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Bitter Legacy of 1977 Is Eased; Development: New life comes to a site left empty since the eviction of 55 Asian Americans.; [HOME EDITION]

JOHN GLIONNA. *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Aug 4, 2002. pg. B.1

Abstract (Summary)

After 25 years, Bill Sorro still shakes with anger over the night they drove old Manilatown down, beginning with the 3 a.m. eviction of 55 elderly Filipino and Chinese tenants of the International Hotel.

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Bill Sorro, left, and Ben Abarca check out the former site of the International Hotel, where a multipurpose complex is being built.; PHOTOGRAPHER: RANDI LYNN BEACH / For The Times; Filipino activists Al Robles, from left, Ben Abarca and Bill Sorro gather at the site of the old International Hotel in an area that used to be called Manilatown in San Francisco. Activists have fought for facilities for senior citizens there since 55 elderly Filipino and Chinese men were evicted in 1977.; PHOTOGRAPHER: RANDI LYNN BEACH / For The Times

Full Text (1592 words)

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After 25 years, Bill Sorro still shakes with anger over the night they drove old Manilatown down, beginning with the 3 a.m. eviction of 55 elderly Filipino and Chinese tenants of the International Hotel.

Sorro recalls how police in riot gear clubbed their way through a tangle of 5,000 protesters outside the residence hotel that served as the emotional center of the city's Filipino community of World War II veterans who worked in the fields and fish canneries throughout Northern California.

And he can still see those frail but defiant old Manongs, Filipino retirees in their 60s and 70s with hats and jackets pulled up against the early morning chill, demanding to know why they were being dumped onto the street.

Most of the old men are dead now, said Sorro, a longtime Filipino activist. And so is Manilatown, its residents scattered after the venerable "I-Hotel"--the city's last Filipino cultural stronghold-- was demolished in 1977.

But with a wicked grin, Sorro said big business hadn't won after all. The firm that owned the hotel had hoped to replace it with a high-rise. It never happened.

For 25 years, the valuable site remained a bottle-strewn, fenced-off crater half a block long as city officials and activists vetoed any development plan that lacked low-income housing.

Now, on the 25th anniversary of those evictions in the pre-dawn hours of Aug. 4, 1977, bulldozers rumble across the Kearny Street lot on Chinatown's eastern edge, carving the foundation for a \$40- million project that will include a 105-unit senior housing development, a religious school complex and a Manilatown museum.

The unlikely turnabout came after years of tedious negotiations involving the Roman Catholic archdiocese and various government agencies and civic groups, including an I-Hotel Citizens Advisory Committee composed of Asian-community leaders. In the end, they were able to buy the land from owners in Thailand.

But for Sorro, the so-called victory remains bittersweet.

"People ask: 'Do you feel vindicated?' " said Sorro, a 62-year- old father of six who once lived at the I-Hotel. "... And our response is, 'Hell, no. Hell, no.' An entire community was destroyed, and that can never be brought back. They ran people out of their homes under the guise of progress. The ghosts of those displaced old men will never forget that."

But the saga of the I-Hotel was a watershed event in landlord- tenant relations. The incident galvanized the Bay Area's Asian community, where the elderly are revered, and inspired an unprecedented surge of Asian American activism.

The evictions also became a national symbol of urban dislocation that prompted changes in city housing codes--moving the issue of affordable housing to center stage in San Francisco.

The episode led to a law banning conversions of residential hotels, paved the way for other eviction controls and halted the development march that many say would have overrun today's Chinatown.

Last month, the city passed legislation requiring that all single room occupancy hotels be equipped with fire sprinklers.

"This was a classic David and Goliath battle where David got his clock cleaned," said Supervisor Aaron Peskin, whose district includes Chinatown.

"But Asian activists not only lived to fight another day, they changed the relationship between landlords and tenants throughout the entire city. I'd call that a resounding victory."

The I-Hotel struggle set the ground rules for a new era of community activism. "Like other young radicals of the day, I cried the night they took those old men out of that hotel," said the Rev. Norman Fong, a program director at the nonprofit Chinatown Community Development Center.

"But we learned that, to win the battle, we had to become more tactical. The developers won through technicalities. They went to the courts and called out the lawyers. We vowed that was never going to happen again."

In the 1940s, Manilatown stretched for 10 blocks along Kearny Street, an enclave of barbershops, restaurants and pool halls with the I-Hotel at its center.

Twenty years later, the ramshackle 152-room structure was among the few remaining residence hotels where, for a retired Asian immigrant, the \$50 monthly rent purchased a sense of community along with a private room.

The hotel sat at the edge of the fast-encroaching financial district and, by the late 1960s, the wrecking ball had already demolished scores of Manilatown businesses. The I-Hotel's turn came in 1969 when real estate tycoon Walter Shorenstein announced plans to tear down the hotel and build a parking lot.

For the next eight years, as the case dragged through the courts, the hotel became a focus for students mobilized by the Vietnam War and civil rights struggles. With the cry of "No evictions! We won't go!" they joined with liberal politicians, union leaders and radical groups such as the Black Panthers as advocates for the elderly immigrants who lived there.

"The movement signaled the resurgence of the Asian American left," said Warren Mar, a labor specialist at UC Berkeley who grew up near the hotel. "Inspired by the Black Panthers, the Asian radicals were the ones who organized."

In 1973, Shorenstein sold the hotel to a company owned by Supacit Mahaguna, a Bangkok investor.

Three years later, when Mahaguna's Four Seas Investment Corp. won an eviction order, the city tried to use the right of eminent domain to seize the hotel and sell it to the tenants. When a judge denied the motion, thousands of protesters jammed Kearny Street and kept a 24-hour watch to guard against the court-ordered eviction.

Police said bombs and automatic weapons were being held at the hotel--claims that protesters denied.

The residents won a brief reprieve when San Francisco County Sheriff Richard Hongisto refused to carry out the eviction

order. But after serving five days in jail for contempt, Hongisto relented, setting the stage for one of the largest one-day evictions in state history.

Emil De Guzman, a Filipino activist who lived at the I-Hotel, recalled the morning of Aug. 4 when he heard the stomp of 300 police officers and sheriff's deputies arriving.

"They were like the Roman legions coming down at us," said De Guzman, who now works as a housing investigator and mediator for the city's Human Rights Commission. "They were marching in formation, many on horseback. We were under siege."

With thousands of protesters screaming for them to stop, police used ladders to scale the hotel, climbing over activists to enter through a higher floor. In a picture that ran in newspapers nationwide, Hongisto used a sledgehammer to batter the front door.

De Guzman said officers dragged him from the hotel by his shirt and hair.

A documentary filmed that night shows Hongisto telling an elderly Filipino man: "It's time to go. You're being evicted."

"Later come back?" the man asks in broken English.

"I don't think so," Hongisto responds. "You can't come back."

Hongisto now says he's proud of activists for preserving the I- Hotel site, but complains that he is remembered for taking the first blow against a hotel he tried to save.

"In retrospect, I feel utterly stupid for taking that sledgehammer to the door," he said. "I should have realized how misunderstood that act would be."

In the weeks after the evictions, a series of unsolved terrorist bombings rocked the city's opera house, a posh Knob Hill restaurant and the home of a director of a firm that had once owned the I- Hotel.

Anonymous letters called for the return of the tenants to the hotel.

But soon the I-Hotel was leveled. Over the next quarter-century, the ruins remained an uncomfortable reminder of failure for locals. Several times, members of the Asian American community, backed by city officials, tried unsuccessfully to buy the site.

Then, several years ago, the company agreed to sell to a group led by the Catholic archdiocese.

"They realized that nothing was going to happen on that property unless a nonprofit took over," said the Rev. Daniel E. McCotter, director of St. Mary's Chinese Schools.

The development project, due to be completed in 2005, will include Catholic elementary and Chinese-language schools, an underground garage and a tea house designed for the elderly.

Also included will be the 105-unit International Hotel Senior Housing, funded by the city and by a federal Housing and Urban Development grant. The first floor will house the Manilatown Heritage Foundation and museum.

In a gesture that thrills activists, the building's floors will be named after former I-Hotel residents.

"People might ask, 'How could you let such a prime piece of real estate sit vacant for so long?' " Mar said. "... But that's the only way to beat developers and get something good done. Maybe more sites should remain holes in the ground for a few decades."

Bill Sorro says the site will always remain a symbol of those lost.

"It's a wound in this community's heart, but it was never just an empty hole. It was always full of the love of those old men who once lived there," said the retired community organizer.

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: Bill Sorro, left, and Ben Abarca check out the former site of the International Hotel, where a multipurpose complex is being built.; PHOTOGRAPHER: RANDI LYNN BEACH / For The Times; PHOTO: Filipino activists Al Robles, from left, Ben Abarca and Bill Sorro gather at the site of the old International Hotel in an area that used to be called Manilatown in San Francisco. Activists have fought for facilities for senior citizens there since 55 elderly Filipino and Chinese men were evicted in 1977.; PHOTOGRAPHER: RANDI LYNN BEACH / For The Times

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