

# Tenderloin's bookstore is back

## *Pretty much everything is just as it was before the move*

BY PHIL TRACY

**A**N early piece of good news for 2005 is that McDonald's, among the oldest used bookshops in San Francisco and the last great one in the central city, has reopened after nearly three years.

When last we visited owner Itzhak Volansky and his "dirty, poorly lit place for books," he was celebrating McDonald's 75th anniversary. As we noted at the time (Issue No. 7), used bookstores had all but become a thing of the past in most of San Francisco, and all of the Tenderloin, so McDonald's continued existence was a celebration in itself.

That was in June 2001 and much, or ultimately little, has changed.

The following June, Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corp. began a \$15 million seismic retrofit and renovation of the building that houses McDonald's and the six-story, 178-room Dalt Hotel, built in 1908 and site of the 2003 slaying of three people in the lobby in and the tenant/gunman's suicide upstairs. TNDC's grand reopening ceremony was set for March 8 from 11 to 1 p.m. Supervisor Daly was among the scheduled notables.

Any retrofit had to begin with the Dalt's lobby and its two ground-floor businesses, McDonald's and Alan Yuen's Tailor and Dry Cleaning.

The U.S. Unified Relocation Act and lease obligations under San Francisco's landlord/tenant ordinance say that whenever a construction project interferes with a commercial tenant's right to do business, the



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property owner must move and store that tenant's stuff, pay him a stipend and restore his business to its previous state upon completion.

Moving the tailor, another neighborhood business with a shrinking number of practitioners, was relatively easy. All the dry cleaning was done off-premise, so there was no need to store heavy equipment. Yuen contacted his customers to collect their clothing by a certain date and stopped taking in new business. TNDC paid for the storage of the remaining items.

Moving McDonald's was a little dicier. The smart money said the bookshop would never reopen: Volansky would get bought off with a big payout and his books and magazines would wind up as recycled newsprint.

As usual, the smart money was wrong. It began with the gargantuan task of removing and storing McDonald's massive inventory: 8,000 cartons. Half the cartons contained used books, the rest magazines, records, CDs and tapes. In all, Itzhak estimates, one million items were moved.

Three trucks and a dozen Delancey Street workers put in six hours a day for two full weeks to accomplish the task. "These were big, strapping men," said Volansky, who is

neither, "with muscles they had built up while in prison."

The books were kept in several unidentified South of Market warehouses. "They made me swear I would never reveal their names," Itzhak tells me. "If it got out that they were storing old National Geographics, they could never show their faces in warehousemen circles again." Volansky hints his code of *omerta* was tied to a discount price.

Such a thing, of course, defies all logic. In the 21st century, where a 30-day inventory is considered an unjustifiable luxury, the idea of storing anything for 2 1/2 years, much less used books and old magazines, for God's sake: well, we're talking way beyond the bounds of reason.

To its varied and grateful customers – in the 45 minutes this reporter engaged Volansky in conversation, three people came in to exclaim how happy they were that the bookstore had reopened – McDonald's has literally defined illogic. For many, the place is a little like the Twilight Zone. Any minute Rod Serling will walk over and say, "No, this is not a dream ..."

Not much has changed. The ceiling is still a patchwork of faded, cracked paint. The shop's sidewalls still outline in black dirt where bookshelves once reached a greater height than reason recommended. The floor is the same unvarnished wood and still squeaks. Seismic bracing – mauve-colored steel beams forming an elongated V from floor to ceiling – are spaced throughout, but otherwise things look pretty much the same. The contrast to the dry cleaners and the Dalt's lobby, with bright fresh paint and new linoleum floors, is striking.

Volansky's refusal to allow any improvements to McDonald's shop-worn appearance certainly puzzled Diep Do, TNDC's senior project manager for the Dalt. "He was a very unusual tenant," she told me. "Most tenants will jump at the chance to have free improvements like painting and a new floor," Do (as in Do-re-mi) explained. A project manager with TNDC since 1999, the Dalt was her first project and she is visibly proud of it. "He was adamant that we do the minimum. Of course, we had to rewire the electrical

grid, update the fire requirements, in addition to the retrofit. But he wanted as little as possible." Many of the bookshelves were deemed "unstable" and had to be "recycled." New ones were constructed and painted a neutral gray to match the shop's décor.

Moving the two businesses was an expensive process, Do admitted. (See sidebar.) "We wanted them to come back, however. They provide important services to the community



PHOTOS BY LENNY LIMJOCO

and a lot of the tenants used their services."

Volansky disputes the notion that little has changed. To comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, the aisles of the bookshop have been widened to accommodate wheelchairs. As a result, the newly reopened McDonald's will sport a slightly contracted inventory. Among the items he is likely to forgo: old Modern Electronics from the '70s. "The really old ones from the '40s are collector's items," he explains, "but there's no call for this newer stuff. The electronics is out of date but not nostalgic. We're probably going to have to give up the 21 copies of the June '51 Sunset Magazine," he said with visible regret.

Itzhak and his trusted assistant, Wayne Holder, have been unpacking the cartons since last September. The bookstore reopened in January. In late February, they had a thousand cartons left to unpack. The cartons are in a building Volansky owns, two blocks away. Now that most of the books are back on the shelves, they're in no hurry to finish the job. Volansky figures probably another a year. Meanwhile, the main order of business is to party, starting at 1 p.m. on March 8, following the Dalt Hotel ceremony.

During my visit, Holder brought over a book, the title written in the cyrillic alphabet. He called it a classic of new Russian literature from the Soviet era and said the title is "Not by Bread Alone."

"You wouldn't find this book in Borders, that's for sure!" Volansky proclaimed with obvious relish.

Only in the Tenderloin. ■

**Itzhak Volansky** seems all but buried by a mountain of books, teetering around him at the bookstore's front desk.

## Dalt retrofit by the numbers

**T**HE seismic retrofitting of the building and renovation of the Dalt Hotel took TNDC two years to accomplish. It cost \$15 million, of which \$8.5 million went to direct construction. TNDC had limited partners, but managed the project.

Tenants who lived at the Dalt prior to retrofitting now pay an average of \$271 monthly for rooms without a bathroom and \$329 with. New tenants pay \$435 without a bathroom and \$495 with.

Of the 178 units, 44 were designated as Title 8 subsidized housing,

with tenants charged 30% of their monthly income. On \$600 a month in SSI, rent would be as low as \$180.

TNDC paid \$10,000 to move McDonald's inventory to storage and \$10,000 to move it back. Storage cost \$3,000 per month for 30 months, or \$90,000. TNDC also paid McDonald's rent (\$1,250 per month) and a monthly stipend to Volansky of \$1,250 for the same period. All told, the cost for retrofitting the McDonald's space (aside from construction) totaled \$185,000. ■

—PHIL TRACY