiner

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Sheila and David Epstein are accumulating properties faster than Donald Trump. While the appreciation factor of their buildings is more modest, it's not insignificant. Along with such icons as the Eiffel Tower and the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., the semiretired Woodland Hills residents number their holdings at about 1,000 sites—souvenir building replicas produced since 1910.

Their L.A. landmarks include the Capitol Records building, City Hall and Griffith Observatory. New York City is also well represented, with sites such as the Statue of Liberty (they have 40 versions), Empire State Building, Flatiron Building and the Guggenheim Museum. A good portion of the collection consists of souvenir bank buildings. Most are made of cast pot metal—a stew of zinc, copper, aluminum and other metals.

The replicas hail from throughout the United States, from Alaska Mutual Savings Bank to Ford City Bank in Chicago to Tallahassee Federal Savings. “The ones from the '60s and '70s especially give a good idea of what suburban banks looked like,” says David. “It’s a good architectural history lesson.”

Experts agree. “Souvenir buildings ... offer something like an alternative, shadow history of architecture,” note Margaret Majua and David Weingarten in their book “Souvenir Buildings Miniature Monuments: From the Collection of Ace Architects.” “This history is popular, rather than academic. It is largely unconcerned with period, place, style and the inexorability of progress; instead it focuses on the range of buildings people have thought remarkable, important, appealing and worthy of a souvenir.”

As is true for many collectors, the couple’s efforts began innocently about 30 years ago, when Sheila’s uncle sent her a miniature replica of New Britain Federal Savings & Loan Assn., located in her hometown of Hartford, Conn. A few weeks later while in Northern California, the couple spotted a Santa Rosa Savings and Loan Assn. souvenir building, and paid \$4 for their find. Now, Sheila says, hunting for souvenir buildings “gives us a focus when we travel. It’s something we love to do together. [The fun is] finding them more than the objects themselves.”

Among the couple’s favorite pieces are a replica of Notre Dame Stadium, with a Knute Rockne statue, as well as an inkwell replica of the Travelers Insurance Co. in Hartford, Conn. Manufactured in the 1920s, the Travelers piece is among the rarer items in their collection, and they recently declined \$895 for it. Souvenir bank buildings can fetch as much as \$1,000, although most fall within the \$100 to \$200 range, David says.

About a decade ago, the Epsteins stumbled upon the Souvenir Building Collectors Society, with about 300 members around the world, and promptly joined up. The group’s web site, [www.sbcollectors.org](http://www.sbcollectors.org), acknowledges that this passion may not be for everyone, noting that souvenir buildings “make our hearts beat faster when we find

them . . . and make others ask ... Why?" While the Epsteins' assets may not compare to the Donald's, they seem to share a similar philosophy of acquisition.

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