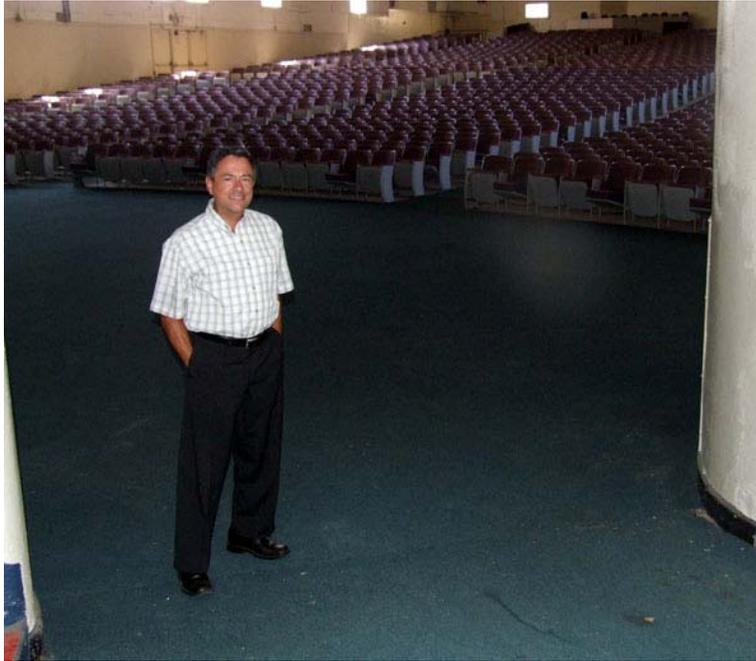


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FUTURE DANCE THEATRE—Alan Ziter, executive director of the NTC Foundation, pauses in entrance way to Luce Auditorium on the NTC Promenade, a venue which is proposed for San Diego's showcase for performance dance.

Former Navy base bursts with creativity

By Donald H. Harrison

SAN DIEGO—Even though Alan Ziter is a walking encyclopedia of information about arts groups and their programs in San Diego County, he happily conceded he cannot keep track of *all* the synergistic interactions that are starting to occur in the arts and cultural district of Liberty Station, the former military installation known as the Naval Training Center (NTC)

Ziter came to the job as executive director of the NTC Foundation after having served for years as the executive director of San Diego's Performing Arts League, an umbrella group for 150 arts organizations ranging from major establishments like the Old Globe Theatre, the San Diego Opera, and the San Diego Symphony to small storefront operations. He truly knows and understands the purposes of arts groups, and enjoys promoting them. He is a fine story teller.

But do you recall that famous experiment of hundreds of ping pong balls set in place by mouse traps? Toss one loose ping pong ball into that assemblage, and you set off a chain reaction where it triggers another ping pong ball which in turn triggers another until soon one sees nothing but a white blizzard of flying ping pong balls.

Creativity may not be running that rampant yet along the NTC Promenade, as the new arts district is known, but it is getting there. Right now there has been renovation and occupation of only six of the 26 buildings, which under the NTC Foundation's arrangement with the City of San Diego are reserved mainly for culture, arts and non-profit organizations. Just imagine when the remaining 20 buildings, including former barracks and officers homes, are filled with tenants who, like those already there, relish the prospect of collaborative efforts with other groups, be they in similar fields or in disciplines seemingly far removed.

I previously [wrote in this column](#) about the interactions among the New Americans Museum, which is dedicated to telling the story of America's immigrants, and its two neighbors, the Visions Art Quilt Gallery and the San Diego Watercolor Society. Ziter, over lunch at Solare Restaurant on the NTC Promenade and via a walking tour, more recently told me about some of the other collaborations that are also occurring on the landscaped grounds that run for blocks between Rosecrans Street and the boat channel leading to San Diego Bay.

In the same building where Solare offers a lunchtime menu of pasta and salads are such organizations as the Jenna Druck Foundation, ARTS-A Reason To Survive, and KIT (Kids Included Together). The Jenna Druck Foundation was named by Jenna's parents, Ken and Karen, after their daughter was killed in a bus accident while traveling in India. Two of its major programs are to foster leadership skills among young women, and to help families like theirs cope with family tragedies.

KIT, which had its genesis at the Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center, is a program started by community members Gayle and Don Slate to help organizations mainstream children with disabilities into activities offered to the general population. The program came to fruition during summer camp sessions held at the JCC, and now interacts with many more organizations. ARTS-A Reason To Survive, is a program enabling children facing adversity to grow and to express themselves through the arts.



ARTS-A REASON TO SURVIVE—Founder Matt D'Arrigo and teacher Adriana Escobar try out some rhythms in the music room of non-profit organization offering arts opportunities to youth at risk. At right, Rob Tobin points out some portraits done by youth in the program.

On our tour, we stopped in the ARTS studios where founder Matt D'Arrigo told us how he turned to his art, and to his music, after receiving double blows of news, within two months of each other, that both his mother and his sister had cancer. His reaction was to "make a studio in my bedroom. I was up there every day, painting and listening and just escaping." That was such a transformative process for me—the artistic process—that it just hit me: I would like to offer the same kind of transformation to others who are facing challenges—whether it is parents' illnesses, or illnesses themselves, especially kids.

“I made a commitment to start a program that would be for children, for them to express themselves, gain self-esteem, heal and be empowered.... My sister, who recovered, bought me a book on how to start a non-profit organization.... We partnered with the Ronald McDonald House and with Children’s Hospital to bring to the children there preplanned art activities, and that is how the idea was born.”

But D’Arrigo’s dream always was to have a center of his own, where kids could have greater artistic choices. After his organization was recruited to NTC by Ziter, it established a program under which “individuals will come here and participate in media arts, performance, ceramics, music... and do what they want to do.”

One can sense the synergies that might occur among ARTS, KIT, and the Jenna Druck Foundation, with clientele of the two latter organizations, utilizing the resources of ARTS. But there are additional collaborations, says D’Arrigo. “We have a very strong partnership with Malashock Dance,” the modern dance group headed by John Malashock, who is well-known to the Jewish community as the creator of various programs for the San Diego Jewish Arts Festival.

“If kids want to do a dance program, we bring them to John’s studio and we do a dance program with them—a diverse program, including contemporary dance, hip hop. We have a performance space here, but the draw for the kids is to work at a professional dance studio, with professional dancers. These kids might never have had that experience otherwise.”

Similarly, he said, “we are working as well with the Watercolor Society, bringing the kids over there for the exhibits, learning from these professional artists.” The same is true, he said, with Quilt Visions. “So it becomes a campus. We can bring our kids there, and they can bring some of their students here.”

Rob Tobin is an artist in residence at ARTS, who encourages students to engage in portraiture and other artistic activities. One project with which our Jewish community is familiar is the large “Tree of Life” installation on the campus of San Diego Jewish Academy with its accompanying butterfly ceramics intended to represent the 1.5 million children slain in the Holocaust. Tobin said that some students in the ARTS program make ceramic butterflies to be added to SDJA’s collection and that, additionally, his mother, a school teacher in Connecticut, has encouraged her students to participate. The Tobins are not members of the Jewish community, but are moved by the symbolism of the project.

On the wall of one of ARTS studios are portraits executed by students from Hillcrest School, Barrio Logan College Institute, and the Monarch School; their subject matters being students from other schools and such places as the Mira Mesa Evacuation Center (during the recent wildfires) and the Ronald McDonald House.

Adding to the excitement and synergy of the arts groups along the NTC Promenade is the fact that the artists and participants in the programs represent many religious and ethnic backgrounds, each bringing their own perspectives and cultures into the process. For example, Ziter is of mixed Lebanese and French Canadian parentage; Jean Isaacs’ parents are Italian; Malashock is Jewish.

We walked from the ARTS studios a short distance to Dance Place where three resident dance companies have rehearsal rooms and office space: Malashock Dance, San Diego Ballet and Jean Isaacs San Diego Dance Theatre.

“There are 90 dance companies in San Diego, yet there is not one dance building that you can

point to where you can say dance happens,” Ziter said. “We know where the Old Globe is, we know where the Symphony is, we know where the Opera is. But where does dance happen?” So NTC met with various dance groups and explained to them, “We can build this dance building; what do you need in this building, and who wants to be here? We found that there were a lot of groups that were young; they just didn’t have the budget to afford a full-time space, and they didn’t need full-time space. They just needed some space occasionally where they could rehearse. So we created dance place where John Malashock, Jean Isaacs and San Diego Ballet are now in residence in five of the rehearsal studios, but we have six other studios that are available for community use. In the last year and a half, 45 groups have used these studios for the dance rehearsal process.”



DANCERS—Jean Isaacs and John Malashock pose in their respective rehearsal rooms at Dance Place along the NTC Promenade

Currently, Isaacs, Malashock and San Diego Ballet together are offering a three-week summer course in which dancers can sample the different dance styles.

“We programmed it together,” said Malashock. “Some of the classes are ours, some are theirs, and it is a shared effort. We also have implemented a free day of dance, the day after Christmas, when everyone can come and take free dance classes all day long, with all three of the companies participating. It’s a way of getting the word out.”

Whereas one might expect dance companies to find a way of joint programming, Isaacs and Malashock were quick to tell me that collaborations occur with other NTC Promenade tenants. “Every day, there is something new, something new surfaces,” said Isaacs. “We just came over from the Quilt Visions Museum and their next opening, August 9, has a theme of human figures in quilts. So they have hired us to come and do some dance for the opening. We just went over there and scoped it out, and actually, one of the dancers, took a quilt that had 70 small figures on it, and she created a dance based on the figures on the quilt.”

“Those kind of collaborations, not just here in the dance building but with other, new entities that are coming in, have been incredible. Our fundraiser for ‘Trolley Dances,’ August 3rd, will be in the NTC Rose Garden, and then will go over to the Solare Restaurant.”

For ten years, Isaacs’ troupe has been performing contemporary dance along the route of the San Diego Trolley, with the idea of bringing dance out to the people. Dances are choreographed for the specific locations. The August 3 fundraiser to help pay for this year’s performances (September 27-28, October 4-5) will be titled the “Mad Hot Ballroom” where purchasers of \$75 tickets will receive lessons in the garden in ballroom dancing, Latin dancing, salsa.

Ziter loves to tell the story about the garden, which is named for Sybil Stockdale, widow of Admiral James Stockdale, the one-time highest ranking Prisoner-of-War during the Vietnam War. One time, Stockdale received in a Red Cross package a photograph which his wife captioned as being that of his mother, who had taken a taxi in Coronado to take a dip in the water. Stockdale couldn't make heads or tails of the message at first; if the haggard woman in the photograph was his mother, time had been tougher on her in freedom than it had been on him in captivity. And why would this woman, whoever she was, need to take a taxi in Coronado to take a dip in the water? If she were a mind to, she could walk to the beach. Then it hit him, the key words were "dip in the water."

So Stockdale dipped the photo in some water and it peeled away to reveal a secret message that had been sent to him by Navy intelligence. It gave Stockdale instructions on how he could send back the names of his fellow POWs and other information about the prisoners. The secret message also informed Stockdale that if in the future, he should ever receive a photograph of his wife, in which there was also a rose (be it in a garden, or a vase, or anywhere else), he shouldn't save the photo, but should dip it into the water, because it too would include a message.

The rose garden commemorates this story. It is located outside the NTC Foundation's Visitor Center where there is a small museum in the Stockdales' honor, and where the board room is made to look like an Admiral's board room and is named for him. Although Stockdale never served at the NTC, he is a bonafide San Diego-area naval hero, who in one presidential election served as Reform party candidate Ross Perot's vice presidential running mate.

But we digress, as creative people along the NTC Promenade are probably wont to do.

Malashock said that in addition to doing some programming with ARTS, and with the fellow tenants of Dance Place, he also recently suggested to the New American Museum the name of an artist with whom he had collaborated as a possible subject for a proposed exhibit on immigrant artists. "It was nice to make that link."

The resident dance companies along NTC Promenade are quite excited about the possibility of the 1,800-seat Luce Auditorium, built in 1941 in honor of Stephen Bleeker Luce, being converted into a permanent dance theatre. Luce, an Annapolis graduate, was the founder in 1884 of the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island.

The 20,000-square-foot facility (including a stage with proscenium) "was built just before World War II, and you had a time when the Navy base population shot up from 8,000 to 30,000 recruits, and so this was a central gathering point. There were a lot of lectures, presentations, movies on Saturday night, and good USO shows," Ziter said. "Bob Hope did a broadcast on stage here; Tommy Dorsey and his orchestra were here; Kay Kaiser and his orchestra—in fact there was a spread in *Life* magazine about Kay Kaiser and his orchestra entertaining the recruits. At the time, it held 2,000 people but now it seats 1,800."

Tom Hall, who for many years was the managing director of the Old Globe Theatre, did an analysis of the space to determine how it might be profitably renovated and utilized, understanding that as an historic building the exterior and certain interior features of the building had to remain intact.

"For performances," said Ziter, "you have to do two things: to mitigate the noise from the airplanes flying overhead (NTC Promenade is under the normal departure pattern of Lindbergh Field), and number two you have to have air conditioning systems. There is a big swamp cooler right now. The goal would be to create a building within a building with a performance venue in front of 488 seats, and the back of the house could be divided up into maybe two different

spaces with 250 seats each. In the end, you get a multi-stage, multi-venue facility all under one roof.”

Ziter notes that currently “there is no theatre that is adequately designed to be a dance theatre; if we could create that, we would be providing a great service to this community.”

Like the Garfield Theatre at the Jewish Community Center, said Ziter, the front portion of the proposed theatre could be made so that the auditorium style seating retracts into a wall, clearing floor space for tables. Such an arrangement might be perfect for cabaret style productions such as Isaacs’ troupe is doing in other places.

Currently there are no changing rooms back stage, nor is there a fly loft for raising and lowering scenery. But such needs could be accommodated in the refurbishment.

The study by Hall helps NTC Foundation “test the ideas with potential users and try to shop it to a donor or two and try to get them excited about the possibilities as well,” Ziter said.

Whereas maintenance of such a theatre might be too expensive for any single arts group, with the NTC Foundation owning it, and allocating dates to tenants and other arts groups, “it does put things within the realm of possibility,” said Isaacs. “Obviously being right next door to us, it would make an ideal space.”

“Perhaps,” I commented to Malashock, “you will get the place next door for your performances.”

“Not perhaps,” he responded quickly. “It *is* going to be the dance venue. It *is* going to happen.”

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