

Art Throb

9/16/09 - Architecture and Design | Hidden Talents

Joe Cultrera — Building Muscle With Voice

In a distant past, when the gods of genetic distribution mapped out the guts of local filmmaker Joe Cultrera, an error was made. Within a soft spoken unassuming shell they dropped in the engine of a prize fighter. This has compounded with another error: in Vonnegut fashion, Joe seems to be stuck within one of his own films.

In his documentary “Hand of God,” Joe demonstrated that in the midst of sexual abuse allegations many leaders of the Boston Archdiocese were remiss not only for what they knew but for what they didn’t want to know. The mounting tsunami facilitated wild decisions. Short term: shuffle accused priests around faster than they become known. Long term: prepare for the impending legal expenses by downsizing and putting property on the market.

Now appears the more concrete battle. At stake is the edifice that once housed the parishioners of Salem’s St. Mary’s.

Our supporting role

On Sunday, Sept. 20th, from 1 to 10 p.m. at the Salem Waterfront Hotel Ballroom Joe Cultrera will be hosting his “Churchapalooza” fund raising effort. On the marathon card are some of the North Shore’s best musicians. To quickly name a few: Radio Scotvoid (a wonderfully excessive sensibility), Marty Rowan (gritty Sin City soul keys), and Erinn Brown (a boot-heel on the back of a snake). A \$20 tax deductible donation is suggested. Anybody having trouble meeting this suggestion, Joe suggests you come anyway. He is a stalwart believer that a local presence will be just as valuable at this point in his appeal.

St Mary’s property, which amounts to four buildings, or half a block on Margin Street, sold for \$2 mil to The Salem Mission, a brainchild of the United Church of Christ, Congressional Faith. On the cheap, the Boston Archdiocese threw in the stained glass, marble, murals and other old world art. After all, it was a Christian organization. To quell mounting anxiety, Joe explains, local residents were promised public access and the continuity of its integrity as a church. All capped with a great big neighborhood handshake.

The nascence of a tenuous trust.

Two important notes: First, the language was never contractual language. Second, The Mission, who had a congregation of less than 10, quickly dropped its religious status. Its housing arm took its place which benefits from a non-profit educational

status. This freed them up from traditional zoning and reconstruction guidelines. Men with tapemeasures, blueprints, and saliva began examining the church and its capacity to handle what was now overflowing the other three buildings on the property.

This is where Joe steps in. Initially and ironically, The Mission had approached him about making a fund raising documentary. (Chew on that one for a bit). Joe — a supporter of The Mission's ideals — disliked the path of ideas that were being laid out for the property and smelled a bad future for the former St. Mary's church. The edifice is now potentially going under the knife to facilitate 20 boxes of small living units, which means a significant \$3 million interior deconstruction.

Joe suggests a less radical alternative for St. Mary's: a community arts center smack in downtown Salem that would benefit both The Mission and the city as a whole. Consent for The Mission's plans is ebbing as historians lament and politicians conform to public dissent.

The current affair has been a mish-mash of church-and-state ironies interlaced with careful federal funding laws. The iconographic stained glass windows could keep the Mission from federal help. Alongside this is a pending historical status that is keeping the windows from being removed. With Joe getting help from these colored eyeballs, the edifice fights for itself and time sits on top of its future like a bag of sand.

Visit SalemCommunityArtsCenter.org if interested in the historical rights of a classic American neighborhood. Selfishly, I'm more interested with an assurance of not coming up against Joe someday. I don't have that kind of fortitude.

<http://www.nsarthrob.com/2009/09/16/joe-cultrera-building-muscle-with-voice/>