

The Fight for Pacific Renaissance Plaza: An (Un-Politicized) Overview, Part I

One April day in 2003, tenants of all fifty low-rent apartments at Pacific Renaissance Plaza came home to eviction notices waiting in the mail. Many had lived years at PacRen, in the heart of Oakland Chinatown. None were aware of a moratorium on their affordable housing. Shocked and angry, the tenants—many elderly and disabled, most monolingual Chinese—initially took a stand against PacRen’s landlord-developer. Community organizations organized; a fury for justice quickly gripped Chinatown. City Hall got dragged into the fracas. People pled. People sued. People left. Years of sporadic community action followed, augmenting drawn-out litigation.

The fight for affordable housing at 989 Webster Street lasted five years.

Depending on perspective, the theme of the PacRen struggle will vary. Some say it’s a story about bad governance, of municipal mismanagement and feeble politicians. Others say PacRen is about gentrification of the ugliest stripe—a fraudulent developer screwing the poor. Some may tout (or exploit) the role played by community organizing. Some point to the cycle of Chinatown displacement. Still, to those who witnessed the evictions and their aftermath, there is a good tale in all this about courage...and the power of the individual.

What Chinatown regular doesn’t know of PacRen? This shiny, grand plaza—spanning an entire city block—is the centerpiece of the neighborhood. Through its main archway, on the 300 block of Ninth Street, lies a massive, open courtyard encircled by two floors of shops and offices. Daily, packs of Cantonese-teasing youths can be seen roaming to their favorite PacRen hangouts. Elderly folk are a fixture at the courtyard fountain, sunning themselves around its perimeter over games of chess, or people-

watching; some will hobble a few paces to the Asian Branch Library to catch up on the Chinese dailies. Other locals are going to HSBC or to their doctors' offices on the second floor. Those exiting Peony Restaurant may head downstairs to the courtyard, to queue up by the cashier window of the underground parking garage—a treat for visitors in parking-starved Chinatown.

Above the bustle, atop the two floors of commercial space, sit two hundred high-rise condominiums, clustered along Ninth and Franklin Streets. Shopping and culturally competent social services are all within a two-block walk, if not an elevator ride downstairs. For those able to afford the \$400 monthly homeowner association dues, PacRen living is the ultimate privilege in Oakland Chinatown.

Then, there are the fifty units across the plaza.

Just opposite the privately owned condos, on PacRen's Webster Street perimeter, stand four stories of affordable-rent apartments. Opened in 1993, applicants were screened for eligibility to live in its mostly one- and two-bedroom units. Selection was primarily determined by income caps. Hundreds applied. Getting in was like hitting the jackpot, hissed many locals, who believed that poor people had no place in "a five-star hotel." Such attitudes persisted in Chinatown as the anti-eviction campaign sought sympathizers.

Nonetheless, one could imagine the silent amusement of a wheelchair-bound *popo* who, upon moving into her 500-square-foot apartment, gazed out her bay window and saw people scurrying across the vast courtyard below. She saw her future friends. She also scanned the shops and spotted the pharmacy she'd frequent for years to come. Such convenience hadn't existed in faraway San Ramon, where her son and grandchildren lived. In time, the *popo* would visit fellow residents on the street-facing

side whose apartments, including those on the lowest floor, rose high enough for a panorama of dusty, aging Chinatown rooftops. The view swelled every PacRen tenant with pride, a testament that shelter—even the *undeservingly* best—was a right of all citizens, regardless of rank or class.

Most who lived at PacRen, moreover those who shopped or worked there, had been oblivious as to how all this stuff got there. But eventually, the mass evictions of April 2003 would dredge up the plaza's forgotten history. Community advocates who helped fight the evictions would rediscover Chinatown's past. (Educating and translating the legacy to the tenants post-eviction, however, proved a frustrating experience.)

In the mid-1960's, while the first generation of Chinatown progressives rose to demand community benefits, Oakland's redevelopment plans, including heavy construction of the nascent BART system, was devastating the neighborhood. Thousands of units of affordable Chinatown housing got razed. The small, mostly Toishanese, businesses of the 60's were later replaced by bigger Vietnamese-Chinese markets. Then Hong Kong immigrants came, seeking opportunities to invest their new money. The huge 1000 Broadway project emerged in the late 70's adjacent to PacRen's current block.

Chinatown was changing physically. Much of that change over those decades was called redevelopment. To others, it was encroachment.

Myer's Plumbing Supply anchored the Franklin Street corner on Ninth. Ken Betts Service Station sat on the other end, at Webster. In between were street-level storefronts—a TV repair store, New Light Laundry, among others—below second story boarding houses. If all this were to go, then it would be under the community's terms. Housing preservation was foremost. The 70's and 80's saw activists working to get the

right kind of developer for this parcel. But no one was interested. It would be decades later, starting in the late 90's, until private interests rushed to germinate—or gentrify—the Bay Area with luxury lofts and other newly stucco'ed things. Pre-PacRen was a different era. Real estate was depressed; there was not yet a Mayor Jerry Brown to doggedly lure developers to Oakland—at any cost, some progressives still seethe.

Years passed...until Lawrence Chan emerged.

Chan's 1984 development bid may have seemed a godsend. This scion of an elite line of Hong Kong hoteliers wouldn't had crossed the Pacific, if not for the advice of his trusted fortune teller. In America, Chan was foretold to expand the family empire. His clan ranked among Hong Kong's twenty wealthiest, boasting high-end hotel properties across Asia and the U.S. Lawrence, an eldest son and groomed for the business since his Swiss boarding school days, was eager to make his own mark as CEO and President of Park Lane Hotels and C&L Financial. He would make his big splash in the Bay Area.

The man erected personal monuments: the Renaissance Parc 55 Hotel in San Francisco and Marriott Courtyard in downtown Oakland. (The latter's construction got mired in a nasty, years-long union dispute.) Chan also sat on the boards of the SF Symphony and the business program at SF State. His civic engagements—Project Hope, Hong Kong Association of Northern California, American Red Cross' Clara Barton Society, the Lawrence Chan Scholarship at SF State—all projected Chan the Patron. Articles in the *SF Chronicle*, *LA Times*, and *SF Business Times* gushed about this captain of industry and his fresh, *oriental* savvy. The Bay Area Chinese community had itself the perfect benefactor.

But to those who knew better, who worked for him, Larry Chan was rather an “inconsiderate,” calculating man. Subordinates saw him as a product of privilege, motivated only by money. Apropos, circular themes—resembling ancient Chinese currency—pervade PacRen’s architecture.

Housing advocates who invoke cabals of moneygrubbing developers may consider Chan-n-pals an eerie living cliché. San Francisco City Hall, dating back to the Agnos administration, listened to this patriarch of local Hong Kong investors. In the East Bay, Chan’s developer-friends have been responsible for a slew of recent condo conversions, including: 466 Crescent Street, 55/66/77 Fairmount Avenue, and 590 El Dorado Avenue in Oakland; and Bayside Commons, the massive blue-roofed complex next to Ranch99 in Albany. Their salesmen repeat the mantra of homeownership to visiting buyers. The few who question the social impact of condo conversion get reassured; conversions beautify the neighborhood, raise property values, and expel drug addicts, respond the developers. *Best and highest use* is the guiding axiom in the real estate industry; there seldom is room to consider the complexities of displacement.

In fact, Chan’s decision to evict PacRen tenants enjoyed many defenders within the brotherhood. Among Oakland brokers, rumors had been spread to slander the tenants as “relatives of rich doctors and lawyers” who lied to get housing.

One wonders what the same businesspeople would say had they witnessed Chan’s negotiations during the application stages of the PacRen project.

Two players emerged after Oakland’s Redevelopment Agency solicited bids, in 1984, to develop PacRen’s current location. The Coalition for Chinatown Development, a group of local progressives largely shut from the decision making process, initially rejected both of their proposals. Though, the Coalition noted that the plan submitted by

Oakland Chinatown Plaza Inc./Sumitomo, Chan's competing bidder, offered more community benefits, including a ground-level cultural center amid ample open space. That stood in contrast to Chan's "great big shopping mall."

City staffers preferred Chan, believing he had the stronger finances to guarantee the project's completion. Eventually, they sealed the deal with agreements inked in 1987 and 1990.

Over \$30 million in public subsidies would leverage PacRen's construction. Only with these concessions did Chan agree to house the public library and Oakland Asian Cultural Center within his plaza; their actual development costs, including the 500-space underground parking garage, were borne entirely by taxpayers. Importantly, under the 1990 agreement, the City loaned Chan \$7 million to assist with construction. (This will surface as a central detail in the anti-evictions campaign.) In exchange, he was to build fifty housing units, to be maintained as affordable apartments for a mere ten years. Chinatown activists relented; this was the best offer City Hall could get.

And so, the developer wasted no time once the clock struck April 2003.

"If they don't scam, then I'll have the authorities throw them out!" Lawrence Chan would thunder, in Cantonese, into the news cameras.

No questions asked, terrified tenants began packing ahead of the 90-day deadline. Resistance was far from their minds. Why should anyone dare to challenge the all-powerful tycoon?

But one individual sensed something wrong in all this. Francis Chang, then 55 and the son of an infirm couple living in Unit 548, decided to seek help....