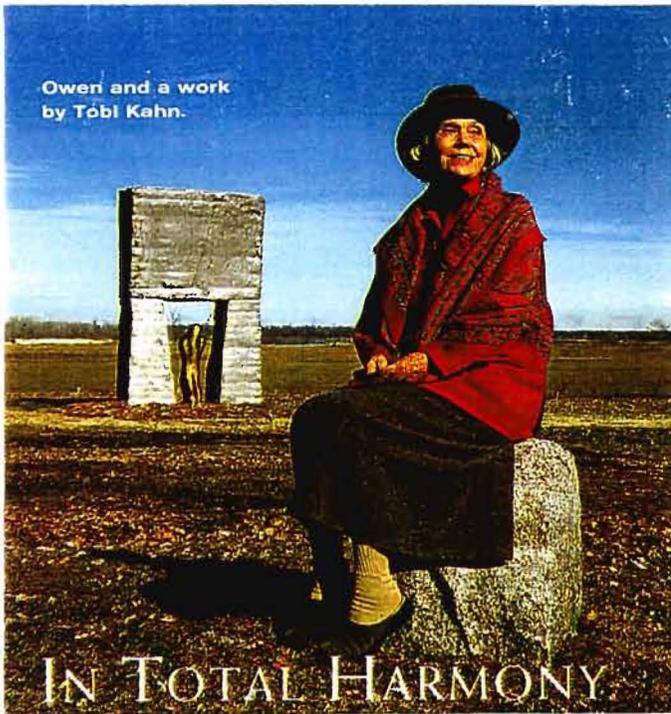


# TOWN & COUNTRY

June 1994



I saw a model of the shape in the studio, and in my mind's eye I saw it standing by itself with a great field behind it." Jane Blaffer Owen is talking about the haunting fourteen-foot-high, 40,000-pound granite sculpture by New York artist Tobi Kahn that is the newest addition to the landscape of New Harmony, Indiana. Thanks to Owen's generosity and vision, Kahn's work—a Stonehengeian gateway sheltering a sinuous, abstract figure—rises powerfully out of the flat, winter-bare Indiana fields. Owen could look at it all day.

She has been bringing such treasures to New Harmony for fifty-two years. The granddaughter of William T. Campbell, a founder of Texaco, and daughter of Robert Lee Blaffer, a founder of Humble Oil, she married into an equally historic family in 1941. Her husband, livestock breeder and geologist Kenneth Dale Owen, was a direct descendant of textile baron Robert Owen, who in 1825 bought and supported a German utopian community at New Harmony. Although largely unsuccessful as a social experiment, his community did become a center of mid-19th-century natural-science research, and, ultimately, a repository of American architecture, with examples from every decade since the 1770s.

In 1941, the sight of the empty, neglected structures of New Harmony touched something deep in young Jane, and in the mid-1940s she began arranging for their restoration. Today, thanks to her generosity and example, great works of modern architecture and sculpture, including the famous Roofless Church by Philip Johnson, for which Jacques Lipschitz created a sculpture and ceremonial gates, contribute to an atmosphere of ongoing human creation. "I love Williamsburg [Virginia], but it freezes time," says Owen. "We are in a river of time, and it keeps on flowing."

To flow with it, New Harmony is the site of conferences and seminars on a variety of creative, religious and intellectual subjects, including this month's Ropewalk writers' conference. Owen's foundation helps to fund many of these meetings, and she has encouraged individuals and institutions to do the same. "I keep on saying, 'Come on in, the water's fine,'" she jokes. New Harmony has such "intellectual and spiritual momentum," Owen says, that she can hardly bear to leave it. "I spend at least half the year there; the other half I'm in Houston but on the phone to New Harmony, twiddling my thumbs, wondering what I am missing." She seems to draw her boundless energy from the very place. "On and on we go," says Owen, "into the future." ANN BERMAN