

# John Spencer and the Casona

by John Prigge

In the late fall of 1990, after two years of traveling through India and Pakistan, John Spencer returned to his rented flat at the Casona in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico. John had now lived for twenty-three years in rooms on the second story of a building whose ground floor dates back to the 16th century. He immediately went back to work on The Walls at the Three Kings church in Tetela, which was constructed in the same century. It was at this time, in 1991, that the Institute of Culture of the State of Morelos, headed by Mercedes Iturbe, an admirer of John's work, presented him with a small grant for one year to acknowledge his many contributions in Morelos. John used all the amount of the grant, and again much more of his own money, on his project in Tetela that was now, with several interruptions, going into its third decade. In a few years, at the age of 69, John would begin an entirely new project.

In April of 1997 John left his flat with books and his rock carvings in his shoulder bag to walk the half block to his favorite cafe for his daily bananas with honey and 'cafe con leche'. This morning he was stopped in his tracks by something new on the facade of his beloved Casona; a 'For Sale' sign. As the usual friends stopped by to join John at the cafe he mentioned this troubling new development. Who would buy the Casona? Would it become another 'centro comercial' like so many other properties in the last several years in Cuernavaca? And where would he go?

John Spencer did know where he would go if the Casona changed hands and was no longer a 'block of flats'. For the last five years John had divided his weekends between two inspiring and captivating places. One was along the Amacuzac River outside of the town of the same name where he stayed with his dear friends Ana Marsland and Stanley Millet. There he would enjoy the company of his friends, excellent home cooked 'spuds', John said nobody made them as good as Ana, and long walks along the river where he

collected more stones for the carvings he had been creating for thirty years, collectively called 'Sermons In Stone'. These carvings, which took enormous patience and endurance, drilling slowly with electrical grinding tools, became tigers, lions, Jonah's whale, Noah's Ark, zebras, and jaguars. The stone carvings that John didn't give away will soon be on view as part of John Spencer's collection at the Casona Museum.

The weekends that John wasn't imagining jaguars and whales in river stones along the Amacuzac he would spend in a small monk's cell at the convent in Yautepec overseen by his great friend Father Angel Sanchez. It was this one-room cell that John thought he would go to live in if he had to leave his home of half a lifetime. But he also began daydreaming about another possibility. John's late wife Elizabeth had left him a small fortune in a portfolio account in England. The only serious money John had ever spent was on his art projects. He had no idea if he had the kind of money it would take to buy the Casona, which in Spanish means the manor. The Casona stands on 1,500 square meters in downtown Cuernavaca. It faces the Cathedral and lies between the historical landmarks of the Borda Garden and the Cortez Palace. The subject of money tended to embarrass John and he wasn't sure how to approach the owner, Miguel Alariste, who over the years had also become a friend. So he turned to another friend who, since he had originally met him in the early 1980's as the only American working in a Mexican Bank in Cuernavaca, he thought might advise him on his, to him, wild and outrageous idea of maybe buying the Casona himself.

When contacted over the phone at his residence in Mexico City regarding John's interest, the owner of the Casona Miguel Alariste, could not take the idea seriously. That his long-time tenant and friend, who neither owned nor drove a car, had no television, stereo, or hardly any furniture, who dressed in threadbare suits and worn canvas sandals and ate in economical restaurants downtown, had the money to purchase prime real estate in downtown Cuernavaca was so strange and improbable an idea that he politely referred John and his friend to the real estate agents handling the sale. It wasn't until John Spencer had won the bidding against three other interested parties and was signing the Escrow

papers at the notary's office less than two months later that the Alatraste family finally realized John was for real. All the sons and daughters of Miguel Alatraste, who had grown up in the Casona with John and were very fond of him, were delighted that the Casona would now go to John. But, at the actual signing of the sale one of the sons turned to John and complained bitterly that he hadn't dealt directly with the family to save the real estate agents' commission. John and his friend assured him that they had tried.

For half his life the Casona had been a shelter and nurturing nest for John Spencer's creative imagination. He had pondered and admired the impressive arched two story entrance that ran up a long hallway bordered by 4 meter thick adobe walls built in the 16th century. He had daydreamed and sketched in the garden amidst lush, tall banana plants and mango trees. He had managed a glimpse of old stone columns and capitals hidden behind the plastering and sheet metal doors of the entrance to his apartment. John Spencer had imagined almost daily the grandeur that could be the Casona if it was liberated from its modern and unsightly construction when it was converted into a block of flats by the previous owner's father in the first half of the 20th century. The senior Alatraste had apparently been so eager to finish the work that when Pre-Columbian artifacts were found on the site, he had them placed into the walls being constructed like so many bricks. Then they were plastered over. This avoided the possibility of INAH stopping the work for archaeological excavations. Several Pre-Columbian stone figures and 16th century arches, columns, and capitals were rediscovered during John Spencer's restoration project. They will be on exhibit at the Casona Museum, also.

John soon realized, to his regret, that to do justice to the Casona architecturally, historically, and aesthetically, the other nine renters would not be able to stay on. He therefore offered three months free rent and moving expenses to all. Most of the tenants were understanding and took John's generous offer. There were some difficult holdouts, but John's project encompassed the entire structure from the street level hallways and rooms leading up to the garden, to the two floors around the courtyard, and on up to the 'penthouses' on the roof, and so work was never held up. The Casona had at that time

2,500 square meters of construction of which over half had to go for John to realize his vision of restoring the building to its historical and architectural integrity. The first couple of years of the project were taken up by a massive demolition project and late at night John would sleep over the sound of the countless tons of rubble being hauled out during the only hours that trucks are permitted downtown. The entire restoration project was funded by John Spencer, but he did have the full support of the Public Works Department, which gave him all the necessary permits free of charge, and the permission and grateful approval of the National Institute of Anthropology and History.

By the end of the demolition phase of the project the roof of the Casona had been relieved of the 'penthouses', which were actually several squalid but very solidly built apartments, and so opened up a breathtaking view of the Cathedral and its gardens to the south and an expansive view of Cuernavaca and the countryside to the east. The garden of the Casona now covered an area four times larger than before. The stately 16th century hallways on the street level below were cleared of the many rooms that had divided them up into dark, musty rooms. Though John never counted exactly how many apartments the Casona had, he was fond of quoting Giuseppe Di Lampedusa's 'The Leopard' whose Don Fabrizio said, 'a palace of which one knew every room wasn't worth living in,' there were easily more than fifty, ranging from cramped one-room flats to large suites. The impressive and inspiring outcome of John Spencer's vision of restoring the Casona has been to give Cuernavaca some twenty different spaces for concerts, exhibitions, workshops, theater, and all types of cultural activities and presentations.

Just as in his art, John Spencer's life was full of fascinating juxtapositions. John was raised in the Church of England but converted to Catholicism in 1955. On even the hottest of days John could be seen walking about semi-tropical Cuernavaca in his threadbare suits and tie, but with canvas sandals on his feet. He often seemed distracted and self-absorbed in his musings on art, but on a trip to England he brought back a Nantucket weather vane in the shape of a 5 foot long whale to a friend who was also fascinated by this mammal. Typically, John left the crate holding the weather vane behind at a train stop

in England, and had to backtrack a couple of hours where he luckily retrieved it. John could complain about the price of his coffee with milk going up 5 cents, but he spent liberally on his sculptures for many churches in the area and on his support of young artists in Cuernavaca, like his friends Cisco Jimenez and Angelina Wilimek.

John was a vegetarian who would not eat salads. His diet had everything to do with solidarity with animals and nothing to do with health. For many years John's diet consisted mainly of white bread with processed cheese, french fried potatoes, and ice cream. But John was so devoted to animals that for many years he went out late every night on the streets of Cuernavaca collecting live cockroaches for his two pet tarantulas. And he once traveled all the way to Los Angeles, California just to sit next to an acquaintance's pet tiger. John was a voracious reader and has left hundreds of volumes of books ranging on many subjects for the library of the Casona. But he could also stare for hours on end at a single picture of a butterfly in one of his many books on the insect world. John would quote from memory lines from Shakespeare, Graham Greene, Admiral Nelson, Chesterton, Nabokov, Gaston Bachelard, and Malcolm Lowry to name a few, but once, when his bank in England called to confirm personal information before sending a wire transfer, they suspected him as an imposter because he didn't answer their questions succinctly.

John Spencer lived a very austere life with few possessions and was perfectly content to picture the rest of his life in a monk's cell at the convent in Yautepec, but instead he became the owner of the Casona, whose facade takes up an entire city block in downtown Cuernavaca. After a short illness John Spencer died on March 17, 2005. John left the Casona as a privately owned and operated cultural center and museum to benefit the artistic and intellectual life of Cuernavaca. In 1999 he set up a non-profit foundation 'Museo la Casona, A.C.' to manage the project after his death. John identified strongly with the old Arab proverb 'Never finish to build thy house,' and, fittingly, the restoration was not completed at the time of his death. But John left very clear instructions with his friends in the foundation on how to complete his vision. The restoration of the Casona coalesces much of John's ideas on form and space into the architectural work itself. Soon

one will be able to wander through the Casona to experience both the historical and architectural aspects of the building he restored and the art of John Spencer himself. Though he gave away most of his art to friends and acquaintances from all over the world, the Casona Museum will still have a permanent display of many of his sculptures, paintings, sketches, and stone carvings. There are also photographs of his life and works, including The Walls in Tetela, which are only a fifteen minute drive from the Casona. Written in to the document that set up John Spencer's foundation 'Museo la Casona, A.C.' is a quote from 'The Poetics of Space' by Gaston Bachelard which always inspired him and will continue to inspire his dream for the Casona, 'We shall experience a house with cosmic roots.'

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