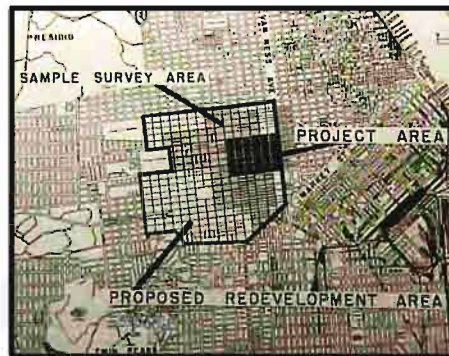


The Fillmore District Redevelopment Betrayal

San Francisco's betrayal of its Black community began in 1953. As the shipyards quieted, the push to drive Black residents from the city only intensified. City leaders promised to repair aging buildings, but their so-called 'slum clearance' plans stalled amid concerns over money and consequences.

Seven years later, Justin Herman, head of the city's redevelopment agency, revived the project. The agency wielded Eminent Domain to uproot families from homes that had sheltered them for generations, sometimes nearly a century. These cherished houses were demolished, replaced by empty parking lots.

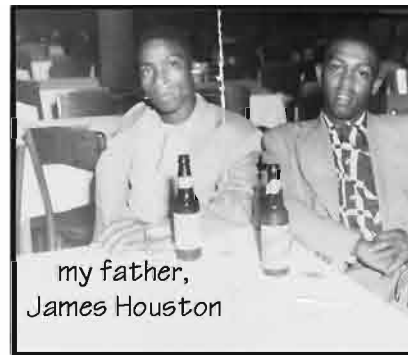


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Justin Herman prophetically declares, "Without adequate housing for the poor, critics will rightly condemn urban renewal as a land-grab for the rich and a heartless push-out for the poor and nonwhites."

We lived and worked in a classic mixed-use building, our business bustling below and our family life unfolding above. Many Black entrepreneurs built their dreams in these old Victorians. Just two years after Justin Herman's warning, the agency set its sights on us. They seized our home, along with the bar and restaurant that anchored our lives.

The Black Fillmore District is a vibrant hotbed of Jazz, known to some as the *Harlem of the West*. Filled with families that mainly rent, roughly 10 percent of the Black population owns their home, and 1 percent owns a business. Since my grandparents were from the South and carried the idea of 40 acres and a mule, autonomy, and do-it-yourself, we own both.



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Ben and Annabelle were pillars of the community. Annabelle, a founding member of the Uptown Church of Christ, while she and Ben feed "street corner men," men who lived in rented rooms and ate out every day, in the Club La Jolla. *Talley's Corner* offers an excellent sociological study of such men and their lifestyle, to which the café or restaurant is crucial.



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Uptown Church of Christ Chorus



Two years after Kennedy was killed, we have to close up and leave. Our home was in good condition and wasn't relocated.

We were forced to leave without care, and this moment changed everything for me. We moved from one house to another. My grandparents bought and sold other homes in the city, but our family was never the same. Losing our home hurt me deeply, but I hid my anger so well that even I didn't realize I was angry.



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This was the way of things, since Black people often had to swallow their anger, afraid of how white people might respond. Without realizing it, that old, ingrained logic shaped our lives in ways we could not predict. I mastered this lesson so completely that I deceived myself, though a part of me, buried deep, always knew the truth.

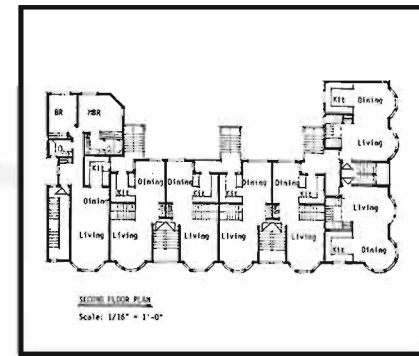
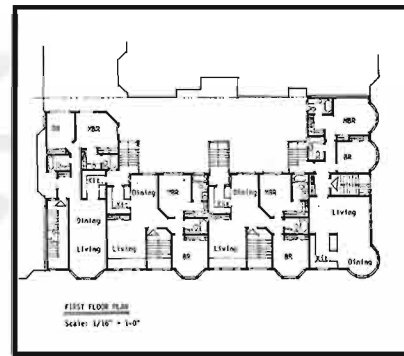
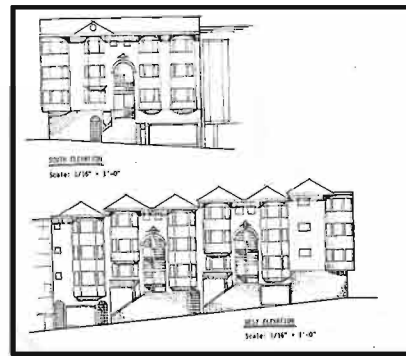


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In 1983, I returned from Hawaii and answered Shao Fu Ren's call to join KMD. That same year, Mayor Dianne Feinstein's long campaign to transform the land once home to the Black community finally succeeded. Construction began on a sprawling new complex filled with shops, restaurants, and hundreds of shiny new apartments and condos.

Yet the price tags on these new homes soared far beyond what former Black Fillmore residents could afford. As they were pushed out, San Francisco's Black community faded even further.



Around then, two friends from architecture school, both Asian American, reached out with an intriguing project idea. Gilbert Chan from Asian Neighborhood Design and Warren Seeto had their sights set on a potential condo development. They had an architect, one of our old teachers, and blueprints in hand, but needed help tracking down the right piece of land.

While I was away at school, the Western Addition Community Organization (WACO) set up a policy. Their plan was to ensure that people who lost homes or businesses to Redevelopment would have first choice of any land the agency sold. They gave out certificates of preference to 4,719 homeowners and 883 business owners, but only 1,099 housing and 39 business certificates were ever used. My grandparents had one of each certificate.

As the general partner for the Alamo Square project, my main task was to secure the land. With my grandparents cheering me on and WACO lending their support, the whole venture began to feel surreal, almost dreamlike. I hadn't noticed the buzz of demand until my future partners opened my eyes to it, but it was undeniable. The WACO committee gave our housing certificate request a swift green light, and soon, I had a quarter-acre corner lot in the Fillmore district in hand. The process unfolded so seamlessly that my partners were genuinely stunned when the land documents landed on their desks.

With the land finally ours, the next challenge was financing. We formed a limited partnership, offering \$10,000 shares, and began rallying friends and acquaintances to join our cause. Each partner took on the mission of raising \$40,000 toward the \$120,000 construction loan we needed.



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When we reached out to the Black community, we received silence in return. Even the promise of an 81 percent return on \$10,000 could not sway my contacts to take the leap. Just as hope began to fade, two Chinese women stepped forward, offering their support when we least expected it.

Shao Fu Ren was the first to embrace the Alamo limited partner offer. Though we had shared years together and were now parting ways because of my own missteps, she still chose to stand by me and help.

She was born in California, the daughter of a Chinese family deeply woven into San Francisco's political fabric. Her ancestors journeyed to California during the Gold Rush, settling in Marysville, where their growing clan and Tong connections soon made them pillars of the community. They built a family temple that still stands as a testament to their legacy. Like countless others, her forefathers crossed the ocean to 'Gold Mountain,' chasing dreams of prosperity, unaware of the harsh prejudice that awaited them.



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Later, the family built a strong presence in San Francisco. Shao Fu Ren's father became the first Chinese American to serve as president of the San Francisco Board of Education.

Shao Fu Ren arrives with two investors at her side, ready to champion the project's success.

A friend from martial arts also agrees to become a limited partner, but the way she does it surprises me. I bring up the idea, she asks to see the Pro forma document I have, reads it, and then writes a check. I didn't expect her to decide so quickly, and it leaves me curious.



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Fu Ren moved to the U.S. from Taiwan and grew up in a family that worked in farming, business, and industry. She knows how to handle risk and isn't afraid of business challenges. She visits the construction site to check on its progress, and when it's finished, she accepts my invitation to visit Hawaii. She grew up on an island in Taiwan, but had forgotten what that felt like. The islands win her over. A few months after we return, I hear that she's moving there and that I'm welcome to join her if I want.

Her offer sparked a clash between duty and desire. My sense of responsibility urged me to buy a unit for my grandparents, to bring them home and reclaim our place in the community, standing with the Black struggle in San Francisco. Yet, something gentler called to me. The beauty, peace, and comfort of Pele's land tugged at my heart, offering a happiness I had never known anywhere else.

Caught between these choices, I saw that the poetic path could unite them. We did not need a grand or triumphant return; the Hollywood ending people imagined for the Alamo project never arrived.



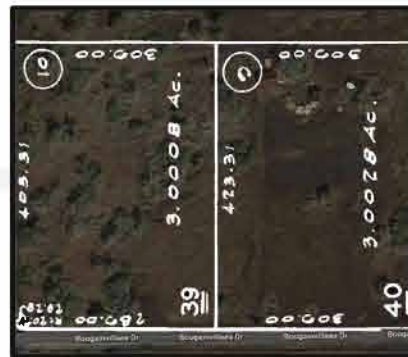
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My grandparents did not return to the old community as others expected. Instead, a more complex form of poetic justice emerged, quietly fulfilling all our needs. For those who looked closely, the building itself became a symbol of our enduring presence.

No sum from the Alamo project could repay what society owed us after Fillmore, or for the struggles we faced as Black Americans. The fight for justice and awareness would continue from Fu Ren's home in San Francisco. Yet, the hope of poetic justice and its promise for the future began to soothe our family's anger and bitterness over the Redevelopment Agency's betrayal.

Freed of the grudges from the past, I was at liberty to follow Fu Ren to Hawaii. Soon after, the premiere projects to grace the Honolulu skyline are placed under my supervision as architectural project manager and contract administrator.

However, with social injustice on the rise and climate change looming in the future, a change of location was in order. A move south made sense, but not back to the insanity of the Black-and-white struggle in states like Texas or Georgia, where many Black people relocated after being displaced from the city.



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Instead of returning to that South, Grandma and I purchased land and moved the “homestead” to South Point on the Big Island of Hawaii, the southernmost point in the United States. And after purchasing land on the island, Fu Ren directed my attention to an advertisement. Several condominiums are for sale at a highly reasonable price in the Holualoa area above Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. Ideally situated on the volcanic mountainside, where one can swim and breathe, I purchased one, and over the years, the condo has appreciated significantly.

Through poetic justice, the family achieves peace and happiness with the prospect of more to come.