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A NEW BEAT MUSEUM IN NORTH BEACH

In an unexpected announcement in San Francisco today, the founders of the Beat Museum, Jerry and Estelle Cimino, made known their desire and intention to build a new four-story Beat Museum at 535 Green Street in North Beach.

The Green Street location, between Columbus and Grant Avenue, is the former home of the Buon Gusto Sausage Factory, built in 1948. The building has been sitting empty for many years and the lot next door, which is part of the same parcel, is currently a parking lot. In recent years the site has been the focus of much consternation within the community, as the current development plan has met with resistance by local residents. Cimino indicated he has spoken with the current owner of the property, who plans to develop 34 condominium units in a six-story configuration, but said he would consider an offer to purchase the building and the parking lot. The site at 535 Green Street is zoned by the city of San Francisco for a maximum height of four stories.

“I think all parties involved in 535 Green Street are frustrated at the stalemate. This is one of the largest centrally located properties in North Beach, and it has been dormant for at least the last 15 years that I’ve been in the city. I view our design as an elegant solution to a complex problem.”

Most residents, business owners, and property owners in North Beach object to a six-story building in an area where most other buildings are four stories (with the exception of historic churches and the NEMS Medical Building at 1520 Stockton). The developer has expressed his belief that the height increase is necessary to make his condominium project profitable. Cimino believes his solution—replacing that plan with a community-oriented offering that includes the Beat Museum, a community theater, and eight below-market-rate housing units for teachers—will serve everyone in the community well, and for decades into the future.

To that end, for the last nine months Cimino has been working with local architect Eugene Tssui on a 39,424 square-foot, multipurpose design that includes a parking garage. Tssui, who specializes in low-impact, sustainable architecture with a purpose, designed the building to inspire both residents and visitors alike, and to embrace the core values of the Beat Generation.

The Beat Generation is well known throughout the world as the counterculture of the 1950s that inspired the hippies of the 1960s and beyond. Prior to the pandemic, tens of thousands of visitors flocked to North Beach every year to walk the very streets from which Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and many others drew inspiration. Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookshop, Vesuvio Café on Columbus, and Caffè Trieste at Grant and Vallejo were all part of that original 1950s scene.

“We’re very open and flexible about the ultimate look and feel of the new Beat Museum building,” Cimino said. “The story of the Beat Generation is a story of Hope. It’s about tolerance, compassion and authenticity, and it’s important to tell that story far into the future. We want to be a solution to the current problem at 535 Green Street, and blend in with the surrounding architecture and the best interests of our neighbors. We have our own ideas regarding design, but we’re definitely seeking community input.”

In order for this project to work, Cimino believes the cooperation of all stakeholders and constituencies will be necessary. He hopes to build a coalition of community supporters, City officials, Beat Generation enthusiasts from around the world, and philanthropists interested in the betterment of North Beach, the city of San Francisco, and the arts.

“There’s no end to the possibilities when people of goodwill come together, working for a mutual solution that serves an entire community,” Cimino said.

An Open House to review the building design is scheduled at the Beat Museum, currently located at 540 Broadway, from noon until 7pm on March 12, 2022—Jack Kerouac’s Centennial Birthday. Architect Eugene Tssui will be here, giving a presentation of his visionary plans for a new Beat Museum at 2pm and again at 4pm.

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