

Artship In America by Richard Whittaker

Slobodan Dan Paich is an original. In a sense, we're all originals, but now and then one runs across someone for whom this word is a particularly apt fit. Born in Yugoslavia and, through improbable events, becoming a child radio and film star, Slobodan has had an unusual life. His vision as an artist is remarkably deep and generous. He is, in fact, a real visionary. This interview is the second of two. In the first one, we learn about his life in Yugoslavia and his flight out of his native country to London. This one picks with his innovative summer school project in Italy. We met at the artist's very small apartment in San Francisco.

RW: Now the last time we talked, we hadn't finished up with your time in London. And I was wondering where did your time in Italy fit into that, where you built the lake?

SDP: While I lived in London from '75 to '80, every summer we went to Italy with between 30 and sometimes even 80 people. Because I taught all my life, I had academic holidays and, although we were digging and making cement, I was also preparing a whole series of lectures for the next year. And I was researching.

RW: So what was the *raison d'être* for that summer period?

SDP: It was a summer school for arts and architecture. And we had fresco painting and the making of the colors from natural materials. The genesis of the school was winning that architectural competition in France. Entering that competition had to do with the underground space in England I told you about earlier.

RW: Yes, that's right. I remember you describing that place.

SDP: They were going to close it. I was sad and just going to the library when I noticed this architectural magazine. I saw there was this advertisement for a competition—"Ideas for continuous building." So I drew up this underground space they were going to close as a piece of architecture. I showed each aspect of what we were doing there. But in the end it was closed down, anyway, as a fire risk.

RW: But you submitted your drawings of the underground space and won first prize in the competition.

SDP: Yes. I won the first prize. It was controversial. Lots of people gave me part-time teaching for the architects. Then about a year later this woman in Italy—Maria Vittoria Colonna-Winspear, a descendent from Michelangelo's patroness, Maria Vittoria Colonna, from the cadet line of the royal Colonna's of Italy—contacted me. She had this land with a prehistoric dwelling and the subterranean cave of the Byzantine monks. And in my architectural proposal, there is also a little paper with it that talks about adaptability; it

talks about these monks leaving Constantinople, leaving the great dome. They almost swam to Southern Italy where they built these tiny little rock dwellings. And instead of the glorious dome, they had a little pudding basin like a carving in the wall where they painted images. So she had one of those. The buildings I proposed were all hexagonal, circular, and she had all of these circular buildings on her land. So she invited us to come and see if we could do something with them. But I was teaching. She promised to support the school, but only at the level she was able to or wanted to. I felt we could only do a summer school.

RW: I see.

SDP: So we went there and repaired the buildings and the roads. It was one of the most important prehistoric settlements in Southern Italy because of the water. It's slightly below sea level at one point. So all the water collects there and that's why the monks went there. Everybody went there, because water is so rare there.

So she invited us and off we went. We formed a non-profit in England, the Fano Foundation. It's like ARTSHIP Foundation now. Then we began to build an art agenda of subjects that no art school covered. Now, you know, papermaking is fashionable. Then, nobody made paper. We were making paper out of what we could find there. We had a live lime pit. We began to cultivate lime for real fresco painting.

RW: Wow.

SDP: We ground the pigments. We carved stones and also did architectural learning, because those dry stone circular buildings are amazingly ingenious. If you learn how to repair them, you can build almost anything. There is no more to that than just the balancing of stones. Big stones balanced on little stones. So you really, really learn about the basics of architecture. Of course, when they are well built, they're parabolas, because that is what holds them. Then we also had landscape architects.

It seemed absurd and wonderful to actually dam this little stream in this ravine that goes underground and build a lake. The idea was over time we would build a series of lakes, because the landscape is completely dry and old. The agricultural land has been eroded. We built the first phase of the lake over a period of four years.

RW: I think I remember you saying that you mixed cement in the Roman way, didn't you?

SDP: Yes. We found the recipe and we experimented. And because we had a lime pit of our own, we could mix sand and lime in the right proportions. The lake was like a beautiful sculpture, and you could feel it with your feet, because it was never so deep. You could swim, but you could also stand. It was so wonderful. Then we planted thyme and rosemary, all wild. You could actually carry the plants with their little roots and then watering them.

RW: That must have been kind of sublime.

SDP: It was quite good. There were these 30 trullos all over the landscape, these little stone buildings. Then this lake was at the end of the property. There was a little pathway through some brambles. We had a little sign there. We'd put a stone there so people would know if somebody was at the lake. That way people could have it for a while just for themselves.

RW: How wonderful.

SDP: It was really like entering Arcadia or something, because when do you have time to yourself to bathe in a lake with all these plants that grew around it? We called one part the Grotto di Diana. You could hide in there and be private. The idea was that this was for personal time.

RW: Like a sanctuary.

SDP: A sanctuary, but for people who didn't have any sense of a meditation practice. They were just there in their own time.

RW: Yes. So jumping forward now, what took you to the U.S.?

SDP: How did I end up here?

RW: Yes.

SDP: Well, the thing in Italy, once we built the lake, the family of the Baronessa said, "Get rid of them. Let's make some money out of this." Well, we had hand picked people who could sleep on a throw mattress in a prehistoric building and not freak out, who would not have a door but only mosquito netting, people who would find that inspiring. Who would wash in the lake, and it's not too many. So the idea of doing it like a resort—course, it didn't work. But we were not even asked, would you like to do a resort with us? There was no thank you very much for repairing the prehistoric buildings and making paths and landscaping. It was like well, the decision is made: goodbye! And there was no lease. It was all...

RW: A tremendous amount of work making a beautiful place pro bono.

SDP: Making it beautiful, and making this an experience for urban people to feel the earth, the feel the timeless Mediterranean, to feel the connection to all of this history.

RW: It seems that you enter into these things with a lot of faith and trust and then the world is constantly betraying, constantly betraying that one way or another.

SDP: Of course.

RW: How have you dealt with those betrayals?

SDP: Well, I kick and shout and cry and then, finally, somehow they make sense. I was just saying to someone who was helping at an exhibition—it was actually his exhibition. He said, "Where are the technicians?" I said, "We're a small foundation. We don't have technicians. And you're the youngest person, and it's your work." I said, "Look at it like this. It's the sandpaper which makes you into a pebble." He could accept that just a bit.

So it's the same. I didn't think of it in that way, but it's the sandpaper that makes one into some kind of pebble. I am definitely a pebble shape.

RW: That's lovely. So what is it when you become a pebble?

SDP: That I don't know. I think I'm still in the stage of being sandpapered.

RW: But I think you have some feeling for what a pebble might be.

SDP: Well, I suppose a pebble is wonderfully rounded and still. And it's at the bottom of

some shimmering water. It doesn't demand anything, and there it is. It is. So I suppose, ultimately, the pebble is you, just as you are. But meanwhile you're being sandpapered and you're struggling.

RW: That's actually pretty deep. There's an overtone of something cute there, but you could say—a rounded, polished stone. That's something quite archetypal.

SDP: Yes. And also the wet pebbles are so beautiful, because you can see the color. But "pebble" is also nice, because if you say anything transcendent—it could be a delusion, you know. I think that could be dangerous. But if it is a process, then in the end, one is merged. And I don't know, maybe pebbles know in themselves.

RW: Right. You don't want to delude yourself.

SDP: Yes, or to put up a banner—as if the banner explains it, so you don't have to do it anymore. So you don't have responsibility any longer. You know, I am in the Zoroastrian religion. And with lots of the rituals the people do, they have forgotten why. But they will be the first ones to fight anybody who comes with an interpretation. You know suddenly it has become just a formalized thing. Everybody just does it. And there is a banner.

RW: That seems to be the fate of so many things. The understanding is forgotten, but the form persists.

SDP: Yes.

RW: So the baronessa — hey, we can make money here. See you later.

SDP: Exactly.

RW: So is that when you —?

SDP: It wasn't exactly, but pretty much. I began to work in an American university in London. That's an interesting story. I will be short. I arrived in England. I knew no one. I learned English. I had no connections. I diligently applied for jobs, at least two a week, sometimes four a week. I got used to rejection. So, fine. For a refugee, that's kind of your fate. I had two jobs in 18 years! And we did some interesting work, lots of amazing things in England. Anyway there was this American university. I sent them all the documentation and everything. You know, thank you. And I forgot about it.

So after six years I returned. I had a British passport and then I was working more. I'd then won the architectural competition and was doing this odd thing of being a non-architect teaching architects. So I applied to the Royal College, and I was accepted. I studied there for three years. I had a great thesis. It was controversial, of course.

RW: What was the thesis?

SDP: The thesis had to do with model-making as an enactment of a real thing. I started with what they call a transitional object and the whole thing of the anthropomorphic simile, which leads to these envisionings and the miniaturized worlds that architects forever fiddle with.

RW: I'm not sure I followed all that, but it does sound intriguing.

SDP: Anyway it's not important. It's only leading to the story that I finally graduated from

Royal College. And in England only the graduates of Royal College are allowed to compete to be like a docent or present curator, administrator, diplomat of the British Council Pavilion and Venice Biennale. So, because I spoke Italian and I was slightly more mature, somehow it all worked. I, and an American girl—both having British passports, but being foreign-born and with accents—were representing Britain at that event. And it's long, from end of May, June or something to November. They had to have three docents and I was the docent in the middle. The American girl was the first. I worked with her for about a week.

When I came back to London she called me and said, "My husband would like to meet you." And she invited me for dinner. So, very nice. I go for dinner and her husband is so erudite and intelligent and interesting. He studied at Parsons School. He does interesting work. He is an American and the head of this art department. He said, "You sent us an application to teach here 12 years ago. Would you like a job at our college?"

My job situation was sketchy and I said, "Sure! Why didn't you ask me before?" He said, "I never hire someone who doesn't have a Royal College of Art degree and who hasn't worked with someone I know."

So I had my degree and I worked with his wife, and suddenly he offered me a job. So that was my first contact with America and American students, who were so completely different. I mean just so different. It was kind of exciting. And that job led to my coming here.

RW: So you came and landed a job at UC Berkeley.

SDP: Kind of. I was what they call a visiting scholar.

RW: But you didn't go back to England after that?

SDP: No. I started the Flagpole Project in the neighborhood. And we did the Arbor Project, which was pretty amazing. A thousand people participated, 200 at a time, building this arbor. And with this and that and the other, somehow it got very interesting.

RW: It seems like you have a gift for working with groups of people.

SDP: I hope so, but it would be funny for me to say, oh yes, I do have a gift. Working with seven people, but also with 14.

RW: But you like that.

SDP: I love it. I never seek a one-man show or something. I would rather have all kinds of people doing it together. Somebody was saying, "You should publish your stories. You should do this." Okay. She was so kind, and she has amazing stories. So I said, "Let's do a book together!"

RW: What are the satisfactions, or the attractions of, working collaboratively?

SDP: It's not really even an attraction. It's like being absolutely responsible.

RW: What do you mean by that?

SDP: I feel like I am absolutely 100 percent responsible as an artist when I am doing my art and working with others. If I'm just doing my art alone, then I'm being kind of narcissistic and only good for myself. But if I'm working with others it's not like social work; it's not like being goody-goody. It's bringing people into a certain flux. And it is good

for them. It's good for community. It's good all-around. And I am just being totally responsible.

RW: You're being totally responsible, but responsible to what?

SDP: To life, to the planet. I am responsible to the environment.

RW: How do you discern whether you're being responsible or not? What is it that one...

SDP: No, I get your question and I might not be able to articulate it. But I was just thinking about your interviews. By knowing to ask the question and actually by being curious about people—because you really have a completely interesting natural curiosity—that is, in a way, both your gift, but also your responsibility. You're not just curious. You're doing something about it. So you are responsible. You are engaged with a particular community, with a variety of human expressions of existence. And it's a community because they are in your magazine. It's like you give it and it gives back to you. It's a very interesting relationship. Well, it's like that.

RW: Yes, I understand.

SDP: But you know, it isn't because I'm a missionary or something. I sit in this chair and I meditate, but when I am engaged with people, I am engaged because of them. Not because I meditate or I'm sort of interested in the influence of those ideas going from Africa to Spain and then from Spain to the Ottoman Empire. I am not doing it because of any of those things.

RW: No. There is something deep that one feels...

SDP: And that's why I went into the theater. You know, I had only two friends allowed to come to our house once a year for my birthday. So I made a production in a little shoebox, a model. Then afterwards, they could play. I made little puppets.

RW: This is when you were a child?

SDP: Yes, from 10 to about 14. So I made one production a year. And then we all played. And they also told the stories or retold it. So it wasn't a boring children's birthday party. Of course, no other children; just two, a brother and sister. But nevertheless, there was a huge amount of preparation. My mother translated some things. And I adapted Oscar Wilde's *Birthday of Infanta* and Maxim Gorky's story. And then a Serbian folklore story, and the last story was *Madame Butterfly*, but told like a narration. And I studied shoji screens and Japanese things the best as I could in Yugoslavia. I also invented a sort of Japanese area of my own, cut out the figures. I was not singing it, but it was an interesting story.

RW: I see. Oh my gosh. Wow.

SDP: And we had a fabulous friendship, the three of us. We even did—the brother and I did some excavations on the Kalemegdan Fortress and we got into trouble, because I was excavating without any kind of permission. But I studied the books. It was where they were throwing away mostly the pipes, because the clay pipes, after awhile, become brittle. They were beautiful. I had quite a collection of these pipes, because I knew where to go.

RW: Now these were the clay pipes of Rome?

SDP: They were Ottoman.

RW: So you were collecting these artifacts of the Ottoman Empire.

SDP: Yes. There was a Roman layer and even beyond. I mean we were urban boys. I think we excavated with forks and spoons and that thing for serving pieces of cake.

RW: Right, like a little trowel.

SDP: Yeah, like a trowel. We would sneak it out.

RW: Once in Italy, my wife and I stayed one night at a vineyard. The owner was an amateur archeologist and with a little persuasion he brought out his finds.

SDP: How great.

RW: One piece in particular was better than anything locally in the museum, and he knew it. He said they would kill for it. He was very passionate about his “hobby.”

SDP: Well, once you start digging, my god, that’s it!

RW: Well, I’m just astonished by some of the things you’ve done and the number of people you helped. Would you talk about the Windows project a little bit?

SDP: It’s so astonishing when one really recounts the numbers, but each person was treated individually. It wasn’t like a mass movement. Each artist was completely cherished—nurtured. The windows were not big, so they were kind of doable. When it was all over, there were 200 store-front openings in Jack London Square.

RW: That must have been very gratifying for you.

SDP: It was. Augusto Ferriols and Daniel helped; they were co-curators as well. There was lots of administration, calling, calling back, explaining this and that—and liability, release of liability.

RW: Did you have to have all of those forms signed and everything?

SDP: Oh yeah.

RW: What a huge amount of work.

SDP: Oh, a huge, huge amount of work. But then in the end, we never charged a thing for the artists. We never took a commission. If artists wanted to be contacted, this was discreetly done. A number of people contacted us and we would pass them along to the artist. It really was just a catalyst for showing.

RW: Yes, yes. And “we” means the ARTSHIP foundation?

SDP: Yes.

RW: Which was basically you. You founded it. Did you have any partners in the ARTSHIP Foundation?

SDP: Oh, yes. The founding members were all pretty extraordinary.

RW: Whose idea was it? I am assuming it was you.

SDP: Yes. But then there were people in Oakland.

RW: The whole saga of securing this amazing, 500-foot long ship. It's astonishing that it happened. I mean, of course, not without great effort.

SDP: Huge effort, but that it happened to ordinary citizens without any connections.

RW: This is a tremendous thing.

SDP: It's like would you believe it? With just a little bit of vision, a little, little, little bit of vision and trust, this would have been one of the greatest art centers in the world.

RW: That's really sad, too.

SDP: But it fulfilled its kernels. Okay, it didn't go to the full bloom, but it triggered something. See that green book there? That's the big opening of the Peace University in Berlin.

RW: I wish I could convey the extraordinary fact of ARTSHIP. And I did not even see it. But I didn't have to see it to know that it was extraordinary.

SDP: Yes. If you look at the YouTube where they are dancing on the side of it. It gives you a great idea. And then there is one, two, three. Those really give the idea of both the scale and the bearing and just the gumption of doing it.

RW: Why isn't this better known? I ask not as a criticism, but because it seems sad or unfortunate that this extraordinary thing didn't get more attention

SDP: Well, it got attention. It even became notorious because in the end people were fighting it.

RW: Why were they fighting it?

SDP: Well, the realtors. And the politicians just go with whoever supports them.

RW: So there was a battle going on over ...?

SDP: The land.

RW: And that's where your ship was, berthed right there?

SDP: Yes. But also, it was a conceptual thing. This ship was giving so many things away for free. It was an alternative way of doing things: alternative education, alternative economy for the kids who just finished school. We were giving them jobs. It was turning all the values upside down. We were being forced to prove ourselves through a commercial model of what you sell and how many. And we were giving most of it away.

RW: I see. So they were measuring you by the dollars you were producing.

SDP: Exactly.

RW: And you weren't producing dollars.

SDP: We were a complete paradigm challenge. And that's why. You know, if Jerry Brown stood behind the interviews of the people he represented he could have said, "In my short life, I am going to stand by the archetypal change of paradigm. Let's do it with one ship and see what can happen." Then things could have happened. It needed someone like that who would say, "Look, I think this paradigm works."

We have lovely real estate all over East Oakland, but we've actually moved those people out. We were proposing that some of them would actually own their houses in five or six years, and be able to earn enough to do that. We trained them as high-schoolers to have professions. We had 250 jobs offered a year.

RW: Who was offering them the jobs?

SDP: I had arrangements with the merchant maritime industry. And they would enter at a lower level, which is \$75,000 to \$100,000 a year. If they only work half of the year, they can go the other half to college.

RW: So you actually had interested parties capable of providing these jobs?

SDP: The Economic Development Administration in Washington. And I was going for the second appropriation of three million to fix the ship. That is when they cut me. Because I was already in Washington to negotiate. I just made the mistake with someone of telling them all the plans. Then they decided immediately, while I was still there. I got a telephone call—it's finished. Just go. Eviction is coming.

Because if I got the appropriations, they could never, never get me out, not me—us, the thing, the idea, the people. The idea that an African American young man or woman could be eligible for a mortgage in Rockridge was terrifying to them.

We were actually empowering so many people at so many levels. It was possible. We had 30 non-profits using ARTSHIP for their fundraisers, for their own development, for their staff, for induction of new staff, for board planning, retreats for free. It was an interesting place. It was a paradigm, which was like an irritant.