



The Mission District – A History of Resistance

for the Mission Anti-Displacement Coalition

Draft: Fernando Marti, December 2006

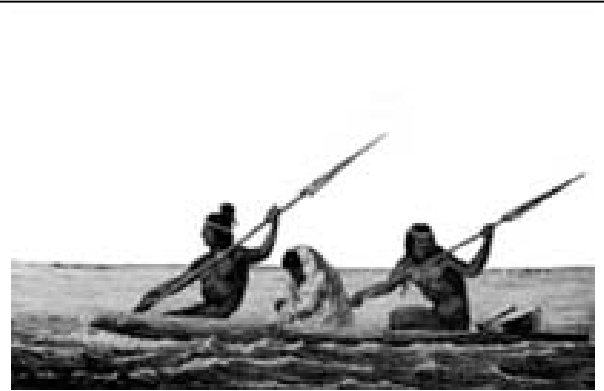
AsianNeighborhoodDesign

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Aquí Estamos y No Nos Vamos! 230 Years of Resistencia en la Misión

The First Displacements

The first recorded eviction in what is now called the Mission District occurred in 1776. The Spanish arrival forced the *Oblone*, who had lived in the region for at least 5,000 years, to flee across the Bay. Those who remained were forced into labor on the new Mission Dolores. The first Mission “anti-displacement movement” occurred soon after, with an Indian uprising on Mission lands that same year. Within thirty years, most wildlife was gone, and the freshwater streams had been contaminated by animal and human waste. The *Oblone* were gradually decimated by disease, famine, and exhaustion. After Mexico’s Independence in 1821, those who survived became serfs on the new *ranchos*. By 1832, the *Oblone* population had been reduced from a high of over 10,000 in 1770 to less than 2,000. In the Mission itself, records from 1833 and 1841 indicate that the Native American population decreased from 400 to only 50.



Depictions of the indigenous *Oblone* by the colonizers

A Neighborhood of Immigrants and Working Class Families

This first wave of gentrifiers were, in due time, displaced themselves. “Manifest Destiny” and the 1849 Gold Rush conspired to bring the first Yankee gold-diggers to the Mission. After the Mexican-American War and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, the new U.S. government that took control of San Francisco from Mexico passed laws allowing Anglo squatters to take possession of the Mexican land-grant *ranchos* in the Mission. The many landholders led to the Mission’s architectural variety, as compared to the housing types built later in the Western neighborhoods by large-scale housing tract developers. Through the late 19th Century, the newcomers created the first “bohemian” Mission, bringing with them saloons, gambling dens, and *fandango* halls. Some mansions for the rich began to be built along Howard Street (now South Van Ness), but for the most part the rich preferred to live in hills with views of the bay, leaving the low, flat, and sunny Mission District to the workers.

In 1906 the Mission became a receiving ground for the homeless displaced by the great earthquake and fire, living in tents and shacks in Dolores Park. Fancy Victorian houses were subdivided into flats, and apartment buildings and “single-room occupancy” hotels, typically on corner lots, were built in the North Mission to house the refugees from ravaged areas. Italians arrived from North Beach, and Irish, immigrants and children of those who came fleeing the Potato Famine, as well as Germans and Scandinavians, arrived from South of Market. These new arrivals firmly established the Mission as a working class immigrant

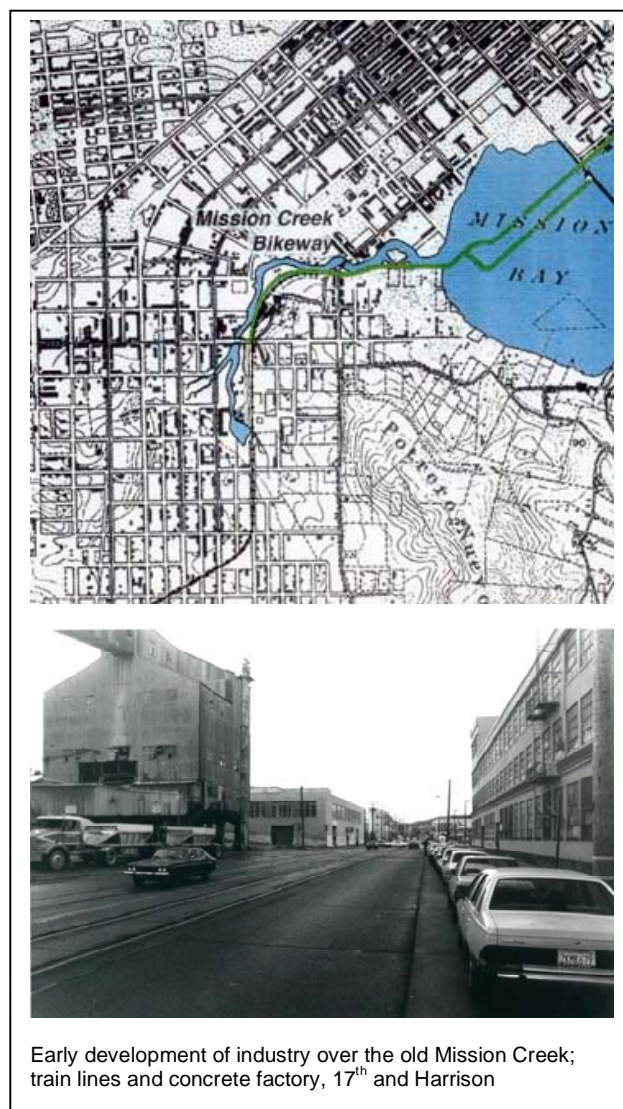
neighborhood. The neighborhood is typical of many United States working class neighborhoods that developed adjacent to the burgeoning industrial districts. By 1910 the Mission District's population was 50,000, roughly what it is today; one in three residents was foreign-born. Locals even developed their own distinct "Mission accent," somewhat like a Brooklyn accent. A network of streetcars throughout the commercial corridors and industrial areas took people to and from work. Mission Street, "the Miracle Mile," became a shopping destination, filled with theaters, and the neighborhood even had its own minor league baseball team, the "Mission Reds." The first public housing projects in the Mission, Valencia Gardens, were built over the site of their old stadium in 1943.

The Industrial Mission

From its early days, the Mission was a district of industrial workers.¹ The first industrial activity in the Mission began in the mid-19th Century around the Center Street wharf on Mission Creek, on what is now the corner of 16th and Treat, and down the newly paved Folsom Street along the west bank of the Creek. A new railroad built in 1860, linking San Francisco and San Jose along the Bernal Gap (now known as San Jose Avenue) and up along Harrison Street on the eastern bank of Mission Creek, brought a proliferation of new industries: tanneries, textile mills, foundries, breweries, and warehouses. The disruption of imports due to the Civil War was the engine for the development of San Francisco's industrial base. The Creek was filled in the 1870s to make more land available for development. By 1890 the streets and land-use patterns that exist today had basically been built up, and the northeast Mission (today designated by city planners as the "NEMIZ") continues even now as a vibrant industrial area.

The Gold Rush had created the first strong ties with Central and South America, with Pacific Steamer ships making regular voyages to the overland connections in Nicaragua and Panama, and with the arrival of Chilean miners. American mercenary William Walker launched his adventure to take over Nicaragua in 1855 from San Francisco. When coffee became a cash crop in Central America in the late 1800s, San Francisco became the chief processing center, with Folgers, Hills Brothers, and MJB all locating here. By 1890 San Francisco was the third most important sailing port in the world.

However, it was the construction of the Panama Canal in the early 20th Century that brought the first mass immigration from Central America. Many Mexicans fled north in 1910 to escape the turmoil of the Mexican revolution, and settled in San Francisco. Latin American men in San Francisco in the 30s worked as laborers near the waterfront, at coffee companies, canneries, agricultural refineries and industrial plants, as well as the infamous United Fruit Company, which operated a dock on China Basin. Women worked at cigarette packing plants in South of Market, or in garment shops such as Levi's at Valencia and 14th. The major Latino neighborhoods in San Francisco were in North Beach and near Rincon Hill.



Early development of industry over the old Mission Creek; train lines and concrete factory, 17th and Harrison

¹ Peter Cohen's UC Berkeley master's thesis has a wealth of information on the NEMIZ.

The Mission has a long tradition of working-class militancy. At the height of the Spanish-American war, Emma Goldman came to the Mission on one of her many speaking tours, rallying the working class against the war. The Labor Temple (now the Redstone Building on 16th and Capp), built in 1914, was one of the headquarters of the 1934 General Strike that shut the City down for days, and ultimately led to the establishment of Social Security and the 8-hour workday. World War II created another wave of industrial growth, with U.S. Steel employing hundreds at its sheet metal and wire rope plant at 16th and Harrison in what is now the enormous “Muni Barn.” The NEMIZ continued to grow as an important industrial center into the 50s, with warehousing, metalworks, woodworking, food processing, breweries, textiles, construction contractors and building supplies as major industries. In the 60s, food processing, apparel, auto repair, and printing gained in prominence.

With the global restructuring of capital markets, the 1970s to the early 90s saw the gradual closure of many of the larger industrial plants in the NEMIZ, with the Koret clothing company, which once employed 700 people, closing in 1990, Best Foods mayonnaise factory, which by 1990 still employed 145 people, finally moving to Guatemala, and the Lilli Ann clothing company, which had employed 360 people, closing in 1995. But these plant closures did not mean a loss of manufacturing jobs: from 1970 to 1990 the citywide proportion of manufacturing remained constant at 9% of total jobs. Many new industries were moving in, including printers, photography studios, small garment makers, catering services, auto repair shops, building contractors, arts production, scene shops, bakeries and confectioners, such as Joseph Schmidt, which brought 100 jobs to the NEMIZ, and “niche manufacturers,” such as custom messenger bag makers Timbuk 2. Service businesses, like auto-repair shops, increased from 13 in 1970 to 98 in 1988.

In the 80s, areas such as the 14th Street and South Van Ness node in the NEMIZ became known as the “trans-Mission,” due to the many body shops, brake shops, and other auto services. A 1991 study showed that 70% of the jobs in the NEMIZ were held by San Francisco residents. These industrial businesses were attracted to the NEMIZ for its proximity to downtown markets, access to freeways, and relative affordability. In the early 90s, local activists fought off a downtown plan to rezone the area for a UCSF biotech campus and related “biotech” industries (now located in Mission Bay), and created a relatively weak “Industrial Protection Overlay Zone” to promote local businesses in the area.

The first “real” artists’ live-work showed up in 1972, with Project Artaud at the former American Can Company, and Developing Environments at the former Haslett Warehouse Company. The labor tradition carried on into the 80s and 90s, with struggles at various garment factories such as Levi’s and Lilli Ann, now closed. And many of the workers involved in today’s labor struggles in the grocery, hotel and janitors sectors live in the Mission.



Labor murals at the Labor Temple (now the Redstone Building), 16th and Capp

Resistance in the Barrio

The first wave of Latinos began arriving in the Mission during World War II, “recapturing” their old turf.² Many came from the Rincon Hill area, pushed out by the Bay Bridge construction in the 1930s. Others came from the old Latino neighborhood that had grown up around our Lady of Guadalupe Church in North Beach, pushed out by rising rents, in the same way that many are being pushed out of the Mission today. Other Chicanos, the children of *bracero* laborers brought in by Federal programs to fill worker shortage during World War II, moved in from the fields of the Southwest and Central California.³ Many came from Nicaragua and El Salvador, fleeing repression from the dictatorships in their countries. Due to its historic ties to Central America, San Francisco soon became the city with the highest Central American population in the U.S. *Puertorriqueños*, *Cubanos*, *Peruanos*, *Chilenos*, and other Latin Americans soon followed, as well as Native Americans, Filipinos, Samoans, and Arabs.

The North Mission, around 16th Street, was the first place of arrival, and over time Latinos settled throughout the Mission District. The first Spanish language Church in the Mission was *El Buen Pastor* at 16th and Guerrero, soon followed by other Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical churches, and *Santería botánicas*. Mission Street and 24th Street became the main commercial and cultural centers for the Latino community throughout San Francisco and nearby suburbs.

Many Latinos became radicalized in the 60s through the influence of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, the work of CASA in the Southwest, the land rights movement and courthouse raid led by Reies Tijerina in Tierra Amarilla in New Mexico, and Corky Gonzales’ “Yo Soy Joaquin.” The ferment soon took the shape of the Third World Strike at San Francisco State, one of the most important campus movements in the 60s.⁴ Leftists of various stripes organized out of the Mission,⁵ with the Communist Party buying a building at 16th and Valencia (though no longer a part of the CP, 522 Valencia is still an important center for political education). China Books on 24th Street (recently converted into condominiums) was the place to go to for books and information on Maoism. The legal defense for the Third World Strike evolved to become the legal defense for the Native American Alcatraz takeover in 1973.



Produce stores on Mission Street, and Cesar Chavez mural on 24th Street

² A good account of the transformations of the Mission into the 70s can be found in Godfrey’s *Neighborhoods in Transition*.

³ Juan Felipe Herrera’s *Downtown Boy* gives a wonderful feel of what it was like to grow up in the Mission in the 50s.

⁴ *Monthly Review*’s July-August 2002 Issue has a review of Latino Leftist movements in the 70s.

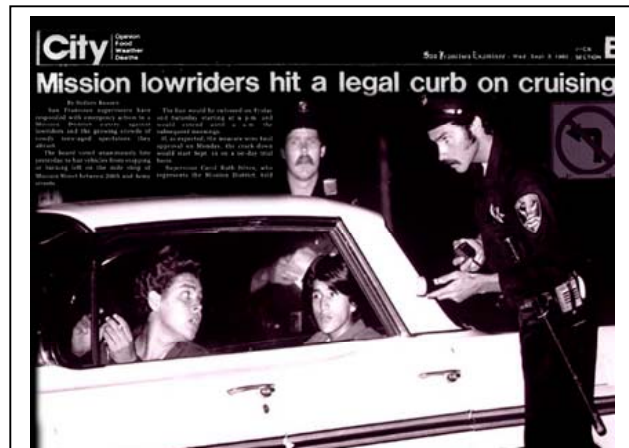
⁵ John Ross’s story of the Mission Tenants Union in *Murdered by Capitalism* is a great Mission episode of radical activism.

The most important of the radical moments in the Mission was the case of *Los Siete de la Raza*, seven local youth accused of killing a police officer. *El Comité para Liberar a los Siete de la Raza*, inspired by the Black Panthers, preached self-determination, and formed free food programs and free health clinics in the neighborhood.⁶

A distinct Mission *cultura* developed, with the Mission's developing tradition of murals and especially the *Mujeres Muralistas* on Balmy Alley,⁷ the Mission sounds of Santana and other pioneers of Latin rock, writers such as Oscar Zeta Acosta and Alejandro Murguía, the exploration of our indigenous roots, *danzantes* and the smell of burning copal, *Galería de la Raza*, the Mission Cultural Center, the Mexican Museum (originally at 14th & Folsom), celebrations for *Cinco de Mayo*, *Carnaval*, *el Chasqui*, *Día de los Muertos*, and the feast of *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. *Cultura* can be a dangerous: in 1977, John Santos was arrested for playing congas in Dolores Park, an illegal activity at the time.

Throughout the 70s, battles raged against the gentrifiers, with gangs chasing Anglos out of local *taquerías*, and activists stopping a bar that they thought would have attracted an upper income crowd from opening on 24th Street. But for many, it was the parades of low-riders that scared the whites from moving any further east and made Mission Street the line that stopped gentrification in the 70s. Eventually, Anglo homeowners, the Mission Merchants Association, and police harassment forced the low-riders to leave. They are now confined to car shows at the Cow Palace or the occasional parade through the Mission, as in the memorial for Leo of Leo's Auto Body on 14th Street a few years ago; the only signs of this vibrant past are the street signs still found on Mission Street that say "No Stopping," 10 pm to 2 am.

Developing our own *cultura* has been not only an act of affirmation, but also an act of resistance. Fights over the expression of local culture continued into the 90s, for example, the fight over renaming Army Street to Cesar Chavez. Immigration from Central America continued strong through the 1970s, with *Nicaraguenses*, *Salvadoreños*, and *Guatemaltecos* fleeing political strife. The Mission Cultural Center was inaugurated in 1976 with a popular mass presided by Father Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua. The Mission became a focus for Central America solidarity, with nightly candlelight vigils at Sandino Plaza, the local name given to the 24th Street BART Station, through the Sandinista victory in 1979.⁸ Solidarity was not just with words, but with printing services, weapons, and even fighters that went from the



Low-riders on Mission Street, 1970s, above, and El Salvador solidarity mural by muralist Juana Alicia. Mission and 20th

⁶ The best account of *Los Siete* is in Marjorie Heins' *Strictly Ghetto Property*. The San Francisco Library's archives also have a comprehensive set of *Basta Ya!*, the newspaper of the *Los Siete* collective. Iggy Scam's 'zine on Hunts Donuts is a great retelling of the story.

⁷ Timothy Drescher's book on *San Francisco Bay Area Murals* has a good chapter on the politics of the Mission murals. More information can be found through Precita Eyes Mural Center.

⁸ Alejandro Murguía tells the story of the Mission activist's support for the Sandinistas in *Medicine of Memory*.

Mission (training for combat on Bernal Hill) to fight in the revolutions in Central America. This solidarity movement evolved into a view of the Mission as a “safe” place for immigrants and refugees, with the Sanctuary movement of the 80s to protect political refugees, and non-cooperation agreements instructing local police not to cooperate with the INS.

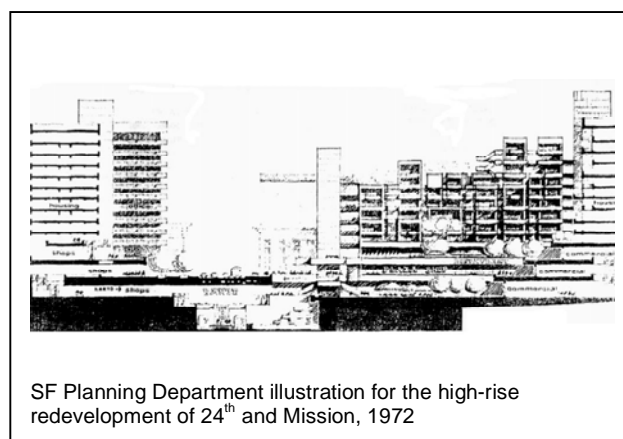
Resisting the State: Redevelopment and Urban Renewal

At the same time that the Mission began developing its own vibrant culture from this new wave of immigration of Latinos, it also began to feel the effects of Capital’s attack on the inner cities. In a process repeated throughout American cities in the 1940s and 50s, the attack was carried out both by large-scale government interventions, and the more subtle interventions of finance and “the market.”

In the 1940s, banks and the Federal Home Loan Authority helped returning WWII vets to buy homes in the Western neighborhoods and in suburbs, but denied these benefits to people of color through bank underwriting guidelines set by the government, as well as racial covenants that restricted who could buy homes. Bank policies of “redlining,” marking out neighborhoods they would not lend to, kept Latinos and other people of color from building up wealth or being able to keep their homes in good conditions. Capital’s flight to the suburbs throughout the 50s and 60s created areas of poverty that would eventually become ripe for new investment and new cycles of growth.

The Bay Area Council in the 1940s mapped out its strategy to remake San Francisco as a world financial capital, moving its industries to the East Bay and establishing a high-tech center in the South Bay, to be connected by the future BART system. Levels of city investment between the neighborhoods of people of color and those of whites were markedly different. In the Mission this was felt as a loss of access to jobs and education, and the resulting jobless youth in the streets, termed by the police “gangs.” Starting in the 70s, Mission residents, especially youth and families, were affected by the increase in gang violence, drug use, and waves of police brutality that targeted youth, immigrants, and other people of color.

Redevelopment was the most visible tool of Capital’s assault on the working class. In this process, cities would declare certain areas “blighted,” and would target them for destruction, buying up properties by eminent domain, and “redeveloping” them into new neighborhoods. In San Francisco, this meant targeting working class strongholds: the South of Market bastion of unionized longshoremen (the veterans of the ’34 Strike) as well as elderly Filipinos, the Black neighborhood of the Fillmore, and the Latino neighborhood of the Mission.⁹ In the late 60s the San Francisco Planning Department proposed high-density towers at 16th and 24th Street to go with the



SF Planning Department illustration for the high-rise redevelopment of 24th and Mission, 1972

new BART stations being built, which would have razed many blocks and hundreds of apartments. Fearing a repeat of the Fillmore’s urban renewal, which displaced over 4,000 families, the Mission community mobilized a united front to stop urban renewal, which included everyone from the Brown Berets to the remaining white homeowners. From this victory, local activists went on to form the Mission Coalition Organization, to access and control Federal funds from the Model Cities Program created by Lyndon Johnson, which included over 100 organizations, including churches, unions, and nonprofits.¹⁰ From the beginning, however, the group was deeply divided. In the first convention, the more radical groups in the Mission, including the Mission Tenants Union, the Mission Rebels, and the *La Raza* party, ended up walking out. In 1973 Richard Nixon cut off Federal funding to the Model Cities program, and the MCO disintegrated in infighting. Nonetheless, it managed to create a network of social service agencies that are still around,

⁹ Chester Hartman analyzes this process in *City for Sale*.

¹⁰ A critical account of the MCO’s successes and failures can be found in Castells’ *The City and the Grassroots*.

including Mission Housing, Mission Hiring Hall, and the Mission Neighborhood Health Center. From one of its splits, *La Raza en Acción Local* was formed in 1970, which unlike the MCO tried to combine Latino culture with community organizing and service programs. They went on to create the many *Raza* organizations in the Mission, including *Centro de Información de la Raza*, *La Raza Centro Legal*, and the *La Raza Silkscreen Center*.

Resisting Gentrification

While the struggle against “urban renewal” had a clear target, the struggle against gentrification, the incremental displacement of a local population by those with more money, was much more difficult to pin down. The Mission developed over these decades not only as a Latino neighborhood, but as a true bohemia, a relatively affordable place where the working-class, immigrants, artists, punk-rockers, and gays and lesbians could find a home.

Local activists again mobilized in 1975 to keep residential areas from being rezoned to commercial, fearing displacement of local residents. As the MCO and others began to “improve” the neighborhood, the first white “urban pioneers” began to colonize the western Mission from Noe Valley, Liberty Hill, and the Castro. While the rent control ordinance of 1979 put some breaks on rising rents, much of the Mission still suffers from overcrowding and deteriorated conditions.

The worst symptom of this has been the repeated rash of residential hotel fires. The arson fire at the Gartland Hotel, on 16th and Valencia, which killed 14 people in the winter of 1975, galvanized a generation of housing activists in the Mission, who turned the “Gartland Pit” into an open air arts and performance space, and held protests demanding affordable housing.

The cycle of disinvestments and reinvestment had come full circle by the late 90s, as Capital returned and shook the Mission like an earthquake.¹¹ California's high-tech boom, centered in the Silicon Valley, attracted not only venture capital, but a wave of upscale young workers associated with the dot-coms. Real estate agents hungry for new markets sold the neighborhood's relative affordability, proximity to downtown, hip nightlife, and its “culture” as a selling point. Rents and the rate of “owner move-in” evictions skyrocketed, and, mysteriously, so did the fires in residential hotels. High-end restaurants and clubs began to price out the local businesses, artist spaces and non-profits. The entire feel of the Mission at night changed with the arrival of hipsters, nightclubs, and valet parking. Dot-com offices began moving into the NEMIZ and displacing industrial businesses, calling themselves “business-service industry” to get around a ban on office buildings in industrial areas. One of the most visible of these projects was Bryant Square, which evicted a number of small industries, including a furniture manufacturer, a sweater factory employing 30 mostly Asian and Latino men from the Mission, and some 50 artists, photographers and videographers in an artists' warehouse. Even where dot-coms did not directly displace businesses, the rising rents effectively did the same, as traditional industries, like garment shops, had to find new space, or move out of the city. Many eventually went out of business.

The Mission's people and culture was slowly being eroded and in some cases, literally erased, as with the famous Chuy Campusano mural that once graced the Lilly Ann factory building, whitewashed to make way for a dot-com advertisement. In 1999-2000 the Mission had the highest eviction rate in the city, with over 600 recorded Ellis Act evictions in one year – this was not counting the many other kinds of evictions that go unrecorded.



The Gartland Hotel at 16th and Valencia

¹¹ The effects of the dot com boom in San Francisco are documented in Solnit and Schwartzberg's *Hollow City*.

A new building type began appearing as well, the live-work lofts, taking advantage of loopholes in a 1988 law created to help create places in industrial areas for struggling artists to live and work in. These buildings were exempt from ADA accessibility requirements, setback requirements, affordable housing requirements, or school and childcare fees. According to a 2000 report, it is estimated that these illegal residential developments cost the city more than \$22.6 million in lost housing and childcare fees. They were built of relatively cheap materials by the non-union builders represented by the RBA, the “Residential Builders Association.” By 2000 the RBA had built over 600 units of these loft boxes in the Mission. Beginning price in 1999: the low \$600,000s. These new upscale “urban pioneers” compete with the funky mixed-use nature of the industrial district. In one case, the new loft dwellers forced a local vocational training center for Latino immigrants to close down its Friday-night fundraising dances, citing it as a nuisance. This new construction boom, combined with land speculation, caused a massive upheaval in land prices. For affordable housing developers, this meant that it had become almost impossible to compete with private speculators for land on which to build critically needed housing for the community.

In the 1990s, a series of anti-immigrant initiatives were introduced, including Proposition 187, which would deny benefits to immigrants and their children. The Mission was at the heart of the statewide organizing against these initiatives. Today, in the post-9-11 world of “Homeland Security,” the idea of San Francisco as a “Sanctuary City” is being rapidly eroding, as ICE conducts sweeps of immigrants through the neighborhood.

It was in the context of all this upheaval that the Mission’s latest anti-displacement movement was born. While Latino families struggled to make ends meet, local artists organized a Coalition for Jobs, Arts, and Housing calling attention to the changes in the NEMIZ, and activists plastered the Mission with “Yuppie Eradication” posters, complete with a page from a CIA manual in Spanish from the Contra War in Nicaragua, describing how to disable the vehicles of the enemy. The Mission Anti-Displacement Coalition (MAC) came together in 2000 at the height of the dot-com boom, bringing together Mission residents, Latino, immigrants, day laborers, nonprofits, business owners, artist and activists.¹² As the Third World students, the MCO, and the Los Siete Collective had done in the early 70s, MAC led a number of protests from the Mission to City Hall, shut down the Planning Commission, invaded dot-com offices and held sit-ins at the Planning Department. From street actions to mass Monday night meetings to the ubiquitous posters created by the SF Print Collective, MAC created a sense in the community that we weren’t going without a fight: “*Aquí estamos y no nos vamos!*”

By 2002 the economic bubble had clearly burst, and rents stopped rising at such a fast pace, but they did not come back down to their affordable levels either. Nor has the weight of Capital, in this world financial center, lessened, as the high-rise condos and threats of bio-tech keep coming in. From fighting individual projects, the organizations that made up



Live-work loft at Harrison and 20th, and the community's response

¹² More on MAC can be found in the San Francisco Bay Guardian and in *Shades of Power*, in various essays by Tom Wetzel on www.uncanny.net, in the movie *Boom! The Sound of Eviction*, and on the web sites for PODER, MEDA, and St. Peter’s Housing Committee.

MAC realized clearly that the struggle for place was about who made the decisions about land uses in the neighborhood: who benefited from “development” and who lost out.

MAC’s current organizing revolves around the implementation of “*El Plan Popular: the People’s Plan for Jobs, Housing and Community*” as the embodiment, in planning terms, of their vision for the neighborhood, where development does not equal displacement. The campaigns that have grown out of the People’s Plan have included, for example, fighting to save a local flower shop and a local restaurant, fighting the evictions of residents on Shotwell Street and Woodward Street, getting the Planning Commission to support additional affordable units from market-rate developers at Bryant Square and at 15th and Mission, and working with the Day Laborer program to acquire a site for affordable housing and a day laborer center at Mission and Cesar Chavez. But the challenge remains, of how to confront the state and the developers in order to ensure that there is still a place the Mission’s residents, while trying engage more of the base in determining their own future. As in the first displacements of 230 years ago, the struggle continues to be about land, and about people’s right to live in their own communities.



Danzantes Aztecas lead a MAC “*Caminata*” against gentrification of the Barrio

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