

# 5 who fled O.J.'s fire back home at Moderne

BY TOM CARTER

**T**HE five residents who fled their smoke-filled Moderne hotel rooms Oct. 12 when a \$2 million fire broke out in Original Joe's below them returned to their reeking digs a week after the Red Cross relocated them temporarily in other SROs.

With their own rooms in shambles, the returning residents were given other rooms in the 30-room hotel. A month after the fire, some were still transferring possessions left behind.

"Just trying to salvage a few things," said Geoffrey Rayner, one of the five who was standing inside his dank Room 31 at a small desk, the only object around him that wasn't overturned in the fire-fighting frenzy. A 3-foot-wide hole had been poked in the ceiling.

Rayner, 77, has lived in the hotel 20 years. He came here from London 43 years ago and worked as a bookkeeper. "I'm getting mostly notes and papers," he said, happy to be relocated in the slightly larger Room 15.

Restaurant workers told the Chronicle the fire started in or near an exhaust flue above the kitchen. The Fire Department said the damage to the restaurant and hotel was \$2 million — \$1.5 million of it structural, Lt. Mindy Talmadge told The Extra, and contents worth \$500,000 were destroyed.

The Moderne Hotel, on the second floor at 162 Taylor St., would be a flophouse by any definition and post-fire conditions have reduced it further. Broken windows and parts of destroyed walls in the dimly lit, narrow hallways and broken windows elsewhere are boarded up with plywood. The stench of wetted-down, burned material fills the air. Dirt and grit is everywhere on the flimsy, deteriorating carpet, but there's no loose glass. Some rooms have gaping holes in their ceilings where rain poured down the morning after fire fighters had finished hacking away.

Built in 1910, the building is owned by restaurateurs John and Marie Duggan who bought it in 1998.

"Hey," said a large man passing in the hallway, "the firemen busted my door down and management hasn't fixed it. Me and my wife have to live behind that."

"This has been a hell hole since the fire," said a woman nearby.

While the good, man-size eats downstairs at O.J.'s have earned plaudits for decades, the hotel above has struggled with propriety. Three years ago the Moderne constituted "an unsafe building or a public nuisance," according to the Department of Building Inspection. The department had found more than a dozen code violations ranging from unsanitary conditions and exposed wiring to missing plaster in walls and ceiling to broken windows and garbage in the light wells. The Duggans weren't rep-

resented at the DBI's Aug. 26, 2004, hearing and contested nothing. But the Duggans got all the violations fixed and DBI cleared them three months later.

But 2006 was more trouble. The Central City SRO collaborative, working with Moderne tenants, filed an extensive list of complaints on Feb. 27. From DBI's Web site, it reads:

"No lock on front door, transients enter at all hours; many of the bathrooms not working, both the toilets and the showers; problems with doors to fire escapes: some were locked, one was broken - perhaps kicked in; no fire extinguishers; room #22 - doesn't have a working door (piece of wood only), cracks in the walls, no fire alarm, infestation of bedbugs and cockroaches, window broken; Room 24: door is flimsy & cracked, no lock on door; Room 26: empty, full of trash, door may not have been on the hinges; Room 6: bedbug infestation; Room 17: door problems, bedbug infestation, sink not usable, private bathroom not usable, no window in this room, heat doesn't work; Room 16: bedbug & roach infestation; no lock on shower door leading to hallway; hallway window boarded up; on-site manager not present for a week, unable to get hold of him; other things, will give list to inspector."

After his initial hotel inspection, DBI's Steve Mungovan made 12 re-inspections over nine months before the owners corrected all the conditions. The case was closed Nov. 29.

On April 4, 2007, two dozen more complaints came in. They ranged from clogged sinks to trash on the roof to faulty windows. The last separate complaint filed before the fire was on Aug. 24. It was about the lousy hallway carpet. The fire turned out to be a dark piece of luck because the Duggans hadn't yet put down replacement new linoleum.

Rayner with others fled the building. While he waited 45 minutes in the rain under an awning paramedics checked him — he needed no treatment. Others had ducked inside Daldas Market on the corner and watched the fire fighters. Police reported they found an unattended 2-year-old wandering among the fire engines.

Authorities took the residents to the Tenderloin Police Station's Community Room at Eddy and Jones streets. The Red Cross lined up SROs for them. Six hours later they left with their housing and clothing vouchers.

The Community Room was apparently



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

**Twenty-year resident** Geoffrey Rayner returned after the fire to reduced conditions at the Moderne Hotel, but to a bigger room.

suffering water damage at the time but it wasn't discovered until five days later. Then it was closed as a public health risk. TL Capt. Gary Jimenez, who thought the problem might be roof damage, said he doesn't expect things to be fixed before year's end. Community groups usually meeting there found other venues.

After the fire, Johnnie Callan, 54, stayed a week at the Auburn Hotel on Minna Street and used the clothing voucher he was given at a Geary Street thrift store.

Callan said he had been in his Room 30, dressed in short pants and a shirt when he smelled the smoke before he saw it rolling out from around the floor pipes leading to his sink. His lights were out. Charging out of the door he saw the hallway filled with smoke under the fluorescent lights. He didn't know which way to turn.

"I thought I was in a towering inferno," Callan said.

He hobbled to the right using his cane to stabilize his prosthetic foot, and soon came across firemen who took him out.

He returned later to fetch a few things, but his room is a mess with the mattress flipped up against the wall and two large holes in the ceiling. One resident's computer, DVD player and television disappeared from his room, he said, and the man moved out to try to find comparable \$150-\$160 a week rent elsewhere.

"It's funny, but before the fire everyone sort of passed in the hallway with their heads down and not saying anything," Callan said. "Now everyone's talking to each other. So I guess some good came out of it. We're all saying to each other, yeah, like 'how're you doin'?" ■

## SOMPAC votes to buy the Hugo for \$3.25 million

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start taking people's property."

The fair market figure came from a professional appraisal. The Chronicle reported four years ago that the owners' asking price was \$4 million. In 2000, Redevelopment paid \$1.8 million for the two-story SRO hotel diagonally across the intersection, then tore it down and built the eight-story Plaza Apartments.

If eminent domain proceedings are approved in January it is tantamount to Redevelopment suing the Hugo owners, forcing them to sell. The case would go to a judge and a jury would decide the building's fair market value, Mike Grisso, Redevelopment's liaison to SOMPAC, said. If it does buy the Hugo, Redevelopment would build affordable housing.

Anytime during eminent domain pro-

ceedings, the owners can strike a deal to sell to another buyer or draw up plans with financing to renovate or build anew, and the case would be dropped. The agency prefers that to acquiring the property, Grisso said. "This is not a trend," he emphasized.

The Hugo's lot at Sixth and Howard is zoned for 50 feet tops while the other three corners of the intersection are zoned for 85 feet. City Planning's East SoMa Plan would raise the odd corner's limit to 85 feet which would boost the property value. But the plan hasn't been adopted yet.

And that, reportedly, is what the Patels are waiting for.

It wasn't until December 2005 that Redevelopment grew new teeth to force progress on the blighted Hugo. The agency had previously operated in the neighborhood with limited authority under the South of Market Earthquake Recovery Redevelopment Plan that guided development after the

1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. An amendment that SOMPAC worked on for 10 years with the Hugo in mind was finally approved in 2005. It gave the agency full development powers in the project area, including the eminent domain option.

SRO resident Antonetta Stadlman, committee member and former SOMPAC chairwoman who has witnessed years of agonizing over the Hugo, said: "It's eminent domain — or we give up."

The vote to recommend eminent domain was 11 to 1 with four abstentions. Curry voted no.

Later, Chairwoman Chris Durazo said the eminent domain vote was two years in coming because the committee had to wait for completion of the lengthy bid and owner-options process mandatory for Redevelopment to pursue with the owners. "There was never a response," she said. "So that took up the time." ■