

CHAPTER EIGHT

"No Evictions. We Won't Move!"

The Struggle to Save the I-Hotel

"This land is too valuable to permit poor people to park on it."

—Justin Herman, former executive director of the
San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, 1970¹



Some of the manong tenants of the International Hotel.

Photo by Chris Hule

The land Herman was referring to in the quote above was a city block in the heart of downtown San Francisco's growing Financial District. One of the most famous skylines in the world was being reshaped. The "Wall Street of the West" had been expanding for years and the 800 block of Kearny Street was prime real estate. It was also the block where the International Hotel stood.

And it became the block where the rights of people of color who were low-income and elderly tenants were fought over for nearly a decade. The movement to save the "I-Hotel," as it was called, is one of the most important chapters in the history of Asian American struggle and of housing conflicts. It was a protracted campaign that eventually drew hundreds of people into the ranks of activism. It was, as the *San Francisco Chronicle* put it, "a cause celebre for the politically engaged."²

In the late 1970s, the I-Hotel was just about all that was left of Manilatown, once a thriving community of mostly male Filipino immigrants that covered 10 blocks between San Francisco's Chinatown and Financial districts. During the 1920s and 1930s, the I-Hotel (built the year after the devastating 1906 earthquake) became home to thousands of seasonal Asian laborers. Many young Filipino and Chinese men who worked as day laborers, dishwashers, messengers and at any other profession that was deemed "appropriate for Orientals" lived there. So did old-timers, who settled in San Francisco following years of working in seasonal harvests, on merchant ships, in canneries in Alaska and Washington, and so on, up and down the Pacific Coast. Many of the old-timers, though not citizens, had served in both World Wars, but the U.S. government denied some of them promised benefits after the fighting stopped.

Asian women were, for the most part, excluded from entering the U.S. until 1965, thereby preventing most of the men who lived in Chinatown and Manilatown from establishing families. Further, California's antimiscegenation laws prevented Filipinos and other Asians from marrying outside the race. Nevertheless, "race preservation" was the concern of white elite California in the 1930s; testimony before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization warned that "the Filipinos are...a social menace as they will not leave our white girls alone and frequently intermarry."³

Yet a different kind of family life persisted, as the bachelor society of Filipino men preserved their culture in the pool halls, barber shops and other Manilatown meeting places. As one of the Filipino elders who lived in the I-Hotel remarked in 1987, "Have here a good neighborhood, and good and very kind country men, old and new friends.... I have stayed here so long that I call this hotel my home."⁴

"It was a good place for brown people—Filipinos—specifically coming for jobs in Alaska or on the farms—a unique place where you met friends to guide you and maybe recommend you for jobs," said longtime resident Nick Napeek.⁵

Fellow resident Peter Yamamoto echoed the sentiment:

Living in the I-Hotel and Manilatown-Chinatown, you realize the need of Filipinos and Chinese to live within their community, where they could find the day-to-day things that they could not find living in, say, the Tenderloin—a cheap hotel, their food, their friends. [It] was a beautiful place, with camaraderie.⁶

Urban Renewal = Filipino Removal

After World War II, San Francisco made plans to expand its downtown business sector, particularly the area around the Financial District. Redevelopment was the buzzword of the time and more and more corporate headquarters moved into the area. As the high-rises went up during the building boom of the late 1950s and 1960s, many small businesses and residential hotels were torn down.

The city's spreading "urban renewal" project had already torn through the heart of the Fillmore District, west of downtown, decimating hundreds of homes and displacing thousands of residents in the city's largest Black community. But it was the Financial District redevelopment that became top priority for the city's expansion, as the opening of the Bay Area Rapid Transit system in the mid-1970s made it easier for white-collar workers to commute from the outlying areas into downtown to work in the major banks, trading companies and other corporate entities moving into the area.

The effect, of course, was to change the landscape of the community. Manilatown was devastated. Ten full blocks of low-cost housing, restaurants, barber shops, markets, clubs and other businesses that benefited a Filipino community that numbered around

10,000 people were destroyed.

By the end of the expansion, thousands of people had been displaced. More than 4,000 low-income units were torn down in favor of high-rise buildings (including the famous Transamerica Pyramid and the Bank of America's world headquarters) and parking lots. Four out of every five low-cost residential hotels in the area were gone by the end of the 1970s.

One of the hotels slated for demolition was the International Hotel, where tenants could rent rooms for only 50 dollars a month. In the late 1960s, most of the hotel's tenants were poor, and almost all were elderly—in the community they were referred to as *manongs*, an Ilocano term of respect for the “old-timers.” One of the *manongs*, Felix Ayson, remarked in 1986, “Most of my time and my years in America I spend in this hotel, so it is my home. Whenever no work in the country, I come here and find a job in the city, and I live here.” Ayson had lived in the I-Hotel since 1928.⁷

More than three million elderly people in America's cities depended on low-cost residential hotels in the 1950s and 1960s, but by the close of the 1960s, the hotels had become synonymous with urban decay and blight as politicians and investors sought to justify redevelopment.

In March 1968, Milton Meyer and Company, headed by San Francisco business magnate Walter Shorenstein, bought the I-Hotel and made plans to construct a multilevel parking lot on the site. Shorenstein secured a demolition permit in September, and in October he ordered the evictions of the 196 tenants, giving them until the first of the year to be out. “We deeply regret having to disrupt the lives of these good people,” Shorenstein said as the eviction notices went out.⁸

In the dizzying pace of downtown redevelopment, the sale of the I-Hotel and the eviction notices to its tenants were barely noticed, except by a few, including Joaquin Legaspi, director of the Manilatown Information Center, a multiservice provider for the community. San Francisco State College professor Jovina Navarro, who had been active in the Filipino community, also learned of the evictions and put out the first word on the college campus, leading to a series of highly publicized protests, led by newly politicized

Asian American students at San Francisco State and UC Berkeley. At the time, students at both campuses were beginning to press for ethnic studies programs and were also in the midst of protests over the war in Vietnam.

Many students involved in the campus-based Third World Liberation Front sought to practice the principles espoused in their new ethnic studies and consciousness movements; the idea, a novel one on college campuses, was to go back into the community and work for justice. The early I-Hotel demonstrations became a political introduction for large numbers of Asian American students in search of their cultural roots.

“It was a generation of a lot of activism,” recalled Terry Bautista, who was active in the defense of the *manongs*. “We were looking for our own voice. The I-Hotel struggle was a good application of what ethnic studies was all about—go study your community and look for justice where there isn't any. There was just so much going on at the time. You couldn't help but be political.”⁹

“Fight to Save the I-Hotel” became a battle cry among young activists and organizers.

The sudden interest in the hotel and publicity from the community soon led to a change in direction; a lease agreement between Milton Meyer and Company and the United Filipino Association (UFA), led by Ness Aquino, was drawn up and plans to make the land into a parking lot were shelved. But before the agreement could be signed, a fire broke out in the building, killing three tenants and giving Shorenstein justification to cancel the agreement and go ahead with demolition.

Returning Resources to the Community

The community continued to resist demolition by staging increasingly loud demonstrations, and most of the elderly tenants, including some who had been at the hotel for more than 20 years, refused to leave. Eventually, the UFA secured a three-year lease agreement, promising to bring the building up to housing code standards within a year. Volunteers, mostly from UC Berkeley's Asian American Studies program, worked to refurbish the hotel. Floyd Huen, who headed the UC program, later recalled using

student fees in the project and justifying it as “returning resources to the community.”¹⁰

Over the next several years, the fight over who controlled the hotel was tied up in the courts. The UFA dissolved and in its place the International Hotel Tenants Association (IHTA) was organized, led by Emil de Guzman.

Bill Sorro, in his 20s at the time of the demonstrations but not a student, was the only young person living in the I-Hotel at the time. Between 1970 and 1974, he called the three-story building his home:

I was just another tenant, I paid my \$45 a month in rent, I mean, I had responsibilities there — I painted, cleaned bathrooms, really whatever needed to be done. I wanted to get involved in the Filipino community, so I knew the issues, but I really saw myself as another tenant...I related to the old-timers. I was part of them. They were like the relatives in my family. They were like my uncles, you know.

People just focus on the big events and the evictions, but you have to understand that there were nine years of hard work that we put into that hotel. It was day-to-day, outside of the media spotlight, by a whole spectrum of people, across race and class lines. We really made good connections with the old-timers and were there for more than just demonstrations. We did all the related work that isn't very glamorous. We helped them understand their rights to Social Security and Medicare. I mean, these were immigrants and many of them just didn't know.

Also, as part of our work as budding revolutionaries, we tried to figure out how to change the environment of the community of people in the hotel to see themselves as being part of more than just their locked-in building. We provided social activities, we got a bus from UC Berkeley and took them out for day trips to the beach to have a barbecue and that kind of thing. I think we really succeeded in developing a trust between the young people and the tenants. Now they may not have agreed with all of our revolutionary rhetoric, but they were like your grandparents. They understood your heart and showed a lot of patience with you. It was a special thing.¹¹

The International Hotel had become a symbol of more than just a housing struggle. For the many people who became intimately involved with the residents and their community, the hotel became

a matter of the heart. The folks who worked to bring the hotel back from the brink of destruction were also able to use the media to communicate that, after all, these were elders who were being threatened. Hotel organizers were able to sway public opinion and, as a result, make the city's political leaders feel the heat. It appeared as though the hotel was going to survive its most direct challenge.

Tired of the bad press and the extensive community support of the hotel at any mention of demolition, Shorestein secretly sold it in 1973 to a Thai businessman named Supasit Mahaguna and his Four Seas Investment Corporation for just over \$850,000. Four Seas applied for a demolition permit but was immediately met with more protests and litigation. Finally, in 1976, Superior Court Judge Ira Brown, a former San Francisco landlord himself, ruled in favor of Four Seas and ordered the evictions. San Francisco Mayor George Moscone attempted to broker a deal that would have the city buy the hotel and sell it back to the tenants, but at \$1.3 million, the price was impossible.

Eventually, the eviction order stuck and the San Francisco Sheriff's Office and Police Department were ordered to re-post eviction notices.

No Evictions! We Won't Move!

Word spread among people who had initially defended the hotel and who had promised support if another attempt was ever made to kick the tenants out. For Asian American activists and organizers, who had been politicized in the heat of the first battle and were presently working in the community, word that eviction notices were going up was a beacon call.

On January 7, 1977, more than 350 supporters from the IHTA, Asian Community Center, Kearny Street Workshop and other community groups and organizations in solidarity with the tenants formed a human barricade to prevent the police from posting the notices. Chanting “No eviction! We won't move!” the demonstrators forced the city and the police into retreat. The next week, after notices were finally posted, some 5,000 people linked arms around the entire block to prevent the forced eviction of tenants. The show of resistance and “threat of violence” forced Judge Brown to grant an immediate stay of eviction. Brown cited unconfirmed reports

that tenant supporters had been stockpiling automatic weapons and gasoline.

In May, however, a court ruling strengthened Four Seas' claim of ownership and eviction notices again appeared. Again they were met by massive demonstrations, including a night when another human fence grew eight people deep in front of the hotel. "We have been terrorized by insecurity and fear," tenant Felix Ayson shouted to supporters during the eighth eviction attempt in the now nine-year-long struggle. "We are here to fight for our right to stay!" Again, the tenants won a stay of eviction.¹²

On August 2, I-Hotel tenants Wahat Tampao, Nita Radar, Benny Gallo, Ayson and others conducted a sit-in at City Hall to pressure the mayor and Board of Supervisors to support the struggle. The next day, however, the conservative California Supreme Court lifted the stay and reordered the evictions. This time sheriff's deputies and city police came with a show of force stronger than before. Again they were met with resistance.

Terry Bautista remembers the duties of the young organizers leading up to the evictions:

We all took on any assignments that were needed. Some were needed to work the phones. Some were lookouts on the roof. I remember 20 or more people sleeping on a stage inside the building, while large numbers of other people were helping the tenants. Some would stay with them in their rooms to make sure that nothing happened to them. My job was to be a lookout [for police] at the front door. It was basically sentry duty. The cops could come at any time and we had to be ready. It was like we were getting ready for war.¹³

The plan of action for the inevitable day when the police would come with full force was to form the largest human barricade possible, seven to eight rows deep around the block with even more people layered inside the building, up every step, outside every room. Even the Reverend Jim Jones (yes, *that* Jim Jones) of the People's Temple had mobilized more than 300 of his followers and arrived on the scene in seven busloads. "Just imagine, it was wall-to-wall people around the whole block," Bautista says. "It was a constant mass of protest. It really was incredible."

The police had cordoned off a two-square-mile perimeter to stop what probably would have been thousands more who intended to come to the hotel in support of the tenants.

Tenant Nick Napeek remembers getting home around 4 p.m. on the night of August 3. He had heard that the police were coming that night. Around 10 pm, he started telling the other, older tenants on his side of the building to go inside their rooms and lock up.

The riot police could be seen blocks away practicing maneuvers in full riot gear; a battalion of mounted police had their horses ready for action. Finally at 3 a.m. on August 4, the cry from somewhere in the crowd came: "They're coming!" Some 400 police in full riot gear rushed the 3,000-person-strong barricade to evict the 50 or so tenants barricaded inside the hotel.

The resulting scene, captured on film in Curtis Choy's moving documentary *The Fall of the I-Hotel*, was of demonstrators, who had been linked arm-in-arm, being forcibly moved out of the way, of police moving in and breaking down doors and of their brutality to some tenants who didn't move quickly enough for them. Tenant Tony Goolsby told *East-West*, "They threw us up against a wall in the middle of the building.... One told me, 'If you don't move, I'll break your fucking neck!'"¹⁴

San Francisco Sheriff Richard Hongisto, who had earlier spent five days in jail for contempt of court when he refused to carry out an eviction order, apparently had a change of heart by the time he was leading the line of cops into the hotel. In a dramatic moment, with cameras flashing all around him, Hongisto used a sledge hammer to break down doors to tenants' rooms.

The pictures of old immigrant tenants being forced out into the street were shown on newscasts across the country and in many places outside of the U.S. The entire spectacle, according to most observers, including those who had never supported the tenants' stand, was disgraceful.

Tenant Florentino Ragadeo, who had lived in the same room for more than 20 years after serving in the U.S. Army and surviving the Bataan Death March in World War II, reserved blame for the real culprits. "I do not blame policeman, not blame sheriff," he told *East-West* days after the evictions. "The judge! The mayor! I know that

they are the ones who have the right to stop the eviction. Especially the owner of the hotel. Before you evict, you should find a place for the tenants...I'm crying all the time...It's not right."¹⁵

"It was like the Roman Legions coming after the Christians," recalled de Guzman. "It was incredible humiliation. We had these elderly men who had to drag themselves to the street, and they were suddenly homeless. A lot of the manongs didn't really live much longer. It's like their hearts were broken."¹⁶

Preserving Heritage and History

On the 10th anniversary of the eviction, de Guzman explained the importance of fighting back against the powerful interests who wanted the hotel gone from sight. "For me and many of us who were born and raised in San Francisco, who have a lot of memories of what Manilatown was like as a community where our own fathers, relatives and friends hung out, the real issue was not the eviction but the attempt to destroy our heritage. The hotel was part of that historical foundation which we wanted to preserve."¹⁷

For more than a decade, the struggle to preserve the I-Hotel and all that it represented often occupied center stage in San Francisco politics. The issues of low-income housing, the rights of the elderly and people of color and the fight against "urban renewal" ("people rights over property rights," was a slogan from the demonstrations) were all ingredients in a struggle that eventually captured international attention.

Though the battle against eviction was lost and the hotel destroyed two years later—its fine bricks, ironically, used in the construction of million-dollar homes in other parts of the Bay Area—the struggle lives on in spirit. Many of the young Asian Americans, who became activists during that effort, found an important issue they could truly identify with. Politicized by the movement, many have stayed to work in the communities they rediscovered in 1968. A real pan-Asian American political identity was formed and from the subsequent work of these and other activists came a plethora of community services designed to meet the needs of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Cambodian, Vietnamese and other Asian immigrant populations.

"These were old people," said Bautista who, twenty years later, is still active, serving on the national council of Filipino Civil Rights Advocates. "You had to have a certain level of sympathy for them. We knew that we had to be accountable to our community. The system wanted control and wasn't willing to just give it up. Even though the manongs were evicted, the system really didn't win. We weren't defeated in one important sense: We learned the lesson of fighting back."¹⁸

Bill Sorro continues to work as a committed organizer, these days for low-income tenants in San Francisco's Mission District. "We can look back at the I-Hotel," he said, "and say that 20 years later, the same principles apply. Back then we called it self-determination. Today it's community empowerment. Whatever you want to call it, it's the same idea. People have rights, tenants have rights. We have to recognize those rights and fight back when we get pushed around. For the tenants in Manilatown we said, we're going to organize, fight back. That we should never let go of. If we ever stop fighting, then we've really lost."¹⁹

Today, 20 years since the 50 elderly tenants were forced out of their homes to make room for a parking garage, the lot at Kearny and Jackson streets remains empty. Ironically enough, it was never made into a parking structure, as developers and the city could never decide on a suitable project. Called "the Hole" now by locals, it is a strange sight in an area where giant skyscrapers dominate the terrain. To many, though, the lot is not just wasted land, but a monument to protest and to organized community struggle.

***Postscript:** After years of negotiation and community support, plans have been formalized to design and build a new International Hotel, with construction scheduled to be completed by the end of 1999. Low-income elders are to move into the new 14-story structure, which will include space for a performing arts center and a school of the arts for young people in the community. The new hotel will also house the Manilatown Cultural Center and Museum, where community artifacts and history—including some from the old I-Hotel—will be on display. Each floor is to be named after a prominent former tenant and an interior wall will list the names of all those who were evicted.*