The I-Hotel: Eviction, Reconstruction, and Asian American Activism

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Introduction

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the reopening of the I-Hotel, located on the edge of San Francisco's Chinatown. The original building, likely constructed in the 1890s, was rebuilt in 1907 after the 1906 earthquake.[1] [2] After reconstruction, the area grew into a hub for Filipino immigrants, reaching about 10,000 residents by the 1920s. Many worked as seasonal seamen, Alaskan cannery workers, and busboys throughout Chinatown.[3] The Filipino community expanded further after World War II, as Filipino veterans were granted United States citizenship and settled near San Francisco. By the 1960s, many tenants paid roughly $50 per month, as noted in community reports from the hotel's later residential phase.[4] As the financial district grew, low-income tenants faced rising rents and mounting eviction pressures. After the Milton Meyer Company purchased the hotel in 1968, it attempted to remove residents, but many tenants resisted.[5]

This essay examines the resistance, the eviction, and the decades-long struggle for the I-Hotel's reconstruction. The images used in this essay are drawn primarily from the *San Francisco Journal* (1976–1980), which operated with an all-volunteer staff and focused on Asian American community issues, highlighting the community's struggles and progress that were often overlooked by mainstream media. Russ Lowe, co-founder of the *Journal*, and his *San Francisco Journal* staff took all the images included here.

Background of the I-Hotel Eviction and Reconstruction

The Milton Meyer Company's persistent attempts to evict long-term tenants set the stage for a dramatic confrontation in 1977. On the night of August 3, 1977, tenants, supporters, and community activists mobilized to resist eviction, culminating in a pivotal moment that would define the I-Hotel's legacy and galvanize Asian American-led housing activism.

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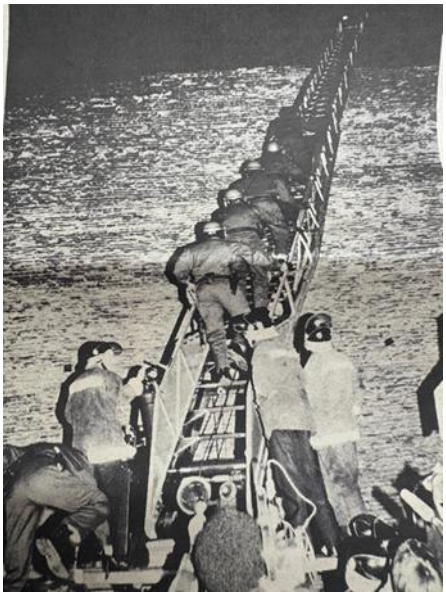
[1] NoeHill, "National Register #77000333: International Hotel, San Francisco, California," *NoeHill in San Francisco*.
[2] Randall Yip, "A Review of Hotel's History," *The San Francisco Journal*, Aug. 10, 1977.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Larry Solomon, "No Evictions. We Won't Move!," *ShelterForce*, September 1, 1999.
[5] Randall Yip, "A Review of Hotel's History," *The San Francisco Journal*, Aug. 10, 1977.



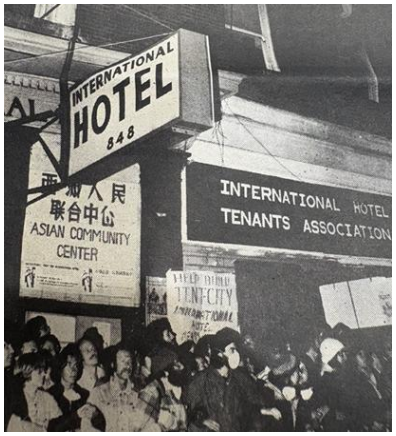
"*Journal* staff covered the International Hotel eviction from the following vantage points: Eddie Foronda, Doug Chan, Paul Chun, and Katheryn Fong were within the police barricade on Kearny Street. Russel Lowe and Virginia Jew were stationed on a fire escape directly across the street from the hotel. Rita Yee, Diana Hong and Bosco Lee were with the crowd of supporters outside of the police barricade between Jackson and Columbus." *The San Francisco Journal*, Aug. 10, 1977

Image 1[6]

Image 2[7]

At 11 p.m. on August 3, supporters gathered outside the hotel, marching and chanting, "We shall not be moved." Police presence included approximately 250 officers and 50 sheriff's deputies (see images 1 and 2), but the crowd continued to grow, reaching around 2,000 by 1:30 in the morning of August 4. Human barricades were formed around the building, and residents vocally opposed eviction (see images 3 and 4). The police attempted to remove occupants by positioning ladders from the adjacent Victoria building, but protesters resisted. After a prolonged confrontation, the final group of tenants was forcibly removed in the early morning hours (see images 5 and 6). Many residents were forced to leave their belongings behind, uncertain if or when they could return.

[6] *The San Francisco Journal*, Aug. 10, 1977.
[7] Ibid.



"The human barricade waits for the tar squad to arrive. Some veterans carried masks for protection against tear gas." *The San Francisco Journal*, Aug. 10, 1977

Image 3[8]

Image 4[9]

Image 5[10]

Image 6[11]

Following the eviction, the building remained empty and was demolished in 1979.[12] For 22 years, the site lay vacant despite several redevelopment attempts. In 2004, construction on a new I-Hotel finally began, and after a ribbon-cutting ceremony on August 26, 2005, new tenants began moving in by 2006, including five former residents of the original building. The reconstruction was led by the Chinatown Community

[8] *The San Francisco Journal*, Aug. 10, 1977.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Harvey Dong, *International Hotel's Final Victory*, International Hotel Senior Housing, Inc., 2010.

Development Center (in partnership with Kearny Street Housing Corporation)[13] and was funded through a combination of U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) grants and loans from the San Francisco Mayor's Office of Housing.[14]

Significance of the I-Hotel

The significance of the I-Hotel's history lies in three key areas: its impact on advancing equitable urban redevelopment, its role in strengthening housing rights for marginalized residents, and its legacy of galvanizing Asian American-led activism. This activism not only organized collective resistance but also shaped city policy and preserved vital cultural and social networks.

Advancing Equitable Urban Development

The case of the I-Hotel illustrates the broader dynamics of urban redevelopment and its consequences for marginalized communities. Although the 1977 eviction complied with a San Francisco Superior Court ruling granting the property owner legal authority to demolish the building, it exposed the limits of purely legal approaches to redevelopment. The forced relocation of elderly, low-income tenants without viable alternatives reveals how redevelopment can come at the expense of human welfare, raising ongoing questions about who is ultimately served by urban development.

Strengthening Housing Rights

The I-Hotel eviction underscores the vulnerability of low-income residents who lack the resources to assert their housing rights amid the pressures of gentrification. The right to shelter is a fundamental human right, integral to personal security and well-being. The sudden removal of tenants—many of whom lost their homes and community ties overnight—illustrates how redevelopment can violate basic human needs even when deemed lawful. Similar tensions appear in other U.S. contexts, such as the Kōloa plantation camps on Kauaʻi, where descendants of seasonal and immigrant agricultural workers successfully resisted displacement. In that case, community advocacy and the adoption of a form-based zoning code coalesced, leading to the rehabilitation or construction of affordable units rather than displacement. This demonstrates how negotiated, community-centered solutions can protect both residents and local heritage.

Galvanizing Asian American–Led Community Activism

The struggle surrounding the I-Hotel became a defining moment in Asian American activism. Community organizations—most notably the International Hotel Citizens Advisory Committee (IHCAC)—mobilized coalitions, sustained public attention to the eviction, and ultimately helped lay the groundwork for the building's reconstruction. Today, the rebuilt I-Hotel stands as a testament to collective resilience and the ongoing fight for housing justice.

More broadly, Asian American activism during the 1970s and ’80s—including the 1973 wrongful incarceration of Chol Soo Lee in San Francisco and the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin in Detroit—demonstrates how communities can organize to confront systemic injustice. Chinese American communities in San Francisco and New York Chinatowns also mobilized against displacement caused by urban renewal and gentrification, led by organizations such as the Chinese Progressive Association.

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[13] International Hotel Senior Housing, Inc., "Organization and Governance," *The I-Hotel – San Francisco*.

[14] International Hotel Citizens Advisory Committee, *History of the International Hotel Citizens Advisory Committee (IHCAC),* University of California, Berkeley Library Digital Collections.

These campaigns successfully pressured local governments to implement tenant protections and preserve affordable housing. Together, these cases illustrate how Asian American communities—like their Filipino counterparts in the I-Hotel struggle—effectively used collective organizing and legal advocacy to defend vulnerable residents, assert civil rights, and maintain community stability.

These movements also helped catalyze the growth of Asian American Studies within the broader framework of Ethnic Studies. In Fall 1969, San Francisco State University became the first university in the nation to establish a College of Ethnic Studies, an achievement that emerged directly from the 1968 student strike led by the Third World Liberation Front at San Francisco State. A parallel Third World Liberation Front was formed at the University of California, Berkeley, in January 1969, further strengthening the movement for inclusive and transformative education. Built through a coalition of faculty, students, and community members, the College of Ethnic Studies aimed to center the histories, struggles, and contributions of communities of color. Since its establishment, it has played a crucial role in making Asian American histories visible, challenging the "model minority" myth, and affirming the distinct identities, legacies, and experiences of diverse Asian American communities.

Conclusion

The history of the I-Hotel shows that urban redevelopment is not merely a legal or economic matter—it intersects with housing rights, social justice, and community agency. The eviction, resistance, and eventual reconstruction of the I-Hotel demonstrate how Asian American communities harnessed collective power to defend homes, preserve culture, and shape equitable urban policy, including in education. Today, the I-Hotel stands as a lasting symbol of resilience, solidarity, and Asian American activism. Its story highlights the importance of advocacy, collective action, and negotiation in protecting vulnerable populations and reminds us that ensuring development projects respect human rights remains an ongoing challenge worldwide.

References

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The San Francisco Journal. August 10, 1977.