

“Coming Home to a Fresh Crop of Rice”

“**W**E WON’T MOVE!” thousands chanted on August 4, 1977, as police on horseback clubbed their way to the front door of the International Hotel at 848 Kearny Street.¹ The hotel was the last remnant of the ten-block Manilatown neighborhood that stretched along Kearny Street between San Francisco’s Chinatown and financial district.

After hours of attacks by police swinging batons, the “human barricade” of thousands of nonviolent demonstrators who had massed in front of the building relented. People inside the building sat on the floor, locked arms, and prepared for passive resistance. In the early-morning hours, sheriff’s deputies roused each tenant from his room, and the elderly Filipinos and Chinese were led out the door with only the clothes on their backs. Each tenant was accompanied by at least one young activist who served as caretaker and eyewitness to possible police brutality. As the frail tenants emerged from the front door, thousands who had stayed up through the night cheered in support and wept.

When the Sheriff’s Department evicted the I-Hotel tenants, it was the culmination of a conflict that had lasted almost a decade. Starting in 1968 with a core of elderly first-generation Filipino immigrants, the anti-eviction movement quickly grew to incorporate radicalized Asian American youth, particularly Filipinos. The first generation of Filipinos in San Francisco’s Manilatown planted the seeds of activism when they resisted eviction from their home and community, and their example inspired Filipino college students and other young people to become activists themselves.

I was one of those young activists, and I played a key role in the anti-eviction movement as a member of the leading Filipino radical organization at that time, the *Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino* (KDP), or Union of Democratic Filipinos. Before becoming involved in the I-Hotel struggle, I had participated

in the emerging Filipino American identity movement in Los Angeles as a founder of Search to Involve Pilipino Americans (SIPA), one of the first Filipino youth organizations formed during the upsurge of the late 1960s.² I moved to San Francisco in 1971 and became involved in the activities surrounding the International Hotel, including those that led to the formation of the KDP.

I was a member of the three-person KDP I-Hotel team that collaborated with the elderly tenants to lead the struggle, and in this book I tell the history of the anti-eviction movement as a direct participant. I was not there for the entire struggle, but I was present for much of it, and for a time I worked as the bookkeeper for the tenants' association. During the crucial period leading up to the eviction, I was a full-time cadre assigned by the KDP. There was such a swirl of events, so many activities happening simultaneously, that even when I was directly and deeply involved I could not keep track of it all. Consequently, I draw on many resources in addition to my firsthand experience to tell this story. They include expanded interviews with the two other members of the KDP I-Hotel team, Emil de Guzman and Jeanette Lazam, and interviews with other participants; newspaper clippings, official documents, letters, meeting notes, and internal memos; and many other sources.

I tell the story of the anti-eviction movement from its inception, focusing on the role of Filipinos. At the same time, the story of the International Hotel intersects with the origins of the Asian American movement and the upsurge of the New Left in the 1960s and '70s. It is also, importantly, a story of how the people of San Francisco resisted the destruction of affordable housing and the expansion of "downtown" corporate interests. I tell these stories to a certain degree, but I pay particular attention to how the International Hotel helped to shape a distinctly Filipino American consciousness.

As broad as the movement became (and as intertwined as it was with other narratives), the I-Hotel provided a distinctly Filipino experience characterized by a unique intergenerational bond. The struggle to keep the Filipino immigrants, affectionately known as the "manongs" (a Filipino term of endearment for elder brother or uncle), in their homes for almost a decade created deep ties between these impoverished pioneers and the college-age Filipino activists who came to their aid. For the youth, the I-Hotel invoked an active recovery of the past, the honoring of injured forefathers; for the elderly tenants, it meant recognition and a glimpse of the promise of American democracy that their generation had long cherished. In the course of resisting eviction, working and personal relations grew, and a family consciousness rooted in Filipino values of respect for the elderly developed.

For the young people, this sharply contrasted with the narrowly youth-oriented expressions of the mainly white antiwar and counterculture movements. There was no "generation gap" among Filipinos—at least, not between the very old and the very young (although many of the youth felt a serious rift with their own parents). The left-oriented elderly—many of whom were sea-

soned veterans of the labor movement—joined with the newly radicalized youth to create an identity through political struggle. In the process, a coherent, self-conscious narrative of Filipino experience in America took shape that had not been known before. The youth created a common history with the manongs that helped to galvanize the Filipino American community and to give the young activists a new sense of identity and purpose.

The International Hotel was also crucial for the development of the Asian American movement that had emerged during the student upheavals at the University of California (UC), Berkeley, and San Francisco State in 1968–69. Students felt compelled to “Serve the People” in their own communities, and the I-Hotel, right on the edge of Chinatown, was a magnet for Chinese as well as Filipino activists. Storefronts in the I-Hotel would eventually house offices and community projects of the Asian American left, and they, too, would face eviction. With a community arts center, a Filipino American newspaper, a radical bookstore, two Chinese community centers, and, above all, the International Hotel Tenants Association (IHTA), the hotel was the place where activists organized themselves and developed long-lasting ties to their communities.

The anti-eviction movement eventually expanded to include an extraordinarily broad range of constituencies throughout San Francisco and the Bay Area, including civil-rights activists, labor unions, religious leaders, the antiwar movement, and the growing gay community. A large segment of San Francisco’s population had strong sympathies with the need for available, affordable housing, in contrast to the needs for corporate expansion. Homelessness was not yet a massive phenomenon, but many residents of the city feared that they could be denied housing altogether, which gave the International Hotel movement a broad appeal. Eventually, saving the I-Hotel won considerable support from the mayor, city supervisors, and other major politicians. Even the sheriff went to jail rather than carry out the eviction—until he acquiesced to the courts.

Much was at stake in the I-Hotel battle: It was a fight for housing rights versus private-property rights; for a neighborhood’s existence versus extinction and dispersal; and for the extension of democratic rights to the poor and working class. It was also part of a resistance to urban policies that aimed to transform San Francisco according to the master plans of commercial and financial interests. By the start of the anti-eviction movement in 1968, “Manhattanization,” or the high-rise expansion of the financial district in downtown San Francisco, had already been under way for more than a decade.³ The focus of the transformation was the downtown area, which city planners expected to expand upward with numerous high-rise office buildings (such as the TransAmerica Pyramid, just two blocks away from the I-Hotel), and outward into adjacent neighborhoods. Manilatown had stretched along ten blocks of Kearny Street, north from Market Street to Columbus Avenue and along the eastern edge of Chinatown, and was one block west of the financial district. Consequently, the neighborhood stood in the way of “progress,” and many of the single-resident-occupancy hotels

that made the core of the community had already been demolished. Over the course of the 1950s and '60s, the neighborhood had been chipped away, except for the very last block where the International Hotel stood.

The will of the tenants backed by mass action characterized the entire movement, and the plight of a few old, once forgotten men became a constant factor in San Francisco city politics. At certain times, particularly between 1975 and 1979, the fate of the International Hotel became a major issue in the electoral arena, and the anti-eviction movement helped to shape a left-liberal coalition that successfully challenged the status quo in city politics. "The attack on the I-Hotel produced some of the most dramatic confrontations in the city's history," writes the urban historian and anti-eviction activist Chester Hartman.⁴ Historians like Hartman regard the anti-eviction movement as a significant event in San Francisco's history. When the eviction finally occurred, it had a profound effect on the city as a whole, particularly because it was linked to two other catastrophes that marked San Francisco at the end of the turbulent 1970s, each of which dealt a blow to the left-liberal upsurge.

The eviction on August 3-4, 1977, was a major setback to anti-corporate neighborhood activists who saw housing and neighborhood preservation, particularly of minority communities, as key issues in preserving the working-class, progressive character of the city. On November 18, 1978, the People's Temple mass suicide at Jonestown, Guyana, decimated an entire cohort of African American community activists, and the tragedy traumatized many progressives who had been allied with the People's Temple leader, Reverend Jim Jones. Then, only nine days later, on November 27, 1978, Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk were assassinated, eliminating two of the main personalities of the new political alliance. Moscone and Jones, who had been appointed as a housing commissioner, were both major players in the International Hotel battle.

Despite the 1977 eviction, the International Hotel movement was never entirely defeated, and it grew to legendary importance to the communities involved. For more than two decades after the demolition of the hotel in 1979, the site remained an empty hole along Kearny Street. It gaped like an open wound for Filipino Americans, a reminder of both discrimination and defiance that marked our history in the United States. But the fact that the hole was not filled with a parking lot or office building also became a positive symbol. No commercial project could be built on the site without a significant housing component because of pressure from the Filipino and Chinese communities and other city activists.⁵

Even as it stood empty, the International Hotel site remained a "hot potato" in city politics. With the destruction of Manilatown, Chinatown community groups adopted the site as their own. There had been many attempts in San Francisco's history to remove the Chinese from the valuable real estate of Chinatown's central location, and keeping the site from being absorbed into the finan-

cial district as an office building was critical for preserving the entire community.⁶ Several agencies and groups combined their efforts, and after several failed attempts, they succeeded in a plan to build on the entire block that the old I-Hotel shared.

Completed in 2005, a new International Hotel now stands on the corner of Jackson Street with the same address as the old hotel: 848 Kearny Street. After decades, the anti-eviction movement can celebrate a victory. Although the old building and its tenants are gone, the new, rebuilt International Hotel is devoted to low-income housing for the elderly and disabled.

The International Hotel Manilatown Center is located on the ground floor of the rebuilt hotel. The Manilatown Heritage Foundation (MHF) was founded in 1994 to assist in the development of the center to preserve the history of San Francisco’s Filipino community and to pay homage to the tenants who fought the battle to save the International Hotel through educational programs, exhibits, and cultural performances. The International Hotel Manilatown Center now plays a role in celebrating Filipinos as an ethnic minority in the United States. The memory of the tenants is preserved; their photographs are displayed throughout the new building; and new generations have a space to learn about and participate in their history, along with the history of the first Filipino community. The new International Hotel is a reminder of what should never have happened—a victory of profits over human rights—and of what did occur: a celebration of community power. Its presence contributes to a memory of resistance and a narrative of identity for Filipino Americans today.

The International Hotel anti-eviction movement is a significant—and living—memory in San Francisco’s history, as well. Tens of thousands of people came to the support of the tenants during the anti-eviction battle, working on media and legal committees, helping to provide nighttime security to prevent arson and other mischief, forming medical teams to aid the tenants and injured supporters, organizing countless demonstrations, and joining the human barricade around the building. Most progressive people who lived in San Francisco during the anti-eviction movement participated in one way or another, and many have vivid, poignant memories of their involvement. The International Hotel was a formative experience for many, just as the 1934 San Francisco General Strike was for an earlier generation, and the anti-eviction movement’s memory still evokes passion among its veterans.

When I began this project, I cried for a week, unable to write anything intelligible because it was such an emotional experience to remember the deep bonds with the tenants and the great pain of the eviction. At many points, I had to put the project down. Many of the elderly died during the struggle or soon after, and I had to cope with feelings of guilt and remorse. Trauma has a way of making you forget, because forgetting is one way to cope with hurtful events. But once the process of forgetting has created enough distance, it can also create the conditions for the past to be seen with new eyes. At such a

point, remembering becomes even more necessary, particularly when so little has been done to bring the story into the public arena. Rather than a history of irretrievable loss, this is now a history of redemption, a healing of an old wound, and the passing on of a legacy. Telling the International Hotel story plays a significant role in transforming a sense of defeat and humiliation into an experience of collective strength.

The new International Hotel represents many things to Chinatown, the housing movement, and San Francisco. But the Manilatown Center also makes it a way for new generations of Filipinos to remember the manongs, the vanished neighborhood in which these pioneers once lived, and the unity of Asian American communities. As the longtime International Hotel activist Al Robles writes in a poem, the new International Hotel is “like coming home to Manilatown after a fresh crop of rice.”⁷

IN CHAPTER 1, “Manilatown, Manongs, and the Student Radicals,” I relate the history of Manilatown and early Filipino immigration to the United States. I describe the life of the manongs as they faced hard labor and migrant conditions, how anti-miscegenation laws and harsh labor policies restricted their community mostly to men, and how they developed political skills as labor-union activists. Chapter 1 tells how Kearny Street became a refuge from racial violence where the manongs could survive among friends in a hostile world.

As the tenants began their first protest against eviction in 1968, Filipino and Asian American students were protesting the Vietnam War and were swept up in rebellions at San Francisco State College and at UC Berkeley, to demand that more minority students have access to higher education; that Third World studies be created to educate minorities about their histories and conditions; and that education relate to the needs to communities. Chapter 1 describes how Filipino and Asian American students reached out to the International Hotel to “serve the people” and “find our roots,” and how contact with the elders inspired the students and made them aware of the manongs’ unknown history of discrimination and resistance. The student radicals were a generation of Americanized Filipinos who had been cut off from their Filipino heritage, and they rediscovered their past and the situation back in the Philippines. As part of this awakening, the students revered the manongs as an oppressed people, and a bond across generations developed as they began to recognize the effects of racism. The tenants’ resistance to eviction and the upsurge of student radicalism converged to become a powerful force.

In Chapter 2, “A Home or a Parking Lot? Human Rights versus Property Rights, 1968–69,” I recount the initial organizing of the tenants, particularly the formation of the United Filipino Association (UFA) to represent them. Mayor Joseph Alioto presented various plans to relocate the tenants, which they rejected. A suspicious fire killed three tenants in 1969, which galvanized the ten-

ants and their student supporters. A lease was finally negotiated with the landlord, Milton Meyer and Company, preventing eviction at least until 1974.

The third chapter, “Peace with a Lease: Renewal and Revolution, 1969–74,” describes the outpouring of student support to repair the hotel after the fire. When more students gravitated to the hotel, they developed community organizations and rented the storefronts in the I-Hotel. Chapter 3 also discusses the intergenerational bonds that blossomed, as well as the gender dynamics that developed between the old bachelors and the young women, creating a unique situation. One of the storefront groups was Kalayaan International; Chapter 3 relates how this group developed into the KDP, a transnational, revolutionary organization that addressed both the democratic rights of Filipinos in America and the fight against the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines. The chapter examines the new wave of émigrés or nationals who joined Filipino Americans in constructing a new community identity. During this time, the Chinese storefront organizations were inspired by Maoist politics to become revolutionary communist organizations. As the lease drew to a close, the UFA disbanded, and the IHTA was formed.

In Chapter 4, “The Tiger Leaps: Fighting the Four Seas Investment Corporation, 1974–77,” a new landlord enters the picture: Four Seas Investment Corporation, owned by Supasit Mahaguna, a shadowy businessman from Thailand. Four Seas did not renew the lease and once again attempted to evict the tenants. Chapter 4 describes how the tenants mobilized support and entered into a series of court battles to prevent eviction. Moscone had vowed to support the I-Hotel before his mayoralty campaign, and when he was elected, he offered a plan to save the hotel in which the city’s Housing Authority would use its power of eminent domain to buy it and then sell it to the IHTA. Critics dubbed it the “buy-back plan.” Divisions erupted among the tenants and supporters over the plan, which opponents criticized as a trick to force the tenants to abandon the hotel when they could not afford the 1.3 million dollars required. Support for the plan primarily came from the IHTA’s chairman, Joe Diones, and the KDP.

In the fifth chapter, “*Makibaka!* Dare to Struggle! The IHTA and the KDP, 1977,” I recount how the tenants led the mass movement and how their political consciousness grew to take up their cause as a struggle that benefited all people. I describe the increasing isolation of Diones and the Moscone plan and the untenable position of the KDP’s I-Hotel team because of its tactical support for the plan and for the embattled and increasingly unstable Diones. After growing threats of violence from Diones, the KDP moved to oust him, and Emil de Guzman was elected as the organization’s new chairman. Despite rumors that the young activists had staged a takeover, the IHTA maintained its organizational integrity. Chapter 5 describes how the three of us on the KDP I-Hotel team worked to develop strong, respectful bonds with the tenants, despite disagreements. I also discuss the problem of the “invisibility” of Filipinos other than the

tenants. The chapter analyzes the “dual program” of the KDP and the pressure to go in conflicting directions, especially with the rise of new immigrants in different social sectors.

The sixth chapter, “People’s Power versus Propertied Elites, 1977,” paints a picture of how the broad support for the I-Hotel developed through the operation of three coalitions in conjunction (and sometimes in opposition) to each other. I analyze the fluctuations of the left-liberal alliance and how the KDP’s efforts to build ties with public officials were often undermined by ultra-leftists who rejected any relationships with politicians. City politics heated up with Propositions A and B to repeal the newly approved reform of district elections for supervisors and to recall every one of the city’s elected officials. As the courts ruled against the city’s use of eminent domain in the Moscone plan, housing consultants working for the IHTA presented a new plan that addressed the court’s complaints. By this time, however, it was too late. Moscone and other liberals had been alienated and decided to withdraw their support for the I-Hotel after the two propositions were soundly defeated on August 2. The coalition made preparations to resist eviction.

In Chapter 7, “The Fall of the I-Hotel: Eviction and Demolition, 1977–79,” I recall the intense trauma of the eviction night of August 3–4, 1977; of how supporters on the “human barricade” nonviolently resisted baton-swinging police on horseback; and of how Sheriff Richard Hongisto swung a sledgehammer to open the doors so that deputies could bring each tenant out. I describe the immediate aftermath: finding emergency shelter and then, later, housing the tenants at the Stanford Hotel. Chapter 7 recounts how the IHTA fought on, campaigning for a ballot initiative, Proposition U, to support the tenants. Finally, after unsuccessfully opposing demolition, the IHTA dissolved. Mayor Dianne Feinstein appointed the International Hotel Citizens Advisory Committee, with former tenants and Chinatown activists, and began the decades-long battle to rebuild the I-Hotel.

Finally, in the conclusion, “The Rise of the I-Hotel, 1979–2005,” I recount the protracted effort to rebuild the International Hotel and the legacy of the hotel for the Filipino American community. The chapter reprises the history of the Asian American left and the KDP and discusses how former activists have taken on leading roles in their communities. I describe the founding of the Manilatown Heritage Foundation and the opening of the International Hotel Manilatown Center as an expression of community power and an exhibition and performance space for recovering the history of the first Filipinos and to celebrate all the contributions of Filipino Americans.