

# BUILDING THE ART ARK

By Tony Vaughan

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The office above the corner of 16th and Mission streets in San Francisco where Martha Senger has been working for the past seven years, at first glance, seems to be more an ideal spot for a private detective agency than the place where radical ideas are actualized. Martha's office door has no fancy gold letters—only a business card pasted in the middle: Artspace Development Corporation, Martha Senger, Executive Director.

The Artspace Development Corporation (or ArtsDeco) had its beginning in the Goodman Group, the well-known arts collective that successfully fought off Redevelopment Agency bulldozers for more than ten years. During that time the Group had their home declared a City landmark and—with help from outside supporters—formed a nonprofit development corporation that created a plan to rehab and buy the building. Though the plan was supported by then governor Jerry Brown's Office of Appropriate Technology and the State Architect and Housing Offices, the Redevelopment Agency gave the building to an outside developer who gutted its live-work studios and converted it into a HUD subsidized apartment building. The Group was evicted in 1983, but took with them a commitment from the City for \$500,000 toward another building.

Since that time, a network has been coordinated out of this office on 16th and Mission to locate a new habitat for the community, or for a community that embodies the auto poetic principles—a complex and frustrating task, but one which its difficulty had helped to articulate and enact a new approach to economics, ecology and art. In fact, there is a new vision, a kind of future modernism at work here—an aesthetic as a collective psychology, a political embodiment.

On the bulletin board above Martha's desk—among the mass of business cards, clippings, financial statements, postcards and reminders—is a small woodcut by Max Butler of the former Goodman Building circled with a line from Henry Miller: “all that really matters is that the miraculous becomes the norm,” and a statement by Joseph Beuys: “The concept of art will be anthropologically expanded as a social architecture, created by many people.” Martha's manifesto is printed below a small self-portrait: “My work embraces action-towards-etherealization as an aesthetic and revolutionary understanding.” These are key ideas that can help show a way out of the relentless and hopeless entropy that has engulfed life in today's society.

Martha says that “it's important to talk about psychological open space and evolutionary open space, that there be parameters for experimentation. It's important not to lose sight of this as an evolutionary necessity. The destruction of habitat of low-

income artists is a crucial ecological issue for San Francisco as an urban area. Diversity of population is necessary to maintain a balance between points of view, and a balance of points of view makes a healthy mind. When that is deteriorated—flattened out—it’s a move downward, toward self-sameness and entropy.”

Martha is talking about the final stages of design a new building—the Ark—a surprising idea that is rapidly becoming an actuality. She says, “It’s important to have different models, a different kind of shelter—something that integrates people in a naturally social, spontaneous way, that brings together living and working. It is the nature of human beings to inquire into what’s possible, let by their aesthetic need to explore. I see the Ark as a kind of urban space probe—a place where exploration can be carried out right here—in the middle of San Francisco.”

Instead of continuing the unsuccessful search to buy an already existing building, ArtsDeco has worked out as plan to construct its own building from scratch, on a site on Potrero Hill. This came after more than seven years of investigating almost everything else under the sun, from industrial buildings to residential hotels, even including an ex-bathhouse and former convent.

Bordered by 18th Street and Arkansas Streets, the parcel of land the Art Ark will occupy was originally an old railroad cut for the Western and Pacific Railroad. The funding for the project will come partially from the City’s half-million dollar subsidy and partially from internal subsidies flowing to them through their partnership with for-profit developer Rick Holliday, who will build 60 condominiums on the site.

Martha and an ArtsDeco design team collaborated with architect David Baker on the Ark’s design. The Ark is conceived as being cooperative live/work space—an organic system incorporating varied and flexible space, multiple communication links and resident self-organization and management. Rents for its 29 loft spaces will be permanently affordable to a broad spectrum of low-income artists.

She is pleased with the design which she says is “basically an aesthetic solution—a bohemian technology, really, because it’s low in mass but high in meaning. We believe it also will be seen as appropriate technology from an ecological standpoint because it conserves physical resources while it also reconnects community.”

On the surface, the Ark/Arkansas Street Project seems like an endeavor nobody would block. But, in fact, there has been considerable protest. A group called Potrero Commons, whose membership includes some of the people who live near the site, does not want to see any kind of development on this piece of land. They claim it should remain as open space, as a kind of commons where residents have enjoyed dog walking privileges and a fine view of downtown San Francisco. Evidence has been gathered that there are over 50 butterfly species that habitually return to this parcel of land year after year to sun themselves during their migrations. For many, the idea of preserving this land from any kind of housing development is critical in the struggle to save urban open space. The motto “Open Space Is Not Empty Space!” is seen in a number of front windows throughout Potrero Hill. Another opponent is Anchor Steam Brewery owner Fritz

Maytag, who claims his brewery needs open space around it much as a spotted owl needs its territory. The opposition has recently been joined by the ILWU, which claims the blue-collar jobs will be endangered if future residents of the condos complain about fumes from the brewery and the nearby Hills Bros coffee plant.

In response to community concern, ArtsDeco has been working to add open space to the plan. Dog walk corridors are proposed and planned through the developed site and areas left open for butterfly and insect habitats. There have also been successful negotiations to acquire the use of adjacent school district property for a neighborhood-designed park along 19th Street.

Martha points out, sadly, “It’s ironic that in order to restore the human habitat, we have been fighting the very people who have been working to restore and protect other important parts of the ecology. We are truly at tragic odds. In San Francisco, low-income artists have been driven out, their low rent habitats destroyed by development that has been totally insensitive to either the City’s or the people’s deeper needs. Whole neighborhoods have been gentrified, their previous lives snuffed out and their residents badgered and bribed out of town.”

“This means that the little that’s left must be designed and meted out with a view to meeting and rejuvenating the needs of the diminished whole—which cannot be done by isolating and chauvinizing the parts. In fact, claiming that any one part of the whole *is* the whole is the essence of reductionist thinking.”

In a manifesto called *Citizens for Common Ground on Potrero Hill*, Martha writes, “We need a bioregional perspective, a broad view that includes and preserves habitat, open space and population diversity. This is a higher, integral mix and also preserves the green belt. It is old paradigm, either-or thinking that we have to fight. A both-and perspective will look at Potrero Hill as part of the larger neighborhood of the City, and the City as a neighborhood of the bioregion.”

When I asked Martha—whose paintings, installations and performances I have seen over the years—what all this had to do with her work as an artist, she said, “I see myself as an aesthetic bootstrapper—working collectively in the world to create a sane form. It’s time to move beyond deconstructionism and create architecture of habitability, of regeneration. I see the Ark as modeling that—as a kind of recombinant DNA structure—one which can begin to cohere what society as torn asunder.”