

# Eye of an Architect

John Margolies' discerning view of roadside America

In

the mid-1970s, John Margolies set out on what would become a decades-long road trip as he crisscrossed the United States to document diners, gas stations, drive-in theaters,

shop fronts, commercial signage and other evidence of America's roadside and Main Street entrepreneurialism.

In the mid-1980s, Margolies' first published photo collection, *The End of the Road*, caught the attention of a young British undergraduate finishing his studies of medieval art and architecture. That student was Marc Greuther, now senior director, historical resources and chief curator at The Henry Ford.

"I had never heard of Margolies, but I thought the book was magical, and it changed my perspective," said Greuther. "I was a big fan of American road movies, and his photos seemed to inhabit the same universe. You just don't see this sort of architecture in Britain. The fact that he photographed it — and the way he photographed it — both legitimized and celebrated it. And I realized it was more interesting to me than studying cathedrals."

Fast-forward 20 years. Greuther, now on The Henry Ford's staff, is in Henry Ford Museum and spots Margolies exploring the exhibit floor with a tour group. By this time, some of the architect's celebrated photos were part of the Library of Congress' collections.

"I introduced myself and told him it was because of him that I was here; in large part my eagerness to work here was rooted in the work he'd done," Greuther said. "He told me that not all of his collection was going to the Library of Congress, and that's how it started."

From that happenstance conversation, The Henry Ford ended up purchasing 1,500

transparencies, and Margolies also donated materials. "We bought his library as well," added Greuther.

This spring, Henry Ford Museum will showcase its Margolies collection in a temporary exhibit called *Roadside America*. Greuther calls it part art exhibit, part installation and part retrospective. "This collection documents a form of architecture and design and advertising that's very homespun," he said. "There's humor, there's quirkiness. There's an emotional resonance that ties to fundamental aspects of American culture. We're acknowledging that and celebrating it."

Margolies may not have had formal training in photography. Nonetheless, he had a discerning eye for rich examples of vernacular architecture, which he preferred to shoot in clear, morning light. Many of the sites he chose already were faded and on the brink of collapse.

"We live in an era of Instagram and Flickr and most every cellphone is a decent camera. Margolies was documenting and sharing when it just wasn't that easy," Greuther said.

Remember, it was pre-Internet, before Google maps and Web searches. "What he was doing was a sort of detective work, fueled by his passion," added Greuther. "He was willing to look at architecture that other people didn't take seriously."

Much of what Margolies documented was made possible by the automobile, of course, and his emphasis on the sites' blend of resourcefulness, ingenuity and entrepreneurialism makes his body of work a fine fit for The Henry Ford. "We use historical materials to look at our present and inspire people for the future," Greuther said. "He was willing to look at architecture and details that other people didn't take seriously and at times didn't even notice."

## ROADSIDE AMERICA

A temporary exhibit in Henry Ford Museum's flexible exhibit space, *Roadside America* is dedicated to John Margolies' body of work. It will include his photos, his library, a map installation of the United States created from felt pennants Margolies collected, a running slide show and dozens of offbeat "Do Not Disturb" signs he picked up at hotels during his travels.

**Dates:** May 9-September 7, 2015

**Where:** Henry Ford Museum  
Free with museum admission

◀ Atomic Bar Sign, El Paso, Texas, 1979



JOHN MARGOLIES

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