

A MYSTERIOUS AND CHANGING COMPANY

My Personal History as a Member of The Goodman Building Arts Community

By Tony Vaughan

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My first contact with The Goodman Community occurred in 1973, when, at the time, I had organized a poetry and music group. We began playing a series of benefits for the Goodman Group. The Goodman Group was an amalgam of artists and teachers who lived in a century-old Victorian hotel at the edge of The Western Addition in San Francisco. The building had housed mostly artists for more than 60 years. At the time a chain of events had placed the building in grave danger of the wrecking ball and bulldozer. But under this threat and peril the Goodman Group continued to keep the place functioning as a counter-cultural community arts center and art/education facility.

Over those years in the seventies I shared in the struggle to save The Goodman Building, working as both an artist and a citizen. One year on the winter solstice I brought in a whole cross section of the Bay Area poetry community to participate in a 24-hour continuous poetry reading called Winter Solstice Festival Of The Imagination. The years following I started a friendship with the aging poet, mail-artist, anarchist, and building resident Byron Alton Hunt. Our relationship lasted almost twenty years until he passed away in 1992. I helped publish his poetry, organized readings in which he participated, interviewed him for Poetry Flash and published a pamphlet about him. We also sent mail/art back and forth and collaborated on drawings. He is Horace, a main character in my 1989 novel, *No Advertisement For An Easy Life*.

Crisis forged much of the early cultural atmosphere at The Goodman Building— both in the existential sense and as a continuing state of mind in light of the major financial and political struggles this community faced. And much material about this time exists that should be cataloged and archived: newspaper articles, photographs, movies, art projects, documentation of art projects, posters of events and more.

Of the many visionaries I got to know in those early years, Martha Senger became a primary mentor. It was through her astonishing original tactics and her understanding of community action that The Goodman Building gained many political victories and the culture there was able to survive a relocation and real-estate adventure that has still to be understood as the amazing miracle it was. I call Martha a social clairvoyant.

The Goodman² Community is the ongoing result of many years of enduring creativity and vision. Today it is housed in a recently completed, originally designed and rather peculiar looking structure near the bottom of Potrero Hill in San Francisco. I call it: The Oyster... “Irritation enough to form some really good pearls!” The people here live and work apart and together in an organic and fractal relationship to architecture, collective history and personal life.

The leap this project took from the eviction day in 1983 when all the resident artists there were thrown out from the old building in a dramatic event that almost erupted into a citywide riot to the present reality is almost impossible to believe. Today only a small number of the current renters or owners at Goodman2 did actually live in the old building. However a primary, if subtle, continuity remains.

In December of 1996 the new building opened for occupancy. I found myself one of the earliest to move in, a representative of residents who lived at the old place. After many years in New York City and a year in LA and a number of more years back in San Francisco, I found—as it were—digging up a treasure in my old backyard.

In New York City during the early years of the eighties I continued to know and work with refugees of the old building, several of whom had crossed back over America to continue with their efforts as community artists, but in what we all thought to be a bigger context. I worked at The Museum Of Modern Art in New York City for years as a typographer and graphic designer. I collaborated with Betsy Newman, an old Goodman Building resident. We produced a poetry/music video about The East Village, and colluded on community action projects to save Tompkins Square Park.

During that time in San Francisco the financial and social activity necessary to find a new location for the Goodman Building continued for more than thirteen years and went through a number of phases. Most of the work of leadership fell into the hands of Martha Senger who was able to literally weave a bridge of threads over the abyss of disinterest and cultural cynicism.

Obstacles occur constantly in the face of creation. Neighbors in Potrero Hill, where a new Goodman Building was planned, protested preparations to build what had evolved into “The Arkansas Project”—and a five-year process commenced in which Martha and the board of directors and advisors of Arts Deco worked with The Neighborhood House, Boosters Club, Middle School, Democratic Club, Art House, The Potrero View newspaper, local community figures, families in the neighborhood and other individuals to forge a plan that would make it possible for an arts centered live/work community to exist in a ravine where once a railroad tunnel for Pacific Western Railroad had been located. Before that a spring that drained the whole northwestern flanks of The Hill had run through that ravine.

At the end, most in the neighborhood were convinced of the potential benefits of The Arkansas Street Project. On April 27, 1995, ground was broken to begin construction in a ceremony at the bottom of the ravine in a large carnival tent, complete with speeches, food and wine.

Any sub-culture or group cannot exist in this society without being affected by the wisdom and folly of the times. When The Goodman2 finally appeared as a finished building in late 1996 a new set of ethics were overtaking San Francisco, being driven by the so-called “dot com” revolution. The concept of a low-income artist was a thing of the past. The new Mayor, Willie Brown, declared any adult making less then \$70,000 a year should leave town. It seemed that money was literally falling off trees, being generated

by the thousands of Internet business and schemes. Web designers and capital investors together became millionaires overnight. Non-profit art organizations were being bumped out of their neighborhoods on a daily basis because of the fast influx of high-end, high-rent studios and offices. The live/work concept took off for developers as a way to get around city building and design regulations. The definition of artist was being dumbed-down to mean anybody who could master Photoshop and get a job.

In such an atmosphere it turned out to be a near impossible task for the 30-odd new residents to come together very easily to develop programs in the public access and shared community spaces. Yet, somehow we managed to forge a social and political structure that allowed us to contract with a well-known, local theater collective and finish developing a large, raw space on the ground floor in the building facing 18th Street. This had been designed with the idea of “retro-fitting-in” a community access theater. Thick Description is now a long-term tenant with Arts Deco at Goodman2.

During the last phase of architectural planning on the new building, it became suddenly apparent that a relatively inexpensive, underground extension could be factored into the project. Very quickly the extra funds were raised and we now have what I still call “The Underground Extension.” This is where we dream a “Media Arts” network can exist. The target communities would be disadvantaged youth, local artists, small business entrepreneurs, students and building residents.

A focus of mine in those first years at Goodman2 involved linking folks together by way of free form art collaborations and video movie-making. As an example, I arranged three weekends of group painting in our naturally lit atrium during a two-year period in which participants were encouraged to collaborate with temperas and pastels. Kristine Brown and myself edited a video documentary of the first one, Working On Beauty Together, at BAVC’s new facility on Mariposa Street. These events were named PaintFests.

The Idealist can often rest well with an Artist. And what is an ideal but the result of deep intention?

The crisis of our times has a lot to do with the social vision. The purpose of a real Democracy is to empower authentic community, promote human rights, and end poverty and slavery. It supports world peace and enterprise of the best kind. It has an active interest in the welfare of its people and the protection of the free rights of expression and the natural human impulse to thrive and be happy.