



I-HOTEL REBORN

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ERIN PANGALINAN
INTERN

SAN FRANCISCO — A SEA of people filled the streets of Jackson and Kearny Streets to toast the rebirth of International Hotel, the last piece of Manilatown to crumble as a result of gentrification.

Manilatown was a Filipino American enclave, home to the manongs, or the seasonal agricultural laborers who worked in the Central Valley and canneries, and retired war veterans, during the 1910s to the 1970s. It covered a stretch of 10 blocks of Kearny Street from California Street to Columbus Avenue, specifically what are now the blocks of Chinatown, North Beach, and the San Francisco Financial District.

Many small Filipino-owned businesses, such as pool halls, barbershops, nightclubs, small groceries, and restaurants had flourished in Manilatown before high-rise condos, parking lots and swank coffee shops barreled their way into the area and elbowed out the small FilAm enterprises. I-Hotel, fought — and eventually lost — the steadfast struggle to stay open. Many Filipinos lost their jobs, and elders the roof over their heads. As the last standing building of Manilatown, the I-Hotel became a symbol of Asian immigrants struggle for a place in the American landscape.

The International Hotel Senior Housing Complex is set to open at 848 Kearny Street on August 26th. Like its predecessor, it will provide senior housing — all of 104 units — to low-income tenants 65 and older. The facilities are larger and offer more convenience than the old building.

Last week, in honor of the spirit of the manongs and former tenants of the I-Hotel, artists and activists from across the Bay Area gave stirring performances as the wind blew on luminous candles.

"We've come a long way," said former tenant Emil DeGuzman. He is also former leader of the International Hotel Citizens Advisory Committee and current president of Manilatown Heritage Foundation (MHP).

But the struggle is not over yet, he adds: "Look around you (pointing across the streets of Chinatown). People still live in substandardized, deplorable housing."

The event drew together younger artists and activists who vow not to forget a time when elderly and ailing Filipinos were driven out of their homes. The battlecry of the struggle — "I'm old, I'm tired, I'm poor, I don't want to move" — was memorialized in banners, shirts, and leaflets.

Angelica Cabande, representing the South of Market Community Action Network, read a poem with drum and guitar accompaniment in the background.

"We don't need your thousand-dollar condos!" she recited from her poem, a response to the previous owners decision to demolish the hotel and replace it with a more profitable business.

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Rise and fall of an era

Early History: Center of Manilatown

- **Late 1800s** — The International Hotel was built in the late 1800s for wealthy travelers.
- **1907** — It was rebuilt after it was destroyed by the 1906 earthquake.
- **1920-35** — Filipino male population was 39,328. Legislation forbade Filipinos from owning land or setting up businesses.
- **1940s** — Manilatown filled 10 blocks along Kearny Street housing more than 20,000 Filipino laborers.
- **1954** — Enrico Banducci, opened his original "hungry I" nightclub next door to Club Mandalay in the basement of the International Hotel where performing artists got their start, such as Nina Simone and Bill Cosby.

1960s: The Fall of the I-Hotel — Gentrification and FIRE!

- **December 1968** — 1st eviction notices handed out to tenants from the new owner of the Milton Meyer Company falling under the management of Walter Shorestein.
- **March 1969** — United Filipino Association (UFA) and Shorestein reached a new lease agreement, allowing the tenants to stay. No official papers were signed, however. One day later a fire destroyed the north wing of the I-Hotel, killing three tenants. It was never fully investigated as arson.

1970s: Resistance Protest and Eviction: Community members fight to save tenants from evictions

- **Summer 1970** — Chinese Progressive Association and Kearny Street Workshop moved into the commercial spaces underneath the hotel.
- **1973** — Faced with protests and continued resistance, Shorestein sold the building out to the foreign Four Seas Investment Corporation, owned by a Thai investor, Supasit Mahaguna, who wanted to develop the site commercially.
- **1974** — 2nd eviction notice is posted by Four Seas' Investment Corporation. The International Hotel Association replaces the UFA that joined forces with other tenants to defend the hotel through a city wide support rally.
- **1976** — Eviction Case Goes to Court
- **January of 1977** — Sheriff Richard Hongisto delays the eviction for several months. As a result, Hongisto is jailed for five days and fined \$500 for contempt of court. Several thousand people demonstrate during the final eight months of the hotel's occupancy, where they created the famous large human barricade around the

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CLOCKWISE from top left: Kicking off the film premiere, the Palabunyan Kulanglang ensemble performed: The adorable Galing Bata students of Bessie Carmichael Elementary School/Filipino Education Center (FEC) sang "Ako Ay Pilipino," members of Pinay Educational Partnerships (PEP), SF State's Asian American 363 class's reenacted the I-Hotel eviction with their interpretation of the closing of Lucky's Barbershop and by handing out eviction notice fliers out to the audience.

PHOTOS BY ERIN PANGALINAN

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Jeremy Bautista and Jason Mateo of 8th Wonder also delivered poetry inspired by the time Bautista's grandfather was a resident of the hotel.

He said, "I wrote the poem that I performed from the perspective of an I-Hotel resident during the time my grandfather lived here, from my family's experience."

The San Francisco State University's Asian American 363 class performed a skit reenacting the eviction of elderly tenants, holding each other together as a human barricade as they cried, "We Won't Move!"

"I-Hotel was not an ordinary building," said Nancy Hom, director of Kearny Street Workshop, "It houses all our dreams and ancestors' dreams."

That same week, the film

"Rise of the I-Hotel" was premiered at the San Francisco Public Library, which has the only Filipino American Center containing an exhibit commemorating the I-Hotel and volumes of Filipino and Filipino American literature since 1996. The short documentary chronicled the struggle to rebuild the New International Senior Housing complex.

"Rise," focuses on profiles of individual tenants interwoven with interviews with some of the directors of Manilatown Heritage Foundation, such as Emil DeGuzman, Estella Habal, Rex DeGuia, Bill Sorro, and Desu Sorro. The narratives of outspoken Wahat Tampao, beloved Felix Ayson, and motherly Luisa de la Cruz, who cooked meals for FiAm tenants, were particularly poignant.

"Rise," added significant information that is missing from

history textbooks. It puts into context the period of the Great Depression when the manongs arrived in America in droves. In addition, it gave an excellent overview of the history and context of colonial mentality in the Philippines and the implementation of the English language in Philippine schools in relation to the rise of the Filipino Diaspora in America.

"There is a community before the eviction that people don't realize kept fighting," said Caroline Cabiding, advisory board member of MHF said.

Executive producer Chester Canlas said that he learned about the I-Hotel in college, and wanted to make sure that the I-Hotel struggle was not ignored in San Francisco and American history as it was overlooked in other Asian American events around the Bay Area.

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building.

- **August 4th, 1977** – Tenants are evicted despite the efforts of 5,000 demonstrators who tried to keep the 300 police officers and sheriff's deputies from removing the occupants. Sheriff Hongisto returns to supervise the eviction. The Sheriff's 4-hour, 3 A.M. to dawn eviction was aided by police in riot gear.

- **1978** – International Hotel Citizens Advisory Committee is appointed by Mayor Dianne Feinstein

- **August 1979** – Despite community protests, Four Seas demolishes the building and the site remains a hole in the ground for 22 years. Community members continue their political activism demanding replacement of the demolished units. They succeeded in blocking any new construction on the site that did not include senior housing.

1980s: Replanning

- **1987** – The planning Commission approves a conditional use planned unit development, which includes 126 units of senior housing.

1990s – 2000s: Rebuilding

- **May 1994** – Four Seas, now known as Pan Magna Group, agrees to sell the land after years of failed development attempts.

- **September 1994** – The Chinatown Community Housing Corporation secures funding from

the HUD Section 202 to build and operate 105 residential units.

- **1994** – the Roman Catholic Archdiocese purchased the property to relocate its earthquake-damaged St. Mary's School from Broadway and sold the property management group, Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC) the rights to build the I-Hotel at the corner of Kearny and Jackson streets

- **December 1995** – International Hotel Senior Housing, Inc., the owner corporation of the housing project, is formed by International Hotel Citizens Advisory Committee (IHACC) and Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC)

- **May 1996** – The International Hotel Citizens Advisory Committee, through their non-profit organization, Kearny Street Housing Corporation, join Chinatown Community Housing Corporation as a sponsor of the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) grant and lead the advocacy for additional city support of the project.

- **Fall 2001** – Start of construction of the underground garage and podium structure that will support the HUD grant funded housing project.

- **July 2003** – The HUD Section 202 funding is closed and Chinatown CDC is given permission to start construction. Construction on the housing begins.

- **July 2005** – The New International Housing Senior construction is completed.

Elders of the I-Hotel remind us that it was a struggle fought by coalitions and not divisions.

Michel Laguerre, author of "The Global Ethnopolis: Chinatown, Japantown, and Manilatown in American Society," focuses on the divisions between ethnic enclaves, specifically those who view Manilatown as less exotic and a minor tourist attraction compared with Chinatown and Japantown.

But what some fail to see, he said, was the cross-cultural alliances that were forming in the 1960s. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Panthers and the Third World Strike of University of California Berkeley and San Francisco

State University's fight for Ethnic Studies, were among the community activists who rallied around the I-Hotel struggle and capitalized on it to further the cause of the Asian American Movement. Theirs was a classic defense: rights of the elderly and fair housing. The fight for fair housing and space was, especially, resonant among Asian American communities.

There were fundraising tables that hoped to support the cause of Manilatown's survival. Runbutans, a Manilatown Running Collective, sold red and black apparel and bags. Runbutans trains runners from Bay Area in Emeryville Marina, Crissy Field, Ocean Beach, and Golden Gate Park on a 30-week

program. They have traveled to Hawaii for the Honolulu and Maui marathons annually since 2003. Each runner pledges money for Manilatown. Rex de Guia, a director of MHF, said he came up with idea because he saw that things like the Aids Walk worked. Runbutans continues to promote health, wellness, community building, and commemoration of the I-Hotel Struggle among its runners.

In February 2005, Diosdado and Maria Banatao pledged to donate \$500,000 to MHF and said that they would match funds dollar-for-dollar. The project is set to cost around \$30 million. (Donations can be sent to MHF. For more information: www.manilatown.org)

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