



Struggles of Elderly Migrant Laborers against Urban Renewal in SF

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April 2021

Key Words

Filipino American
housing
urban planning
urban renewal
San Francisco

Abstract

Filipino Americans have been largely excluded from environmental justice literature. However, Filipino Americans have experienced similar residential discrimination to other minority groups as described by environmental justice researchers. This study compared urban renewal in a Filipino American neighborhood to urban renewal in a white neighborhood in San Francisco. Primary source documents were used to establish parallel narratives to determine if this Filipino American community's experience fit into larger residential discrimination patterns. Governmental and business interests drew on existing prejudices to justify urban renewal policies. Class and race both played a significant role in which San Franciscan neighborhoods were chosen for urban renewal efforts.

Introduction

Residential and community stability are factors in human health and wellbeing. Infrastructure can foster community, such as walkable neighborhoods with restaurants and stores catered to the local population. However, infrastructure has also been used to disrupt communities. Federal and city governments implemented urban redevelopment programs to grow the economy, but displaced thousands of residents and thriving communities in the process. There is evidence that communities of color, particularly Black communities, and low-income communities have been disproportionately targeted for urban renewal projects. Filipino American communities have also been adversely affected by housing discrimination, but their experiences are not well represented in environmental justice literature. This study aims to add Filipino Americans to the existing environmental justice narrative of urban renewal in the United States. It presents a comparison of two neighborhoods in San Francisco, one Filipino American and one white, both of which were chosen for redevelopment.

Part of the motivation for urban renewal policies has been a long-standing concern over “blight” growing in the heart of U.S. cities. Unfortunately, but perhaps intentionally, blight is a vaguely defined term. Wendell Pritchett describes the word blight as a “facially neutral term infused with racial and ethnic prejudice.”¹ Blight often described the negative effects of residents on cities rather than physical conditions, particularly that poor and minority populations would “infect” the rest of the city and cause property values to decline. Planners claimed blight was caused by the lack of planning and proposed redevelopment plans to “cure” cities.² As Dorceta Taylor has described, city development plans have also been used to justify the removal of Black, low-income, and other minority populations.

According to Taylor, “though the use of eminent domain has great implications for EJ research and activism - in terms of how its use impacts minorities and low-income residents - little attention has been paid to this process by [Environmental Justice] researchers.”³ She writes that “eminent domain is often used in tandem with rezoning, urban renewal, and other economic development initiatives to reshape cities and influence residential patterns,” ultimately removing many minority communities from cities altogether.⁴

Environmental justice and urban studies scholars have identified patterns within urban renewal projects across the United States. Residential stability is a factor in human health and well-being. Therefore, neighborhood maintenance is an environmental health issue. There is evidence that

¹ Wendell E. Pritchett, “The ‘Public Menace’ of Blight: Urban Renewal and the Private Uses of Eminent Domain,” *Yale Law & Policy Review* 21, no. 1 (2003): 6.

² Pritchett, 17.

³ Dorceta E. Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: New York University Press, 2014). 228.

⁴ Taylor, 228.

communities of color, particularly Black communities, and low-income communities have been disproportionately targeted for urban renewal projects and displaced.⁵ Through policies and practices like eminent domain, city governments have seized and destroyed neighborhoods like Black Bottom in Detroit and Seneca Village in New York City. Such displacement has harmed communities and individuals. Unfortunately, this history has been largely ignored until the past couple of decades. However, narratives of community resistance to redevelopment are emerging through new research. More recently, Filipino scholars have joined this conversation.

Urban renewal also has a number of health impacts for affected groups, including the initial displacement and subsequent insecure housing that many displaced people struggle with. Displacement due to a variety of reasons has been linked to negative health outcomes including “malnutrition, poor health care, and even homelessness.”⁶ In addition to the individual health effects of displacement, researchers have found that urban renewal policies can contribute to community destruction and dissolution, which in turn have their own damaging effects.⁷

Despite being the third largest Asian group in the United States (behind Chinese, except Taiwanese, and Asian Indian populations), Filipinos are largely invisible in American infrastructure. When deciding to invalidate racially restrictive covenants in their 1948 decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, the United States Supreme Court acknowledged that “Filipinos, like Blacks, were among those targeted for exclusion from the ownership or occupancy of real property.”⁸ Therefore, it seemed likely that Filipinos should be included in the larger environmental justice narrative about urban renewal. Many cities still have thriving Chinatown neighborhoods, but few have noticeable or labeled Filipino neighborhoods. However, several West Coast cities once had such neighborhoods.

Filipinos are rarely included in larger environmental justice movements or studied by environmental justice researchers. Dawn Bohulano Mabalon, a Filipina scholar, documents and discusses the effects of urban renewal on Little Manila in Stockton, California in her book *Little Manila is in the Heart*. Her work was the only analysis of Filipinos and urban renewal that I could find. Like other minority groups, Filipinos experienced intense discrimination in many forms, including housing. According to Angelo N. Ancheta, Filipino, and Filipino Americans suffer from their racialization as

⁵ Taylor.

⁶ Erick Lyle, “Displacement and Trauma: A Public Health Crisis - FoundSF,” *FoundSF* (blog), 2016, https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Displacement_and_Trauma%3A_A_Public_Health_Crisis.

⁷ Emily A. Benfer et al., “Eviction, Health Inequity, and the Spread of COVID-19: Housing Policy as a Primary Pandemic Mitigation Strategy,” *Journal of Urban Health* 98, no. 1 (February 2021): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-020-00502-1>.

⁸ Angelo N. Ancheta and Lisa Lowe, “Filipino Americans, Foreigner Discrimination, and the Lines of Racial Sovereignty,” in *Positively No Filipinos Allowed*, ed. Antonio T. Tiongson, Edgardo V. Gutierrez, and Ricardo V. Gutierrez, Building Communities and Discourse (Temple University Press, 2006), 91.

“perpetual foreigners,” which includes both “private discrimination and governmental policies that limit full participation in U.S. life.”⁹

Residential patterns are also significant to this research, as most men in both communities lived in residential hotels. In his book about residential hotels, Paul Groth writes,

People live in hotels, full-time, throughout the United States. Americans have done so for over two hundred years, often choosing hotel life over other housing options. Hotel rooms have provided indispensable housing units, sheltered important social groups, supported essential industries and businesses, and represented cosmopolitan diversity in American society. Hotel homes have also revealed deep conflicts in urban life, helped industrialists exploit workers, generated fortunes in downtown real estate, and challenged the dominant cultural values of how homes should shape American culture.¹⁰

Residential hotels were popular in San Francisco, especially for working-class day laborers and farm workers. They allowed tenants to pay for housing by the day or month, without needing a lease or large deposit. In 1980, there were three San Franciscans living in residential hotels for each San Franciscan living in public housing. These 27,000 hotel homes made up ten percent of the total housing units in the city. There were thirty-seven residential hotels in Manilatown at its peak.¹¹ They were cheap to stay in, importantly, but they also provided community and support to their tenants. Despite their popularity and widespread use, residential hotels were often stigmatized by the upper and middle classes.

Residential hotels were commonly assumed to be run-down and dirty because poor and working class people lived in them. According to Groth, “Since large proportions of the city's shiftless laborers, social misfits, thieves, and prostitutes lived in cheap hotels, reformers also assumed that hotel life must be an important part of the cause.”¹² The outlook that poor people were poor because of their poor quality of character was common in the Progressive Era. Reformers and urban renewal advocates drew upon this rhetoric to convince city officials and residents that “skid rows” could grow and damage the rest of the city. Tenants of residential hotels in Yerba Buena and Manilatown fought against this stereotype and frequently spoke of the benefits of their living situation with the press and government officials.

Neighborhoods like Yerba Buena and Manilatown were also mixed-use, with residences, businesses, and cultural centers located in the same area. Stores and restaurants were available to residents within easy walking distance. Walkability was important to residents who did not have other

⁹ Ancheta and Lowe, 104.

¹⁰ Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States*, New Ed edition (University of California Press, 1999). 1.

¹¹ Groth, 158.

¹² Groth, 202.

transportation options. Access to stores was particularly important to Filipinos, who depended on Asian markets to purchase food to which they were accustomed. Age of population, class, geography, and residential patterns were all similar between the two neighborhoods.

For this study, my research question is whether Filipino experiences of urban renewal fit into larger patterns as identified by Taylor and others. I analyze the differences in how Filipinos and whites were treated. Due to time and resource constraints, the scope of this project is limited: I compared two neighborhoods in San Francisco, Manilatown and Yerba Buena, to ask large questions about how urban renewal affected Filipino and white populations. Neighborhoods like Manilatown and Yerba Buena were identified as "blighted" and targeted for urban renewal efforts, usually meaning displacing residents in favor of building something new for white and wealthy people to use. However, I found striking similarities between the two narratives. The populations of each neighborhood were elderly and poor, which made them easy targets. City planners and business interests thought their neighborhood land could be put to a "higher," more profitable use than housing vulnerable people. Unfortunately, the policies to enforce this ideal may have changed, but vulnerable people continue to have difficulty finding homes. I found that two groups of low-income elderly migrant laborers were evicted from hotel rental properties in the 1970s, one was Filipino migrant workers in Manilatown, and the other was white workers living in Yerba Buena.

Methods

The primary source documents for this thesis are two first-person narratives about neighborhood struggles with urban redevelopment in San Francisco, as well as a Department of City Planning evaluation of neighborhood conditions. Estella Habal and Chester Hartman were anti-eviction activists and writers in San Francisco during the main period of urban redevelopment from 1945 to the late 1970s. Most of the original residents have passed away, but their stories -- in their own words -- were captured by Habal and Hartman.

City planning documents from 1947 and 1955 were available and provided insight into these questions. I relied heavily on the Housing and Neighborhood Conditions report from 1955, which was designed as a survey to qualify for federal funding for urban renewal projects under the Housing Act of 1954. It aimed to identify blighted areas within the city to target for redevelopment. I compared the scoring system the city used to determine blight conditions with the characteristics of Manilatown and Yerba Buena. The report provided a framework for analyzing each neighborhood from the perspective of the Department of Planning. It is important to note that Manilatown and Yerba Buena were not named specifically in the document because they were smaller subsets of larger neighborhoods (Chinatown and

South-of-Market, respectively). Manilatown was never considered an official neighborhood by the city, though its residents saw it as distinct from the neighboring Chinatown.¹³ As a result, I use Chinatown as a proxy for Manilatown and South-of-Market as a proxy for Yerba Buena when referring to the planning documents.

The majority of my research was in constructing narratives based on firsthand accounts of each struggle and providing context through official planning documents. My analysis developed from comparing the two narratives. I wanted to understand how each community was targeted, by whom, and the responses from residents. I explored the similarities and differences between Manilatown and Yerba Buena's fight for their homes. Initially, it seemed as though race would be the most defining feature but it turned out that age and class were equally important.

Findings

Displacement in Manilatown

Manilatown and I-Hotel were easy to target for urban renewal plans as both populations are elderly and low-income. These populations did not have abundant resources to counteract evictions, despite work done to organize protests with San Francisco advocacy groups. Federal funding depended on identifying and eliminating blight which catered to justifications surrounding business interests.

In her book *San Francisco's International Hotel*, Estella Habal described the story of the International Hotel (I-Hotel) as "a story of how the people of San Francisco resisted the destruction of affordable housing and the expansion of "downtown" corporate interests." At its peak, Manilatown comprised 10 blocks along Kearny Street between Chinatown and the financial district. Given its location and the majority population, Manilatown was also referred to as a Filipino town or, simply, Kearny Street. It was a Filipino enclave from the early 1900s, when Filipinos who worked on the sugar plantations of Hawaii moved to California for better wages and working conditions, to the late 1970s, when the last residential hotel was destroyed. According to the Manilatown Heritage Foundation, "The seeds of the community were sown in the early 1900s."¹⁴ Important businesses included Benny's Cigar Shop, which opened in 1915; the Santa Maria Restaurant, which was owned by the Visayan Santa Maria brothers; Tino's barbershop next to the I-Hotel; and the Bataan Drug Store, Pool Hall, and Restaurant. Manilatown was never recognized as an official San Francisco neighborhood, likely because of its size, population,

¹³ Estella Habal, *San Francisco's International Hotel: Mobilizing the Filipino American Community in the Anti-Eviction Movement*, Asian American History and Culture (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008). 9.

¹⁴ Manilatown Heritage Foundation, "Seeds of the Community - History," October 19, 2013, <https://manilatown.org/about-us/history/>.

and political leanings. Filipinos historically had little political power or voice, especially due to their migrant lifestyle. Therefore, it is difficult to find documentation about Manilatown specifically. In most city planning documents from the time period, Manilatown is included in the larger, neighboring Chinatown, land that had been long coveted by white businessmen of the financial district.

Early immigrants from the Philippines were mostly men, who had trouble finding work and the American dream they were promised. The majority became migrant farm workers, traveling with the harvests up the west coast from fields in California to the canneries in Alaska. Most were unable to start families due to the gender imbalance of Filipinos and anti-miscegenation laws that forbade Filipinos from marrying white women.¹⁵ They worked under difficult conditions for low wages. This generation of Filipino immigrants became known as the manongs, an Ilocano term of endearment for older brothers or uncles. Due to the migrant lifestyle of the manongs, the population density of Manilatown was highly variable throughout the year. Estella Habal estimated there were around 2,500 people living in Manilatown during the summer which would swell to 30,000 in the winters between the 1920s and 1940. Sobredo had a more conservative estimate of 10,000 residents at its height.¹⁶

The story of the I-Hotel can be used as a proxy for the Manilatown narrative for several reasons. First, the I-Hotel was the literal center of Manilatown by the mid-1960s when the fight for its existence began. It was also the last residential hotel to survive urban renewal efforts and came to symbolize the “Filipino American struggle for identity, self-determination, and civil rights.”¹⁷ In addition, the I-Hotel galvanized an anti-eviction movement within the larger Asian, Filipino, and Filipino American communities. The I-Hotel was not only a home for manongs, but other community elders as well as some remaining Manilatown businesses. Filipino organizations and stores rented space on the first floor, even as many in neighboring buildings were forced to close. The Kearny Street Workshop, for example, had its headquarters in the I-Hotel and was home to many writers and artists of the Asian community.¹⁸ The I-Hotel itself was run by Filipinos but on land owned by a white company. By the mid-1960s, white downtown interests and the expanding financial district had reduced Manilatown to three blocks around the I-Hotel.

The Immigration Act of 1965 expanded immigration opportunities to allow Filipinos to move to the US with their families. These new immigrant families settled in the mainly white, working-class South

¹⁵ Dawn Bohulano Mabalon, *Little Manila Is in the Heart: The Making of the Filipina/o American Community in Stockton, California* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). 86.

¹⁶ James Sobredo, “From Manila Bay to Daly City: Filipinos in San Francisco.,” in *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, ed. James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters (City Lights Books, 1998), 278.

¹⁷ Sobredo, 279.

¹⁸ Leon Sun, “Reclaiming Our Roots,” April 2015, <https://www.kearnystreet.org/reclaiming-our-roots>.

of Market district or mostly Latino Mission district, with many later moving to Daly City. However, the manongs were unable to afford rent in other parts of the city and had no other family in the US with whom to live. The result was a largely elderly population in Manilatown who relied on the low-income housing and community around Kearny Street. In June of 1968, Milton Meyer and Company (owners of the I-Hotel building and property) applied for permission to demolish the building in order to build a parking lot on the land. At the time, 182 people lived in the I-Hotel (72 Filipinos, 28 Chinese, and 38 people of other ethnic groups). The I-Hotel was also home to twelve stores, including billiard halls and the “hungry i” nightclub. In October of 1968, tenants received their first eviction notice, prompting about one-third of the residents to move away. By May of 1969, only 65 tenants remained, more than 50 of whom were Filipino.

In response to the eviction notice, community members founded the United Filipino Association (UFA) in 1968. Local businessmen, professionals, community leaders, and tenants joined the organization. Their main goal was to prevent further eviction and negotiate a lease from Milton Meyer and Company. The I-Hotel cause built a coalition of civil rights activists, labor unions, religious leaders, anti-war activists, groups in the queer community, and others. According to Habal, “a large segment of San Francisco’s population had strong sympathies with the need for available, affordable housing, in contrast to the need for corporate expansion.”¹⁹ However, those in favor of corporate expansion and downtown interests had considerable money and power and saw Manilatown as standing in the way of progress. The I-Hotel story was also widely publicized at the time and there is some literature available about the struggle, while other businesses and hotels received little attention from the rest of the city. Tenants and their supporters attracted massive demonstrations around eviction. Local college students, African American and Japanese groups, low-income housing advocates, and even members of the People’s Temple called attention to the protests. The I-Hotel was not only central to Manilatown literally and physically, but its supporters left documentation for future generations to follow. Politicians joined in supporting I-Hotel tenants - Community members were not the only ones concerned about Milton Meyer’s plans to demolish the I-Hotel. The San Francisco Human Rights Commission and other agencies began advocating on behalf of tenants. Several city officials joined the tenants’ cause as well, including Supervisor Jack Morrison. He picketed with protesters and suggested that the tenants appeal the demolition plan to the Board of Permit Appeals. Walter Shorenstein was the president and director of Milton Meyer and Company. He was also a “major force” in local and national Democratic politics. His involvement in politics included funding Democratic campaigns like Mayor Joseph Alioto, whose downtown interests aligned with his own. President Johnson appointed Shorenstein to the

¹⁹ Habal, *San Francisco’s International Hotel*. 3.

President's Task Force on US Urban Problems in the mid-1960s. Shorenstein also chaired the Mayor's Citizen Housing Task Force in San Francisco.

Downtown interests evicted ninety residents (including 68 Filipinos) from the nearby Palm residential hotel in January of 1969. The eviction and demolition left all 90 Palm Hotel tenants homeless and provided no relocation plan or assistance. In response, I-Hotel tenants doubled down their efforts to remain in their home. Sidney Wolinsky filed a federal lawsuit claiming that "the removal of the residents without adequate alternative housing for them would violate their constitutional rights."²⁰ Indeed, even Mayor Alioto's advisory committee to the Office of Aging opposed the demolition unless relocation plans were made. The UFA, other tenants, and community members continued to protest, including a particularly charged moment at a party thrown by Alioto.

By mid-1969, more organizations and groups were joining the I-Hotel movement and Alioto faced mounting pressure. The San Francisco Family Service Agency asked Alioto to stop the eviction and demolition plans, but he refused. Instead, he released his own plan in May. Under his plan, tenants would be moved to nearby hotels temporarily before they were relocated as a group to a new 110-unit housing center already designated for the elderly. The new center was being built by the San Francisco Housing Authority at 550 Ellis Street in the Tenderloin District. The UFA and its allies identified several problems immediately. First, the Tenderloin District was known for being a high-crime neighborhood, and it was far away from the Chinese markets where tenants shopped. Asian food was not widely available in other parts of the city, and the lack of refrigeration meant people had to shop almost every day. In addition, temporary relocation at the Padre and Hyland Hotels would "scatter them and shatter their informal personal networks."²¹ To make things worse, both the Padre and Hyland were condemned in 1966.

In March, a fire swept through one floor of the I-Hotel, killing three people. It was ruled an accident, but tenants and community members suspected foul play. Shorenstein and Milton Meyer denied any connection to the fire and refused to repair the damage. A few months later, a Human Rights Commission inspection found Milton and Meyer had also stopped providing tenants with toilet paper and clean sheets. The community kitchen was never cleaned and the garbage was rarely taken out. Unsurprisingly, Shorenstein and his attorneys denied the claims.

After lengthy negotiations, the UFA succeeded in securing a lease agreement with Shorenstein and Milton Meyer. The new lease became effective July 1, 1969. The UFA agreed to a \$40,000 per year rent for three years. Milton Meyer and Company could cancel the lease after two years if they gave six months' notice and reimbursed the UFA for rehabilitating the I-Hotel building. The UFA would also buy a

²⁰ Habal, 43.

²¹ Habal, 47.

\$25 million insurance policy to protect Milton Meyer from liability and cover the costs of repairing the fire damage. Tenants would be responsible for an additional \$23,000 in annual property taxes. Despite these high costs, the agreement ushered in a new period of relative quiet. Tenants and their advocates called this time “Peace with a Lease.”

In 1974, the city required that the building be “brought up to code or demolished” and Milton Meyer sold it to Four Seas. At the end of the original three-year contract, the UFA felt it had fulfilled its purpose of preventing eviction and rehabilitating the I-Hotel. They decided to disband and Shorenstein extended the lease for another year. Student activists who helped with repairs and renovation also helped tenants establish the International Hotel Tenants Association (IHTA) in 1973. However, the fight for the I-Hotel was not over. There were ongoing lawsuits against Milton Meyer and Company regarding city and state housing code violations, but the owner continued to skirt responsibility. In January of 1974, the City Attorney’s Office officially required Milton Meyer and Company to bring the hotel up to code or demolish it, but Milton Meyer had already sold the property to the Four Seas Investment Corporation. However, tenants didn’t learn about the sale until March.

The Four Seas Investment Corporation was a Hong Kong-based firm headed by Supasit Mahaguna, a formidable and secretive businessman. According to Habal, Mahaguna “used his money to hire the best lawyers to defend his property rights, and they employed the courts and other forms of state power to intimidate, harass, and finally evict the tenants.”²² At the end of September, tenants received another eviction notice. The IHTA quickly moved to resist the eviction. The tenants and their supporters’ response was both political and legal. Their goals were to prevent eviction and fix building code violations in the short term, as well as to obtain a long-term lease or buy the building. They planned a demonstration in front of the Four Seas Headquarters in October of 1974. Three thousand protesters representing more than 15 organizations marched through Chinatown to the headquarters. The IHTA also “set up a legal strategy designed to show that the eviction threat was causing undue harm to the elderly tenants -- a threat that could easily be alleviated by making repairs [to the I-Hotel].”²³ However, judge after judge ruled in favor of private property rights over the human rights of the tenants, the Four Seas Investment Corporation over the IHTA. In response, the IHTA continued to build their anti-eviction coalition and win public and political support for their cause.

There were significant governance changes in 1975 that looked promising for the anti-eviction movement. George Moscone, a liberal who had supported the I-Hotel tenants in the past, was elected mayor. In addition, the San Francisco Supervisors would be elected by voters in their neighborhoods

²² Habal, 78.

²³ Habal, 83.

rather than in citywide elections. This change in election was an attempt to “break the stranglehold of downtown interests” and “give power to neighborhoods.”²⁴

The tenants also had unexpected support in the anti-eviction fight from San Francisco Sheriff Richard Hongisto and Undersheriff James Denman. In statements made to the press, Hongisto and Denman reflected on their status as middle class, white, and a part of the political elite. They reportedly did not want to use their police power to harm poor and elderly people on behalf of wealthy corporations like the Four Seas. Indeed, both Hongisto and Denman refused to serve eviction notices while appeals were in progress. When they were eventually charged with being in contempt of court, they blamed lack of manpower, but it was clear they had moral qualms as well. Both men were convicted and fined \$500 in January of 1977. Despite the protests, another judge ordered tenants to be evicted about a week later.

On August 3, 1977, all tenants of the I-Hotel were violently evicted from their home despite a massive protest. The city failed to provide even temporary housing for the elderly tenants; apparently, the Undersheriff’s officers had forgotten to give out packets of information for the night after the eviction. There was no plan for permanent relocation and the eviction left the IHTA and supporters floundering. “The campaign culminated in the deployment of over 400 riot police, mounted patrols, anti-sniper units and fire ladder trucks in a 3:00 AM eviction raid on August 4, 1977.”²⁵

The Four Seas Investment Corporation was eventually successful in demolishing the building, but the land remained undeveloped. The city, including new mayor Dianne Feinstein, required the Four Seas to include affordable housing in any development they planned. Unwilling to build the low-income units, the Four Seas allowed the property to stand empty for over twenty-five years. Finally, in 2005, former Mayor Feinstein and advocates like Estella Habal celebrated the opening of the new building on Kearny Street. Twenty-eight years to the month after the eviction in 1977, the International Hotel Senior Housing building opened, with 104 units of affordable housing for the elderly. In 2005, a new I Hotel Senior Living facility opened with 104 units of affordable housing.

Displacement in Yerba Buena

The majority population of Yerba Buena in the 1950s was similar to that of Manilatown. Yerba Buena was home to about four thousand residents, most of whom were poor, elderly men. Like their Filipino counterparts in Manilatown, many lived in residential hotels. A significant difference between Yerba Buena and Manilatown is the racial makeup: Yerba Buena was primarily white. However, the larger South of Market District, where Yerba Buena is located, also became a home for non-white immigrants,

²⁴ Habal, 89.

²⁵ The I-Hotel, “History,” - San Francisco, accessed May 25, 2023, <https://www.ihotel-sf.org/history/>.

particularly Black and Asian families. South of Market was known as a “reception area” for new Filipino immigrants in the 1950s.

In 1953, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors approved a possible redevelopment plan for a large part of the South of Market district. They referred to this location as “Area D” in planning documents. Importantly, this plan was created in order to receive funding from the federal urban renewal program. In 1954, Ben Swig unveiled his “San Francisco Prosperity Plan,” which included building the Yerba Buena Center (YBC): a new convention center, office buildings, and a large parking garage. Unfortunately for him, he did not own any of the lands he wanted to bulldoze and develop. In addition, the Yerba Buena neighborhood he wanted to build on was outside of Area D, therefore was not eligible for taken by the city. There was considerable pushback from the community and this plan was never implemented.²⁶

Businessmen Charles Blyth and J. D. Zellerbach formed the Blyth-Zellerbach Committee in 1956. They began with planning a redevelopment of East San Francisco’s wholesale produce market. The area was 28 blocks in total and was located just east of the financial district, the perfect place to start downtown expansion. The wholesale market had also been criticized for being crowded and disorganized. Many businessmen and planners saw planning as the solution to problems of disorganization and blight. While the B-Z Committee tried to be covert and avoid public attention and critique, they were successful in their goal. They won approval for a 51-acre luxury residential and corporate headquarters. The Blyth-Zellerbach Committee created and funded the San Francisco Planning and Urban Renewal Association (SPUR) in 1959. There was significant overlap in membership between the two groups; SPUR was a downtown interest advocacy group. Their goal was to garner “public” (business) interest and support for urban renewal projects. An internal SPUR report found that San Francisco was behind other American cities in development and required leadership and staff for its Redevelopment Agency, as well as more business support. SPUR worked closely with the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency (SFRA), especially after Mayor George Christopher designated SPUR as the “citizen’s group” mandated by the federal government for urban renewal funding. They focused on South of Market Redevelopment, particularly the YBC idea from Swig’s Prosperity Plan. The unimplemented plans for Area D paved the way for future South of Market developments, particularly with the intent to bulldoze as much as possible, construct a massive sports-convention-office center, and begin renewal nearest to the central business district regardless of actual neighborhood conditions.²⁷

²⁶ Chester W. Hartman and Alvin Averbach, *Yerba Buena: Land Grab and Community Resistance in San Francisco* (National Housing and Economic Development Law Project, 1974).

²⁷ Hartman and Averbach.

The developers and city officials who were connected to the San Francisco Planning and Urban Renewal Association sought to revitalize SOMA starting in 1959. They were keen on redevelopment and emphasized the relative poverty of the area, claiming it was blighted and unsalvageable. Indeed, they paid little attention to the existing community of “other single men with common backgrounds, experiences, and problems.”²⁸ Yerba Buena was a safe, comfortable place for retirees, not the “skid row” it was painted by developers. According to Hartman, “official agencies and the business community played on class prejudices... This carefully cultivated image of the residents of South of Market enabled the planners of Yerba Buena Center to present their project as a two-fold public service,” both as an economic revitalization via construction jobs and increased tourism and as a way to rid the city of undesired populations.²⁹ Blight rhetoric was a strategy employed by redevelopment advocates across the country, particularly to demolish poor and minority neighborhoods.³⁰ In 1961, San Francisco mayor Christopher asked the SFRA to plan for South of Market urban renewal, despite Opperman’s earlier opinion that there was not enough blight to justify renewal. The SFRA applied for a federal urban renewal survey and planning grant to cover Area D (as designated in the Swig Prosperity Plan) as well as land closer to the central business district, including Yerba Buena. The next year, the US Housing and Home Finance Agency (the predecessor to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development) approved a \$600,000 planning grant for the project. The HHFA increased the grant to \$19.6 million after the SFRA debuted its official Yerba Buena Center plan and requested more funding.

The Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors approved the Yerba Buena plan in 1966, and the SFRA finalized grant and loan contracts with the newly-formed Department of Housing and Urban Development soon after. City politics were upended when Mayor John Shelley suddenly ended his re-election campaign. Former Redevelopment Agency Chairman Joseph Alioto announced his candidacy for mayor shortly after Shelley ended his campaign, which led to suspicions of a buyout. In addition, Alioto’s campaign was primarily funded by Ben Swig and other downtown interests. He won the election in November of 1967. Unsurprisingly, YBC plans were kicked into high gear.

Undeterred by HUD’s refusal to grant them hearings, Yerba Buena residents gathered at the Milner Hotel in 1969 and formed the Tenants and Owners in Opposition to Redevelopment (TOOR) group. TOOR was a relatively small organization composed of residents and their advocates. Most residents were elderly, so they were limited in their ability to engage with the SFRA and business representatives. Informal meetings took place monthly, attended by 60-80 members. TOOR also

²⁸ Hartman and Averbach, 95.

²⁹ Hartman and Averbach, 95.

³⁰ Pritchett, “The ‘Public Menace’ of Blight: Urban Renewal and the Private Uses of Eminent Domain.” 17.

continued community work with free Friday night movie screenings and referrals for health and welfare resources. Despite their age, co-chairmen George Woolf and Peter Mendelsohn fought for Yerba Buena with tenacity. They had both been union organizers decades earlier and cared deeply about their homes. Maintaining community and decent housing was TOOR's main goal. Organizers recognized that the South of Market housing problem was a part of the larger city's housing shortage, and wanted to guarantee Yerba Buena residents would be rehoused in their own neighborhood, unlike other displaced communities. They adopted the "We Won't Move" slogan, which meant "we won't move from the blocks needed for public facilities unless we were given decent relocation housing, and housing that is in the same general neighborhood."³¹

TOOR was able to get a federal judge to file an injunction in 1970 because SFRA wasn't building any replacement housing - TOOR filed a new complaint and motion for a federal injunction against HUD and SFRA in late 1969. In response, federal judge Stanley A. Weigel issued a restraining order against SFRA to temporarily stop demolition and relocation. In 1970, Judge Weigel issued another injunction against the Yerba Buena Center project, which cut off funding by July 1 if SFRA didn't revise its relocation plan. Over the next three years, several SFRA relocation plans would be rejected by HUD, delaying demolition. TOOR continued to file injunctions on the grounds that the SFRA was making little progress on the previously promised 1,500 to 1,800 housing units elsewhere in the city. Other suits were also brought against the YBC project, citing violations of California and federal environmental protections.

Finally, in 1973, TOOR and SFRA signed an agreement. TOOR agreed to drop its suit against the YBC project and form a housing development corporation to sponsor 400 units of low-income housing. SFRA agreed to develop the 400 units of housing on four YBC sites, as well as complete the other units as promised. While TOOR was successful in negotiating the construction of additional housing units, the original residents were still displaced.

Analysis of San Francisco City Planning Reports

Planners and renewal advocates were primarily concerned with the class of residents, but they also used existing racist prejudice against Filipinos to justify redevelopment. The combination of being poor and Filipino proved difficult for manongs and their supporters to overcome.

In the city's 1954 "Housing and Neighborhood Conditions" report, the scoring system for determining a neighborhood's blight level was split into nineteen characteristics. Racial makeup was only

³¹ Hartman and Averbach, *Yerba Buena*. 114.

a minor consideration to the Department of City Planning: they were more focused on targeting low-income populations. “Non-white population” received a penalty of only three out of a total possible eighty-nine points. The poor (or perceived poor) were targeted to a greater extent. For example, neighborhoods were scored on how many households per 1000 had a yearly income of over \$5000. They were also scored on the percentage of rentals costing less than \$40 per month.

In addition, blight factors like “Deterioration rate” and “Dilapidation” were highly subjective and, importantly, difficult for most residents to ameliorate. Dilapidation and deterioration rates are significant because most residents of Yerba Buena and Manilatown rented rooms in buildings owned by larger companies. They had little to no control over the structural conditions of their home, but they were the ones to be displaced if urban renewal projects were approved. Indeed, I-Hotel residents reported terrible conditions and maltreatment by the building’s management. It is possible that landlords let their properties fall into disrepair in order to make the case for slum clearance and redevelopment. Walter Shorenstein, the owner of the I-Hotel building, reportedly said he felt he was clearing a slum by evicting tenants and redeveloping the land.

Before beginning my research, I wrongly assumed the city government would be the only adversarial actor. I expected to find evidence that the city government employed eminent domain to seize property in Manilatown and Yerba Buena and gave it to private redevelopers. It became clear that “downtown” corporate interests were incredibly powerful and influential on the government itself. The government was often acting on behalf of the business interests rather than using private developers to create plans for “public use.”

Manilatown activists wanted the city government to protect tenants from losing their homes. Unfortunately, even liberal politicians were afraid to challenge the power of landlords and the real estate industry. According to Randy Shaw, “The ability of a rarely seen liquor magnate from Thailand to evict nearly a hundred elderly tenants, for no stated reason, perfectly captures the state of landlord-tenant relations in San Francisco in 1977. No laws stood in the way of landlord greed.”³² Shaw and others were advocates for regulations on rising rent costs and evictions. The lack of these regulations “enabled landlords to replace low-income and working-class tenants with those who could afford costly rents.”³³ Tenants of Manilatown and Yerba Buena were certainly victims of this process.

Conclusion

³² Randy Shaw, “Tenant Power in San Francisco,” in *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, ed. James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters (City Lights Books, 1998), 287.

³³ Shaw, 287.

This research describes the experience of poor Filipinos and whites in San Francisco during a period of urban renewal. Based on my research, I believe that manongs of Manilatown belong in the larger environmental justice movement narrative: they were vulnerable people targeted specifically by powerful people for urban renewal. I also believe that the intersection between class and race is an important issue in the Filipino urban renewal discussion. Taylor indicates that some Black neighborhoods were targeted for renewal despite having quality housing, streets, and facilities. The opposite seems to be true for Filipinos in San Francisco: poor Filipinos living in somewhat rundown residential hotels were targeted, while middle-class Filipinos in nicer neighborhoods were not.

Unfortunately, the struggle for affordable housing continues in San Francisco and many cities across the country. The story of Manilatown and Yerba Buena can teach us the importance of united communities and policies that support all people, not just the wealthy and white. Access to safe and affordable housing is an environmental justice concern, therefore more attention should be paid to these struggles. Further policy analysis is necessary in determining how to provide housing for the most vulnerable, as well as how infrastructure can support the communities who require it.

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