

TNDC's \$15 million makeover of SRO rat trap



LIZ HAFALIA PHOTO COURTESY S.F. CHRONICLE

Tommy Funanish takes advantage of the spacious community kitchen, among the West's new amenities that include a laundry room and library.

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the side of a building eight feet away and offered only ambient light.

"I don't need a view," pleasantly replied the formerly homeless Fielding, who had moved in a few days earlier from the MSC South shelter. "I've got the Tenderloin. I walk outside and I am in downtown San Francisco." He smiled broadly.

Funanish, 49, who has worked as a TNDC desk clerk and security guard, was one of the original 15 residents who moved back in on Dec. 10. His unit has no shower and the rent is \$395. He had first landed at the West during the gloomy era in 1999.

"I can't believe it's the same building," he said from down the hall where his cloth wall hangings and large television screen transform his 122-square-foot room into a bachelor den. "There's no original feature left."

HISTORY OF THE WEST

Funanish, a 15-year veteran of the Tenderloin, wasn't all that surprised. "I had seen what they (TNDC) had done at the Ambassador (at 55 Mason). But this has exceeded everyone's expectations."

TNDC bought the 135-room Ambassador in 1999 for \$4.5 million and, linked with it, the West in March 2001 for \$2 million. Both of the decrepit hotels were owned by Vasilios Glimidakis. The "Greek from Crete," though, is best known since 1961 as the proprietor of the Minerva restaurant on Divisadero at Bush—the Minerva originally opened in 1934 on Eddy Street, and its best-known customer was JFK. This was the commercial heart of the city's Greek community.

According to TNDC records, the West housed a tavern in 1909, a restaurant in 1913, a pool hall and barbershop in 1916. In 1934, it was known as the Dunloe Hotel.

Over the years, the reputation of the once-hand-some hotel began to slide. The year before TNDC bought it, the West was well-known for playing "musical rooms." It would evict people before they lived there a full month, which would give them resident status and certain rights.

"It is wrong to play havoc with people's lives by kicking them out onto the street every three weeks," City Attorney Louise Renne was quoted in the Examiner at the time as saying, and she threatened legal action against Glimidakis.

Months later, TNDC owned the neglected West

and its endless repair challenges. Immediately, the city zeroed in on violations. A pressing issue with the Department of Public Health was holes in the floors or walls that allowed rats, mice and roaches to roam. Some rooms were worse than others.

"In some units there were 10 to 15 cats, some of them dead," Griffin said. "And you could smell cat urine on the floors and feces, even human feces in some units. Some of the residents had mental health issues. But we didn't want evictions and worked with social workers on this."



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Nick Griffin, TNDC project manager, remembers the West as a rat trap with dead cats in some rooms and the city zeroing in on violations.

When TNDC bought the West, 120 people lived there. When relocation began in November 2002, about 70 occupied around 45 units. Construction started in August 2003 after residents were sent to other TNDC properties and to the Bristol, Biltmore and Empress hotels.

TOTAL RENOVATION

The West was stripped to the frame, jacked up and leveled. It got seismic retrofitting, new fire and life safety systems, new mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems, improved accessibility. Every unit was newly created and common areas were added: an expanded lobby, community kitchen with dining room, library and laundry room. A social worker is on site and job development help is available.

Rehabilitation is complete and the hotel has lost all vestiges of its past, including its most sensational piece of historical trivia in 1985. That was when the West's seedy appearance likely attracted the West's most infamous former resident, Richard Ramirez.

Ramirez took some time away from his Southern California activities to periodically reside at the West over an estimated 18 months, according to an account on The Crime Library Web site. San Francisco police were sure he killed two sisters in their Telegraph Hill apartment in February 1985, a man and his girlfriend—whom he first raped in Cow Hollow—and an elderly man and his wife near Lake Merced in August.

Among other things that linked the notorious "Night Stalker" to the crimes besides fingerprints, matching bullets and recovered stolen property were surviving witnesses telling of his rotten teeth and bad breath. Those two things, along with a published description, led a young West Hotel clerk to go to the cops to tell them his suspicions. In Ramirez's room, the cops found a drawing of a pentagram, the telltale symbol he left at several crime scenes. But the satanic killer had already checked out. They missed him by hours. He had returned to Southern California to commit other murders before he was finally caught and prosecuted.

"The hotel had a reputation for being a murder hotel in the late Seventies and early Eighties," Griffin said. "I don't know why, or if that was before Ramirez or not. But he stayed here."

It's exactly that sort of appeal that the West has lost. ■

GOOD NEWS for...

LIBRARY-PHILES Sue Cauthen, a maritime journalist and former English teacher, was appointed to a two-year term on the Library Citizens Advisory Committee by its chairman, Supervisor Chris Daly, as his District 6 representative. Cauthen chairs the Neighborhood Library Coalition and is a member of Alliance for a Better District 6. Daly, whose ordinance created the committee last May, made the appointment at the first Library CAC meeting Jan. 24. It was the third to last of the 11 individual supervisors' appointments to be made to the 17-member committee. District 6 libraries are the Main and the Mission Bay branch, under construction.

MEN OVER 45 Davy Jones, who has worked eight years on prostate cancer causes, says those folks from the Tenderloin and Mission are eligible for a free and confidential prostate cancer screening on Saturday, Feb. 12, 11 a.m.-1 p.m. at 3416 19th St. near Mission. The disease, Jones points out, will kill more men in the United States in 2005 than AIDS but, detected early, can be successfully treated. Jones also reports that the Seventh Annual Food Drive for Prostate Cancer sufferers in the TL and Mission was the "biggest yet." A first-time cash gift of \$2,400 from Safeway, plus smaller donations, allowed volunteers to deliver 195 holiday baskets.

SPRING IN SOMA A group of South of Market neighbors are following the TL's good example and organizing a tree planting through Friends of the Urban Forest. Neighbors who want to plant one or more sidewalk trees and who live or work between Mission and Harrison and Eighth and 11th streets (the boundaries are slightly fluid) need to fill out a form indicating their interest. Trees cost \$300, but FUF subsidizes half and handles all the details of planting day. FUF will take on the project only if at least 30 people complete forms. By the end of January, 17 forms were in. Last July's Tenderloin planting put 20 new trees on the streets at no cost to property owners, thanks to Elaine Zamora of Zamora & Wynn, workers' comp lawyers, and the effort of many TL residents. SoMa-ites who want to help green their community by buying a tree, helping with planting, or donating any amount of money toward the effort should contact Audrey Crane, 626-7144.

SHELTER DWELLERS Under legislation by Matt Gonzalez, a 13-member advisory Shelter Monitoring Committee is to be created that with inspections and quarterly reports will bring oversight to a new level. The commission, acting in teams, will make four announced and two unannounced visits to the city's 15 shelters to see how the homeless are being treated and check on such conditions as sanitation. A stipend of \$25 per visit per member got cut prior to passage. Committee members will be chosen from among nonprofit service providers, homeless advocates, the homeless and formerly homeless for two-year terms. The supervisors select six, the Homeless Coordinating Board chooses four and the mayor's office three. For an application call Linda Laws of the Rules Committee, 554-5184, or Darryl Smaw of the homeless board, 554-2626.

CENTRAL Y The Y's two-year-old community technology center got a huge boost last month: a \$400,000 cash and software grant from Microsoft's Unlimited Potential program, which pushes tech ed, especially in poor neighborhoods, and has awarded \$80 million in grants to nonprofits in 78 countries. "Nearly 100% of the kids in our after-school program come from families whose annual income is less than \$25,000 a year," says Y E.D. Carmela Gold. "We'll be able to provide computer training and Internet service to about 150 youth from the Tenderloin and nearby neighborhoods." Last March, Central Y also received \$40,000 worth of computers, printers, digital cameras and a projector from Hewlett Packard, a gift that will allow the Y to put Microsoft's cash and software donation to immediate use. For information about the Y's community technology center, call Mejan Minnick, 447-2513.

A CLEANER NEIGHBORHOOD In the latest cleanup sponsored by DPW and the Clean City Coalition, volunteers meet to pick up litter, tend to trees and paint out graffiti in the neighborhood. At the same time, District 6 residents can get rid of their clutter. The districtwide cleanup starts at Hallidie Plaza at 5th and Market on Saturday, Feb. 5 and goes from 9 a.m. to noon, followed by a free lunch. Call 552-9201 to volunteer. From 8 a.m. to noon, any resident can take advantage of three Golden Gate Disposal and Recycling's debris boxes at 900 Seventh St. at Berry (eight blocks south of Market). They'll accept compostables, recyclables (including big and small appliances, scrap metal, mattresses) plus stuff like Styrofoam (but no hazardous waste) that doesn't fit either category. Residents who can't make the trip but have a Golden Gate Disposal account can call 626-4000 to arrange curbside pickup.

— TOM CARTER AND MARJORIE BEGGS

If you have some good news (no events, please), send it to marjorie@studycenter.org or tom@studycenter.org

38-Geary plan heads toward a green light

THE compromise reached by Tenderloin activists and Muni on the bus stops to be eliminated on the 38-Geary line was approved on Jan. 28 at a Department of Parking and Traffic hearing, with no objection from the public. The plan goes to the Municipal Transportation Agency for final approval on Feb. 15 at 4 p.m. in Room 400 at City Hall.

The originally proposed stops were a point of controversy at hearings over sev-

eral months and are part of Muni's \$400,000 Inner Geary Transit Plan to streamline transportation downtown to the Richmond District.

The compromise restores stops on Geary at Jones and Hyde and on O'Farrell at Larkin and at Leavenworth. Removed on O'Farrell are stops at Polk and at Mason. The Geary at Mason stop will also be cut. ■

— TOM CARTER