

‘Imagining Makebelieve’ exhibit opens in The Forks

Tahawus center honors the late Arto Monaco

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AU SABLE FORKS — When entering the art exhibition “Imagining Makebelieve,” people took a step back into time, surrounded by restored artifacts from the Land of Makebelieve located in Upper Jay and pictures of the theme park that closed its doors more than 30 years ago.

The Tahawus Lodge Center on Main Street held an open reception on Friday, July 22 from 6 to 9 p.m. for the exhibition that is honoring Arto Monaco, the creator and designer of the Land of Makebelieve.

Monaco created the park by drawing on his experience as a toy maker, a Hollywood set designer, an animator and designer of Wilmington’s Santa’s Workshop.

When the park opened in 1954, it “was one of the first generation of theme parks,” according to Anne Mackinnon, president of the Arto Monaco Historical Society.

The theme park was child-sized and included a miniature train, tiny cars, pirate ships, a stagecoach in Cactus Flats, the park’s western town, and a fairy tale town complete with a castle.



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A guest views the design plans for the new park that will be a tribute to Arto Monaco.

“Everything was created by hand with love by him [Monaco] for the children,” Mackinnon said.

Lynda Denton, Monaco’s niece who attended Friday’s open reception, recalled how much the children loved the park.

“I can remember at night parents dragging their kids out and the kids screaming,” she said.

Not only did the kids love the park, but so did Monaco, according to Mackinnon.

“This was his masterpiece,” she said. “He love it.”

Throughout the years the park flooded several times due its proximity to the Au Sable River.

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Due to flood damage, the park permanently closed in 1979.

"It became too much to restore it," Mackinnon said, since everything was hand-crafted and the grounds were meticulously maintained.

Mackinnon said the Arto Monaco Historical Society has received letters from people who said they cried when they found out that the park had closed.

A new beginning

Since November 2010, Elan Planning and Design, a Saratoga Springs-based design and landscape architecture firm, has been working on design plans for a new park on a smaller piece of land, but in the same location as the Land of Makebelieve, according to Jere Tatich, lead designer on the project.

"The challenge was when we started the project was to come up with a park that — I don't want to use the word memorialize because Arto was a much more active guy than the word memorial — but to continue that concept of play and imagination," Tatich told those at the exhibition.

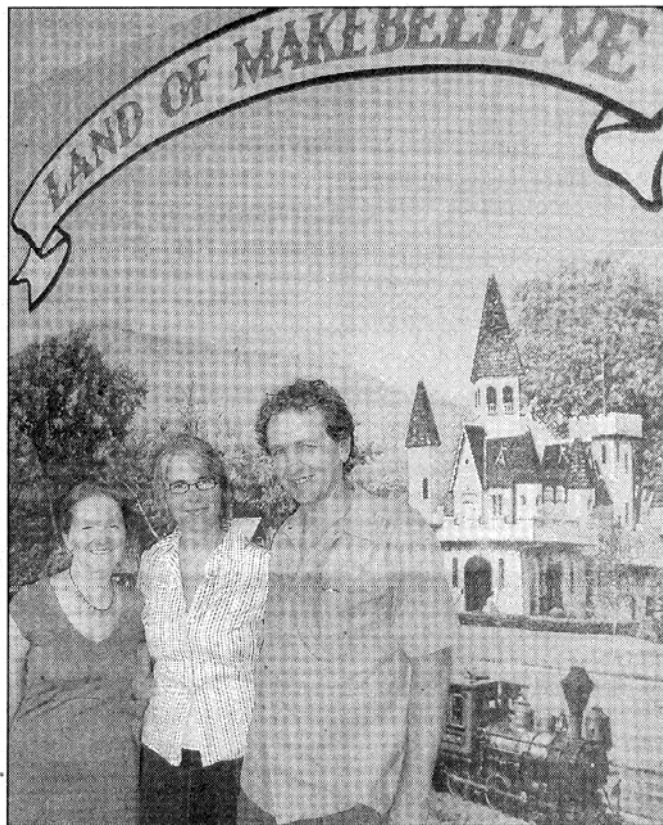
To do that the design firm has decided to make the new park "reminiscent" of the Land of Makebelieve.

It will do that by including elements in some form or another that were iconic to the Land of Makebelieve.

Some of those elements will include having a loop walkway that is reminiscent of the big oval that everything played off of in the original theme park, a castle and having the trees and lawn well-kept, according to Tatich.

Considering flooding concerns, one option for the castle is for it to be elevated. "That gives us another element of play," Tatich said. "Kids love going up and down hills."

The park will have some new elements to it as well. It will have a public space area that can be rented out for events such as birthday and graduation parties, in the cen-



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From left, Anne Mackinnon, president of the Arto Monaco Historical Society, Karen Davidson, exhibition designer, and Peter Seward, exhibition collaborator, stand in front of a wall-sized print of the former Land of Makebelieve.

ter there will be a colorful memorial to Monaco, and in the winter a skating rink, Tatich said.

"I love it," Denton said in response to the concept for the park. "I absolutely love it."

Tatich said the concept is still a work in progress and welcomes any ideas or comments from the public about the park.

It could take years for this concept becomes a reality, according to Tatich, since funding for the project still needs to be secured and it's likely that it will be built in phases.

The exhibition

But for right now the Land of Makebelieve and its creator lives on in the "Imagining Makebelieve" exhibition.

"We were trying to use the nostalgia for people who live here and went there," said Karen Davidson, designer of the exhibition. "To capture the freshness of his style and

ture of the Land of Makebelieve train; original signs from the park such colorful restroom and snake bar planks; a miniature pirate figure from the Barbay pirates ride; a castle model made by Monaco; a collage of magazine and newspaper stories about the Land of Makebelieve; a wall-sized reproduction from a postcard book showing the park's castle, fairy tale houses, train and grounds; and wall-sized picture of Monaco in a hand-painted car by Peter Seward.

"While the pieces are different, they are cohesive," Rebecca Kelly, co-director of the Tahawus Lodge Center. "He has this sweet, lively, colorful aesthetic. You can see the fun sense of whimsy he had."

People steadily trickled into the building on Friday night to look at the pieces on display, and some even told other exhibit-goers of their memories of either working or going to the Land of Makebelieve.

"This exhibition is different in that it's an opportunity for people to interact with their community," Kelly said.

The "Imagining Makebelieve" exhibition will run until Sept. 5 at the Tahawus Lodge Center on Main Street in Au Sable Forks.

For more information, call 646-734-7151.