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photo by Vano

You find only dead art in museums... — Jean Varda

Friends of Jean Varda propose a waterfront location for a pavilion to house the late artist's mosaic mural

by Cynthia Roby

The late artist, Jean Varda, must be smiling down on his old hometown of Sausalito with benevolence... Long ago, his old friend, Victor di Suvero, recalls that Varda proclaimed, "A museum is just a short way of saying mausoleum. You find only dead art in museums."

How appropriate then that a 23-ton, 16 by 20 foot gold-leaf mosaic mural, designed by Varda and executed by Alfonso Pardini's of Byzantine Mosaics, has been returned to Sausalito complete with a set of plans for a new "al fresco" location on the waterfront that will pay it and Varda's spirit the greatest kind of tribute.

Recently rescued from the wrecker's ball, when its former home, the Villa Roma Motor Hotel in San Francisco was razed, the mosaic was moved to Sausalito at a cost of \$23,000. It is now being stored at Marinship park. Plans to incorporate it into an outdoor pavilion have been spearheaded by three of the artists' oldest friends: Victor di Suvero; Doug Murdock; and Jacques Overhoff, members of the whimsically titled "Waldo Point Bathing and Boating Society."

With their eye on a waterfront setting—Marinship Park, Dunphy Park or Gabrielson Park near the ferry landing—the three have conceived of a simple white concrete pavilion to house the glorious mosaic.

Jacques Overhoff, a sculptor who has consulted on numerous architectural and construction projects, expands on the proposed design. "Because there is a lot of gold-leaf in the mosaic, the Pavilion is to give it some cover. Gold-leaf cannot be exposed directly to the sun or it fades. Because the wall in back would be blank, it too could be used for the display of work of other ar-

tists... It will also be a fantastic backdrop for public events or music events. It is designed as sort of a stage set. There will be a concrete base and space frame with a type of lucite skylight. The whole effect will be very white. The only thing you will observe is the mural. It will have a Mediterranean look which is especially appropriate because Varda was a Greek... I think this would please him."

And, happily, the idea appealed unanimously to the City Council when the concept was proposed at the November 16th meeting. Contingent on finding an appropriate location, the Council accepted the piece "in principle" and agreed to direct the Community Appearances Advisory Board to consider the proposal at their December 9th meeting. In addition, the newly appointed Art Commission will work on the project. Councilman Earl Dunphy also suggested that the Sausalito Foundation be invited to work on the project as well.

Victor di Suvero commented on the Council reaction, "I am absolutely delighted. It is wonderful of the people on the Council to have been responsive to the worth of this. Hopefully a location will be found in the next month or so." Di Suvero, who describes himself as a poet and businessman, has faced the Council before as developer of Marina Vista.

Jacques Overhoff explained that it is important that the project move along fairly swiftly. "We will have to put it together in a fairly short period or the wall (to which the mosaic is attached) will begin to deteriorate... The involvement of the Art Commission should speed up the process."

Di Suvero estimates that the com-

There is no doubt about it — the issue of whether or not the Casa Madrona expansion project has been properly handled by the City has sharply divided segments of this community. Although Casa Madrona owner John Mays has taken his share of abuse over this project, the main point of concern at the Monday, November 22 meeting was whether or not the City had properly processed this application at City Hall. The question is whether or not there is something wrong with the process or something wrong with the way City officials applied the existing review process to this project. Some find no blame at all with the City and cannot find fault with the process. Others are disgusted and vehemently opposed to this point of view. In short they hate what has happened. The argument that there was ample notice both from City Hall and in the local press during the early planning stages for public input does little to assuage these angry residents, who object primarily to the scale of the project which encroaches into a residential neighborhood.

The Monday night meeting was handled 99% of the time with a generous degree of decorum. What could have turned into an angry free-for-all was prevented by restraint on both sides of the issue and compliance with a firm set of guidelines set forth by Mayor Carol Peltz. Very few speakers refused to generously adhere to the spirit of the ground rules. The meeting was tense and polite, which does not mean to imply that the speakers minced words when presenting their point of view. Just the opposite, speakers firmly presented their opinions, suggestions and complaints.

The meeting got off to a shaky start when Mayor Carol Peltz said she wanted to respond to a letter circulated by John Mays regarding his application for a license to sell beer and wine in his restaurant which is being challenged. Several residents have written letters of opposition to the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board. The City Council has also written a letter supporting the residents' concerns about noise, traffic and parking impacts in a residential zone. The Casa Madrona Hotel and Restaurant are legal non-conforming uses located in a residential zone. Mayor Carol Peltz said while the Council is not opposed to the issuance of a permit for the sale of beer and wine, the Council is sensitive to neighborhood concerns about the impact of the hotel/restaurant use. Immediately attorney Stephen Fraser, who represents John Mays, objected and demanded equal time. Mayor Peltz said she had to respond before the meeting proceeded because "This is a letter which brought people out" and told him he would have his opportunity to speak. Fraser finally agreed to sit down.

The agenda called for a chronological review of the project, which was satisfied by a handout prepared by the Director of Public Works. This "Log of Actions" outlined city activity on the project from July 5, 1972 to the present.

Ralph Holmstad, George Draper and Gail Lorge presented additional information, which generally reviewed resident concerns with the project they believe have not adequately been addressed by the City. Briefly, these concerns focus on open space requirements, proper setbacks from property lines, the absence of an Environmental Impact Report, possible violations of zoning and height regulations and the allega-

tion that Community Appearances Advisory Board meeting minutes have been purposely altered to benefit the developer.

Dan Cahill, attorney for Velma Gamble and Scott McBride, spoke next. He said he had two major concerns: 1) whether or not any liquor license can legally be authorized by the City; and 2) whether or not the city has properly applied its zoning regulations with respect to open space.

Cahill said it is his understanding that the right to continue a legal, non-conforming use expires if and when there has been a lapse in use for a period of six months or more. He said since beer and wine has not been served at the Casa Madrona since May 5, 1982, the owner has forfeited his right to serve beer and wine.

He added if the City should decide to permit Mays to serve beer and wine, conditions should be imposed: service should be permitted only from 6-10 pm (the hours the restaurant is currently open); dining and drinking should be prohibited on any outdoor deck or rooftop; breakfast and lunch service should not be permitted; customer and service access should be from Bridgeway only; signage should not be permitted on Bulkley; parking should not be permitted in the Village Fair parking lot; the driveway parallel to Bulkley and adjacent to the Casa should be blocked off; and rental parking permits should be required on total use of the site (1 space per room, 1 space per employee, 1 space per 4 seats in the restaurant).

Cahill then spoke to the open space issue, "I believe the code is susceptible to several interpretations. In the R-3 District and C-C zone there is a 15-foot rearward setback requirement. There should be at least one 15-foot setback" where the R-3 and C-C zones meet on the Casa Madrona parcel.

City Attorney Lee Jordan said he would be making a statement soon with respect to the legal, non-conforming use requirements and acknowledged there is room for a difference of opinion on the open space question. He said his interpretation of the zoning ordinance allows the property owner to provide a 15-foot rearward setback on Bulkley.

Brief presentations by architect Don Olsen and attorney Stephen Fraser were made on behalf of the project.

Olsen introduced a 7-page letter written to the Council into the record and said "Back in 1979 or 80 when the negative declaration was asked for on this project, it was properly noticed. To my knowledge no one responded until the 9th, 10th or 11th hour. We have met the requirements."

Fraser said his major objection is the letter the Council wrote to the ABC, which was based on a telephone communication. He said it is improper for the Council to write to a public agency without giving the concerned party an opportunity to respond. Fraser added, "We have had lots of public comment, but we do not have any facts that have been presented. It's still not clear what you have in mind tonight." He concluded, "This meeting seems to be an opportunity for the opposition to vent their spleen. The entire hotel project should be put in perspective. The City is spending a lot of time on this project when time should be spent on far more worthwhile projects."

Audience comment was spontaneous and did not follow a pattern. A

variety of issues were raised. Most speakers made brief statements.

Sterling Hayden, who has spent intermittent time in Sausalito since the 40s, said "The town has survived. The facade that is going up there happens to be an extremely attractive one. I have a tremendous affection for small hotels." Jane Baird was not impressed by Hayden's endorsement and suggested "our meetings should not be open to every Tom, Dick and Harry".

Glenn McCormick was the first to speak to an issue that was addressed by many speakers, "The concern is that the project is in a constant state of change. The applicant never submitted a plan. I believe that the reason we are here tonight is because we do not know how to manage the City. I think that is the real issue. We have given staff too much power. I presume it's time for the people to take over."

Kathy Lustig, general manager of the Hotel, said, "All of us care about the hotel and its place in Sausalito. You see the outside of our business. On the inside, we run one of the very finest small hotels anywhere. We have a wonderful country French restaurant. A sense of quality is being applied to every detail."

Jan Emory, interior designers for the project, said, "The new rooms will pay attention to the flavor of the old hotel. A unique concept is being used. There are 16 designers for 16 rooms, who are taking pride in designing a hotel for your town. It's something we should all be proud of."

Ann Arnott said, "The frustration I feel sitting here is enormous. We've given John Mays the go-ahead. We're not going to abate it — right or wrong. Something is wrong with the procedures that got us where we are right now. When you meet some people in the supermarket, you really aren't speaking. The project is 'fait accompli'."

Bernadette DeMartini was the first to question the announcement made by Mayor Peltz that she planned to take a vote at the end of the meeting to measure public opinion. Mrs. DeMartini asked, "What are we going to be voting on? The liquor license? What hotel have you gone into in your lifetime that doesn't have a liquor license?"

Virginia Merrill said, "I'm worried about Bridgeway. It's our only main street" and voiced her disapproval of asking for a vote from the people, "You lock people into opinions that way."

Sheila Reichling said, "People may feel they were left out of the process. Sausalito may want to have something to say in the future."

Ray Taber, a former member of the Planning Commission, said "The Council needs to sort this out and give us the leadership we ought to have."

Gerald Clear said, "The real concern is that the project is out of scale for Sausalito. This project slipped through. We don't know how that happened." He added, "I don't think a vote will accomplish a thing."

Tom Hoover said, "The old Casa is almost invisible. It's a problem of scale. I'm somewhat for, somewhat against."

Anne Hicks asked, "What went wrong with the process?"

Walter Lappert, owner of the small eating place just north of the project said, "I feel the project should be finished."

Wally Mays said "This project will

continued on page 3

pavilion

continued from page 1

pleted project might bear a price tag close to \$90,000. He notes, however, "In cash and commitments, \$14,000 has already been raised." He envisions that

a total of \$45,000 might be raised privately and that one of the foundations, like the San Francisco Foundation, might grant the balance. Di Suvero has special praise for Bill Loorz of Stolte Inc., the construction company who were the successful bidders for the construction of the new 250-room hotel that will be built on the Villa Roma site, a building which he also built. Di Suvero says, "His company and the Cleveland Wrecking Company took great care with the mosaic. Loorz is a prince of a guy and has even contributed \$5000 of his own to the project."

Back in 1960 when the piece was

first commissioned for the Villa Romana Motor Hotel, Victor de Suvero remembers some of the conceptualization behind the dramatic piece. "Jim Hamm, one of the original developers along with Bill Loorz, told Varda and Pardinias he wanted the mosaic to be something Italian in feeling."

"Make it Italian," Hamm said.

"What kind of Italian?" the artist wondered.

"Ladies and good food. Sort of commedia del'arte..." they suggested, adding, "Just make it nice!"

Varda retorted, "There's no such thing as nice. There's just glorious!"

And to hear di Suvero talk, it is clear that Varda's life was better than nice. It too reached for the glorious.

Varda came to Sausalito via Big Sur after World War II from Paris where he had shared a studio with Braque and Picasso.

"Varda was one of the first artists to come to Sausalito after World War II. He lived on the old Ferryboat in the Vallejo in the forties and fifties," Victor di Suvero remembers, adding, "He brought a great heritage and background and was the focal point of fun activity and delight. His presence on the waterfront was very, very important." In 1960 Varda's friends formed the Waldo Point Boating and Bathing Society, an organization devoted to sponsoring events and festivals in Varda's spirit.

And extraordinary times they must have been with Varda at the helm both figuratively and literally...

Di Suvero recalls, "He built wonderful Mediterranean sailing boats out of old lifeboats. The sails were all



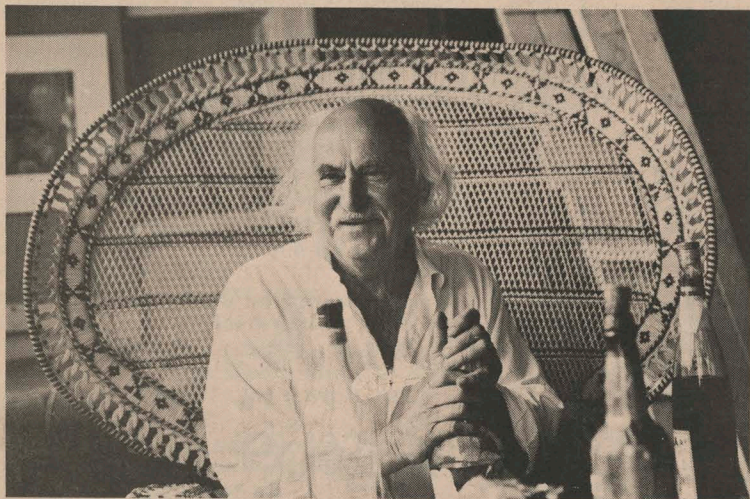
photo by Vano

oranges and reds and the boats were all painted brilliant colors. Varda always said, 'Anything that has life has color.' Di Suvero tells how they would set forth on a Sunday afternoon, "All wearing our wildest colors, carrying musical instruments. We'd just be lumbering along. The wine was good; the girls beautiful."

Special celebrations were always painted with a broad brush stroke. Di Suvero recalls, "In 1969, on Varda's 75th birthday, a 1000 people celebrated it on the drydocks in the middle of the Bay and two years later for his 77th birthday, there was a gypsy gathering at the tip of Strawberry Point."

The first Sausalito Art Festival was built around Varda and he participated in many of the early festivals. He designed a Phoenix symbol, used as the Festivals symbol. The 1980 Art Festival was dedicated in his honor.

But, finally, there is a good chance there will be a permanent and appropriate showcase for this great artist's talent. Victor di Suvero says it well, "It is a chance for Sausalito to pick up on some of its past and make it solid and tangible."



Jean Varda
photo by Brian Frankish

