

**JIM MEKO**  
**SoMa loses its champion**

A crowd of 200 admirers of Jim Meko jammed Slim's Aug. 17 to praise him as the driven, undisputed guardian of the west side of SoMa, where he lived and worked for four decades.

Mr. Meko was known at City Hall for his indefatigable efforts to protect the diverse character of his working-class neighborhood through his comprehensive testimonies and the dozen organizations he led or was a member of.

He was a formidable inquisitor on every issue, a feisty bulldog one moment, gentle the next, spicing dialogue with his droll and quick wit. Even at his darkest, friends said, everyone knew his intentions came from the heart.

His death at age 66 leaves a gap in leadership, the mourners said, shoes hard to fill, someone to take up his torch, the work he began not yet done.

Mr. Meko served two terms on the Entertainment Commission, but his most notable achievement was steering the 22-member Western SoMa Citizens Advisory Task Force, created in 2004 by a resolution co-authored by then-Supervisors Chris Daly and Matt Gonzalez.

Charged with ensuring that the neighborhood retain its culturally diverse, working-class character, the task force's plan limited housing south of Harrison Street and market-rate housing north of it; developed height and density guidelines; required special permits for chain stores; restricted the size of big-box retailers; pushed for more parks and open space; and added more crosswalks and traffic calming. The plan changed 141 sections of the Planning Code.

Brimming with anticipation, Mr. Meko told *The Extra* in October 2005, "It's revolutionary. Now we're in charge." It seemed the table was turning, in contrast to earlier days when SoMa Leadership Council members saw how the Planning Department's Eastern Neighborhood Plan addressed western SoMa. "They were treating us like an abandoned industrial area."

The task force plan's features protected art spaces and service/light industrial zones, and allowed nighttime entertainment expansion and higher but moderate density, task force member John Elberling, Todco's executive director, told *The Extra* after the memorial.

But the plan isn't really working now. Mr. Meko's first love, nighttime entertainment, hasn't grown, "and the Central SoMa Plan is killing off about half of the SLI district," Elberling said. "But we'll know more next year. Jim was happy with the (mixed-space) Eighth and Harrison project, though."

The massive 350 Eighth St. apartment project has office, arts, retail and residential. But Folsom Street, which he wanted slowed by two-way traffic from Fifth to 13th Street to encourage visiting the neighborhood, still is one-way.

Daly, who appointed Mr. Meko chairman of the task force, told the memorial gathering that the plan "was really Jim's" in every detail. Mr. Meko conducted committee meetings for eight years.

"SoMa is my greatest love," one mourner quoted Mr. Meko as saying, "(It) occupies most of my waking hours."

Mr. Meko died Aug. 3 at UCSF hospital on Parnassus Avenue after suffering a stroke July 19. He was found next to his bed in his home on 10th Street near Folsom, also his business address, by Roy Carr, 77, his partner of 30-plus years and co-owner of their printing shop. At the hospital, Mr. Meko lingered for two weeks, never regaining consciousness. This memorial was his sendoff.

Mr. Meko came to The City from St. Paul, Minn. Daly, who praised him as an "eloquent writer," read a piece Mr. Meko had written in 2006 for the *Fog City Journal*, reflecting on the evolution of his neighborhood. It began:

"I moved to SoMa in '77, mostly to be left alone. It was a warehouse district. There were no homeowner associations and very few families. My neighbors were Filipino refugees from Manilatown, gay men experimenting with alternative lifestyles, beat poets, performance artists and rock and roll bands. Survivors and



DAVID ELLIOTT LEWIS

**Jim Meko** for decades was at the forefront of the fight to preserve western SoMa's residential and small business character, especially keeping its longtime immigrant and working-class population in place.

squatters."

The neighborhood had good times and bad, the mix always striking a humanist chord in Mr. Meko, of Hungarian and Irish stock. He kept getting more deeply involved with his neighborhood until at one point he was a member of a dozen organizations, had served eight years on the Entertainment Commission and another eight on the time-consuming task force, was the neighborhood's go-to historian and had run for District 6 supervisor. In November 2010, the city gave him the NEN Lifetime Achievement award for his work.

Mr. Meko's sister, Jeanne Hall, here from St. Paul, was introduced but did not speak. She told *The Extra* later that her "quiet" little brother had been editor of his high school newspaper, even involved in its printing. He could accomplish whatever he set his mind to, Hall said. "He loved learning things — he learned how to play the 12-string guitar in high school on his own." Moving to San Francisco was "a good fit for him. Many opportunities to be of service."

On a big screen behind the guest speakers a film loop of 439 photos ran continuously, showing Mr. Meko campaigning, in meetings, on the street with friends and supporters and in the print shop. "I met him in 2009 and started photographing him then," said photogra-

pher David Elliott Lewis who had prepared the loop and sported a Meko for Supervisor campaign button.

The screen was flanked by large bouquets, compliments of Kathleen Oliver and Kimberly Engle, from their neighborhood shop, Cherries, next door to Mr. Meko's print shop. A long food table was supplied by Slim's, DNA Lounge, Ted's Market and Don Ramon's restaurant, members of west SoMa's old guard. The fare ranged from pizza and veggies to falafels and chicken casseroles.

American cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin read a long list of contributions her friend of 15 years had made, calling him deserving of a place in the pantheon of SoMa heroes.

"He wanted to preserve the existing character of the neighborhood," Rubin said, the gay bars, small businesses and longtime residents. "And he sought community control."

He was "a leather boy" who wanted to keep what was left of the old leather row scene on Folsom Street, when it was known as the "miracle mile," as well as protect the neighborhood's Filipino heritage. During the "nightclub wars" of the 1990s, he charged that ambitious people wanted to turn the neighborhood into "Bourbon Street."

➤ CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

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## 1st planning study of western SoMa

The effort to preserve South of Market's character from Fifth Street to Ninth and Mission to Folsom began in 1982 with grassroots research funded by City Planning to determine the true nature of the neighborhood.

It was an obvious mix of flats and houses blending with small businesses in a low-rise neighborhood. But no one knew the residential density, nor the variety of small businesses that were part of the area.

Google Streetscapes were three decades away, and property searches had to be conducted at the Recorder's City Hall office with staff assistance to get particulars of each parcel on microfiche. A more telling way would be to canvass the area on foot, noting the buildings on each block and alleyway.

Skidmore, Owings and Merrill took the lead on the first and only census of the residences and businesses within the mid-Market area and western SoMa. San Francisco Study Center partnered with SOM to produce the study — "Mid-Market Street Conservation & Development Study" — that was to inform the city's planning policy for this section of the neighborhood. Everything east of Fifth Street was already being transformed.

Fifth formed a natural break in character, and the city needed to know what to do west of there. It needed data to document any decisions about building height, density and use in the future.

Study Center's executive director walked each block within the study area, documenting each residence and its size and each small business and type. The report gave city planners the evidence they needed to keep the area low-rise and mixed use. It is a policy that Jim Meko's task force has attempted to enforce.

— Geoff Link