

# Defenestration: under-the-radar artistic jewel

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film this," Cordovani says.

"It's eccentric," says Chris Cosser, a young woman from Spring Branch, Texas, sporting a backpack, who crossed the intersection moments later. "It's far-fetched,



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

**A couch** looks to be preparing [for takeoff] at the Defenestration art project at the closed Hugo Hotel.

near-fetched, any kind of fetched—it's out there. One of the most interesting places in the city, I'd say. I am staying at the women's shelter near here and I see it about every day."

Joe Moyzis, recently here from Chicago, passes it daily, too. "I wonder if that furniture is properly secured," he says. "But it's inspiring—San Francisco has always had a commitment to the arts. It cheers the neighborhood up. It's a positive slant."

The art work is earning a measure of international fame. Defenestration is now a regular highlight of some Gray Line Tours (the drivers design their own tours), and Gray Line estimates that from 500 to 1,000 of their tourists see it monthly.

"What I like to see," says Phil McKnight, "is the faces of people when they first see it. They stand there in disbelief. They drive by and look up and then nudge the driver. Some stop and hold up traffic taking pictures. Some stand up through sun roofs to take pictures as they drive by.

"Buses disgorge big groups of Japanese tourists and they all take pictures. And the people from the Midwest always say 'only in San Francisco.'"

McKnight has been a grocery store owner (Maikins) on Sixth Street for 35 years.

The last 17 have been on the northeast corner, the best camera angle to catch both sides of Defenestration.

The 150-unit Hugo Hotel was boarded up in 1977, McKnight says, although a report from the Central City SRO Collaborative has the building being closed in 1987 by fire. Ownership has changed hands several times since. The Patel family appears to have owned it at least since 1991. I.M. Patel and Sumatai Patel owned it in 1997 when the Defenestration art project went up, and the next year ownership was transferred to Branch Limited Partnership, of Hillsborough, consisting of Shantaben and Ichharambhai Patel. The latest assessor's office valuation of the building was \$400,589, a figure, experts say, is extremely low, even if the building itself is worthless, which it probably is.

The building has been for sale for years, though the Redevelopment Agency has been unsuccessful in its attempts to buy it. An amendment to Redevelopment's South of Market plan is in the works to expand its influence (and eminent domain as a last resort) to all blighted areas in the neighborhood. The agency's plan, created in 1990, was prompted by structural damage to buildings caused by the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989.

"We have worked closely with the neighborhood on this," says Bill Carney, Redevelopment project engineer for South of Market. "If it (the amendment) passes, we would encourage owners to develop. There would be a limited range of properties that could be acquired by eminent domain, and it would be a last resort. It would be those unwilling to redevelop. The Hugo Hotel is an example of a blighted structure. We'd like to see it productive."

The amendment must be passed by the Redevelopment and Planning commissions before going to the Board of Supervisors for a vote.

McKnight says he remembers squatters inhabiting the hotel before Goggin's project went up. "I never thought the stuff on the walls would stay," he says. "I thought it would be vandalized. But it didn't happen. That stuff is really secured up there."

Indeed, the art work has been a crime deterrent.

"There used to be small fires there and police cars came in to route (squatters) out," says Sheila Jariwala, owner of the Orlando Hotel building on the southeast corner. "It has been made into a tourist spot instead of just a boarded-up building."

McKnight recalls the grand opening in March 1997. The madcap "furniturama" had been created by Goggin and his friends and volunteers from the neighborhood with grants from the city Grants for the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The consortium of funders put up \$65,000 for a series of 15 or 16 art projects, says Susan Miller, executive director of New Langton Arts, fiscal sponsor of the projects.

Defenestration, as part of that package, could have cost "as little as" \$5,000, Miller estimates. The intersection was blocked off for a Felliniesque happening, a gala opening made merry on the surrounding sidewalks and streets by 150 performers, musicians and artists, many from the Urban Circus, a collaboration including such groups as the Church of the SubGenius and the San Francisco Cacophony Society. Performers rappelled down the building from a giant spider web.

"I did more business in those two days than I have ever done," says McKnight.

Left over as a permanent signature of the opening are painted panels on the building just beneath Defenestration. The freaky drawings relate to the theme above, such as Table Dancer, Lady Lava Lamp, Tattooed Twins and the world's strangest married couple (Sofina and Spud). Below that, now, is a sharp contrast of graffiti art, a Latino urban scene by Emilio Rolando that runs the length of the building.

"Soon after I return," Goggin e-mailed from Thailand, "I am planning to begin to sand, refurbish and repaint all the furniture ... clean the refrigerator and replace the light bulbs. The cleanup will add a revitalized life to the project, plus it will be fun to swing around on the boom lift!"

Defenestration is not a gold star for the city like the Palace of Fine Arts. But if it miraculously lasts another couple of years, its place in the pantheon of notable urban sights is more ingrained with each passing month.

"I love it and I think it's one of those things that locals share with visitors," says Lori Armstrong, spokeswoman for the San Francisco Convention and Visitors Bureau. "But nobody asks about it. They should, it's totally cool."

"It brings attention without you really expecting it," says Miller. "And then you can't forget it. And to Brian's credit, it is a durable art work." ■

## OBITUARY

### I Remember Hiram

by Ed Bowers

Sept. 9, 2003, 1:30 a.m.

Hiram,

I have just returned from a bar.

On my answering machine is a

Message from Keith Savage

Informing me that you have

Died of a heart attack.

You're playing boogie woogie piano

On another planet now

And when you introduce yourself

As a negro no one knows what

You're talking about.

So just ask them if they want to purchase

One of your c.d.s for ten dollars

And leave it at that.

You lived in my neighborhood,

The Tenderloin of San Francisco,

But now you're dead.

I saw you on Golden Gate ave.

Two weeks ago

As I was walking a manic-

depressive friend

To her psychiatric hotel

At Jones and Leavenworth.

All the streets here

Are spelled like names of prisons

Or heavens or hells.

They sound like jazz.

They sound like the blues piano

You played at the Brainwash

Less than a week ago.

The music in the smile

In your face looked too alive

To die.

Now,

When gazing carefully

Into the eyes of those

I pass on the street,

I also look for you.

Just because

No one can see a face

Doesn't mean

It's gone.

