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Pacific Heights Furor

Uneasy Neighbors

By Mitchell Thomas

Over cocktails and over after-dinner cognac, the thoughts exchanged in many of those splendid Pacific Heights homes these evenings spin dizzily from the utopian to the downright apocalyptic.

Old acquaintances, business associates and fellow fighters for civic causes snub one another at parties, shout at each other over telephones, form cabals to plot attacks.

In another part of town, the issue might simply be a question of what to do about the peculiar neighbors. In Pacific Heights, it leaps to the possibility of fundamental changes in Civilization As We Know It.

And no wonder.

Just down the block from the home of Peter Fay, the one-time Stanford football hero who now heads the Pacific Heights Improvement Association, is a fine old mansion full of ex-convicts and one-time dope addicts, some of the hopeful salvage of the Delancey Street Foundation.

San Francisco has ordered the foundation to vacate the house at 3001 Pacific avenue and another at 2563 Divisadero street, holding that their present occupancy violates zoning regulations for single-family residence. The foundation has vowed to fight the order in court.

Pacific Heights has chosen sides.

It is a battle, as Peter Fay recalled the other day, that goes back to the Middle East's six-day war of 1967 and has embroiled all kinds of combatants and mediators from a spell-binding promoter from New York's lower east side to prominent names in the Social Register, from the U.S. Department of State to the government of the United Arab Republic.

The house at 3001 Pacific, a handsome brick structure with 25 rooms and nine baths, is owned by the United Arab Republic, which used it as a consulate until its diplomatic relations with the U.S. were cut in the heat of the 1967 Middle East conflict.

Delancey St.



Two residents in front of the Delancey Street house, 3001 Pacific avenue

The Arabs packed up and departed in haste, leaving the vacant mansion full of exquisite furnishings. For four years it stood uninhabited, except for incursions by hippies in search of crash pads, and by less savory visitors who gradually emptied it of furniture, draperies and even wall sconces.

SEEKER

In 1971, it was discovered by John Maher, a graduate of prison, drug addiction and Synanon, talker extraordinaire, a zealous missionary of sorts. He was looking for a home for his newly founded Delancey Street Foundation, a unique kind of rehabilitation center for people in trouble with dope and the law.

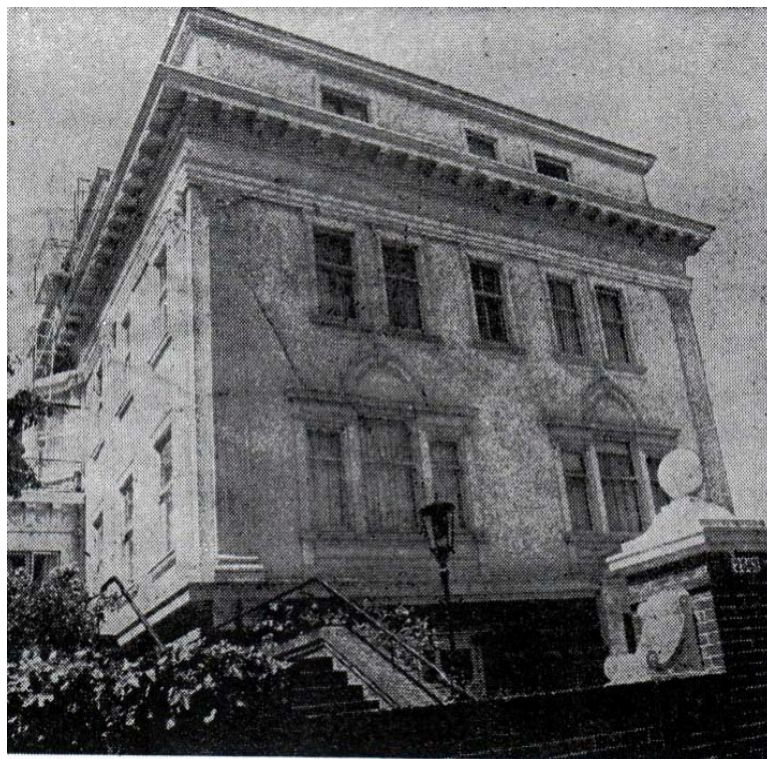
Through Coldwell Banker, the big real estate managers, Maher arranged a two-year lease at \$1000 a month, handed over a \$2000 deposit for the first and last months' rent and moved in with a little nucleus of people in search of a new life.

The first Fay heard about it, he said, was just after he returned, still suffering from jet lag, from a trip to Europe to buy goods for his prosperous men's clothing store, Young Man's Fancy, in Laurel Village.

A man in the State Department phoned from Washington to ask Fay's help, as president of the property owners' association, with "a very sticky situation that is developing in San Francisco."

The State Department man had been contacted by the Washington law firm of Edward Bennett Williams, which had been retained by the United Arab Republic, which had refused to sign the lease and demanded that somebody get those people out of there.

The State Department man said he already had contacted the offices of the mayor and the chief of police, who gave him "a sympathetic understanding" and referred him to the Department of Health, which said it couldn't do anything unless it received a complaint from a local citizen.



The foundation's second mansion at 2563 Divisadero street

VISIT

Fay, who lives at 3060 Pacific avenue with his wife, two children and his wife's 101-year-old grandmother, eventually took a stroll down the street and rang his new neighbor's bell.

"I was rather hostilely and belligerently received," he said, until Maher - "the man with the King's English," Fay calls him - appeared on the scene, charmed his visitor, appealed to their mutual Irishness, and explained what the Delancey Street Foundation was all about.

This is the point at which Maher conjures up a Red, White and Blue image of 19th Century immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, where "they gave them a straw hat and sent them off to Delancey street."



PETER FAY
A complaining neighbor



JOHN MAHER
Delancey's founder

His own sick and huddled unfortunates, Maher rolls fascinatingly on, are the new immigrants, just arrived from slums and prisons on the golden shores of Pacific Heights, people “who have never seen America before.”

Fay went away and talked things over with fellow members of his association. They noted that the lease on the Delancey house – if Maher could make it stick – would be expiring in July of this year and that the Arabs were unlikely to approve a renewal. They decided “to sit things out and not make a big flap out of this. The newspapers would love it . . .”

The lease dispute went to court, Maher won, and the initial skirmish was over.

Some neighbors complained occasionally, Fay said, about parking problems caused by Delancey Street vehicles as the number of new arrivals grew and grew. (Maher says the foundation has about 200 residents now, about 45 of them living in its two Pacific Heights houses and the rest in legal residences elsewhere in the city. (All of them eat, in shifts, at the Pacific avenue mansion.)

There was also some grumbling about noise and obscenity when Delancey Streeters held encounter sessions with their windows open. There were no police problems.

And some of the neighbors were enchanted.

Among them is Georgina Hopkins Callan, a divorcee who lives alone at 3035 Pacific avenue, two doors away from the Delancey Street house, and who is in the Social Register.

“I couldn’t have nicer neighbors,” Mrs. Callan said. “The day I move in, 14 months ago, the doorbell rang and two terribly attractive kids were there with pots of flowers. They said, ‘Welcome to the neighborhood and if there’s anything you need let us know.’”

That was the Delancey Street welcoming committee. Mrs. Callan went to dinner at their house and had a delightful time. She hired some of the Delancey people to do some work around her house, as other people in the neighborhood were beginning to do.

The Indonesian consulate general, in the house between Mrs. Callan’s and the Delancey Streeters’, has a new coat of paint on the back, supplied by the hard-working bunch from next door.

Nobody at the consulate could be reached for comment but Mrs. Callan said the Indonesians and the Delancey Streeters visit back and forth regularly and “the Indonesians just love them.”

And when Mrs. Callan told John Maher a while back that her house had been broken into, he assigned two of his toughest ex-burglars to walk patrols to see that it didn’t happen again.

“It takes one to know one,” Maher said. “When our guys see some hood on the street they tell him, ‘Look, we don’t believe in violence, but you are in a violent business and violence begets violence and if we see you in this neighborhood again we’re going to break your legs.’”



GEORGINA HOPKINS CALLAN
‘I couldn’t have nicer neighbors.’

EXPANSION

And so it went until last December, when the Delancey Street Foundation bought the old Mein mansion, a rundown, 29-room splendor at the corner of Divisadero and Broadway, and moved some of its people in there.

Responding to complaints from Fay and others, un-named, inspectors from various city departments descended on the two Delancey Street houses. The city issued its eviction order, which was upheld by the Board of Permit Appeals after a rousing hearing. However, Maher announced he was staying put and appealing to Superior Court.

Feelings began to run strong among the neighbors. About 60 of them signed petitions, urging the city to let the Delancey Streeters stay. Some started trying to work out a compromise: they would help Maher find a

new home nearby, with appropriate zoning, and even help him finance it if a court fight could be avoided. Things calmed down.

Then, last Monday, full-page ads appeared in both of the city's daily newspapers, signed by "Friends and Neighbors of Delancey Street." It suggested that Delancey Street's opponents were guilty of racism, upset because many of the foundation's residents are blacks and Chicanos. It challenged the whole concept of single-family zoning, declaring that the Delancey Streeters are a single family. It said Delancey Street was going to court. At that point, as one charming lady put it, "The - - - hit the fan."