

## Estella Habal's 'San Francisco's International Hotel'

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### San francisco's international hotel

### Mobilizing the filipino american community in the anti-eviction movement

By estella habal

Temple university press; 227 pages; \$54.50

This is not a spoiler: Estella Habal's "San Francisco's International Hotel: Mobilizing the Filipino American Community in the Anti-Eviction Movement" is a story with a happy ending. Proof positive is the 2-year-old International Hotel, which stands proudly at Kearny and Jackson streets in downtown San Francisco where the city's Financial District and Chinatown meet. Topped with 14 stories of apartments, including some designated for low-income seniors, the building today also houses the International Hotel Manilatown Center on the ground floor, which holds more than a century of Filipino American history.

The original International Hotel, intended as a luxury destination for wealthy travelers, was built on Jackson Street in 1854, moved to its 848 Kearny St. location in 1873 and was rebuilt in 1907 after the great San Francisco earthquake and fire in 1906. By the 1920s, the International Hotel, known locally as the I-Hotel, found itself squarely in the middle of a 10-block Filipino American enclave along Kearny Street known as Manilatown, the first Filipino American community in San Francisco, and one of the first (and few) across the country.

Through the decades, the I-Hotel - and its surrounding neighborhood - was home for mostly male migrant Filipino workers. More than rooms for rent, "[t]he I-Hotel also served as a social network and cultural center," writes Habal.

By 1968, the I-Hotel's tenants were predominantly aging first-generation laborers referred to as *manongs* (a respectful Filipino term for elder brother or uncle) who, as victims of exclusive anti-Asian immigration laws, had been forced to live isolated bachelor lives. Many were also U.S. war veterans. Most, by virtue of U.S. colonial occupation of the Philippines from the turn of the 20th century until

1946, were American nationals.

These *manongs* - some of whom had called the I-Hotel home for half a century - were served eviction notices in October 1968. The final vestige of a once-bustling Manilatown, the I-Hotel stood on a valuable piece of commercial property that would bring in more income as a parking lot for then-developer and owner Milton Meyer and Co. Long familiar with discrimination, the elderly tenants adamantly refused to leave. Joined by a new generation of activist Filipino American youth who relished the opportunity to reclaim their roots, the bitter battle over the I-Hotel spanned three decades, with an all-star cast that featured San Francisco's powerful and elite, including George Moscone, Dianne Feinstein and even Speaker Nancy Pelosi's brother-in-law Ronald Pelosi. "The effort to save the International Hotel was one of the most extensive grassroots movements in San Francisco's history and a major moment in the development of the Filipino American community," writes Habal.

The struggle took on behemoth proportions. The *manongs* fought for nine years before they were finally dragged, kicked and carried out of the I-Hotel in the middle of the night on Aug. 4, 1977. Despite public promises of alternative housing by then-Mayor Moscone, the tenants had nowhere to go. Although the fragile community was shattered, the struggle continued. More than two more years passed before the condemned building was demolished in 1979. Shockingly, 26 more years would pass before the empty hole along Kearny Street - "like an open wound for Filipino Americans, a reminder of both discrimination and defiance that marked our history in the United States" - was finally filled. Unfortunately, few of the original *manongs* lived to experience the final bittersweet victory.

Habal, an Asian American studies professor at San Jose State University and a member of the Manilatown Heritage Foundation's board of directors, captures the struggle as a "direct participant": "I worked so quietly with the elderly members of the International Hotel Tenants Association that many of the thousands of people who also participated may never have known my name. Nonetheless, I was there," she writes in the opening acknowledgements. "I was one of those young activists, and I played a key role in the anti-eviction movement as a member of the leading Filipino radical organization at that time."

In spite of a tendency toward repetition and an overabundance of minute details that sometimes impedes pacing, Habal's text is inarguably thorough scholarship; her supplementary appendices alone cover almost 40 pages. Habal's title also serves as a noteworthy companion piece to Curtis Choy's award-winning documentary, "The Fall of the I-Hotel" (1983, revised 1993 and 2005), in which the tenacious *manongs* live on forever in celluloid.

Habal's dense title is both testament and tribute to a determined group of Filipino American men and women who took on corporate and government bigwigs and, against all odds, eventually won. What emerges is a story of universal struggle - across arbitrary ethnic, gender and class lines - the ultimate right for every human being to have fair access to decent, affordable housing, to establish a home for

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right for every human being to have fair access to decent, affordable housing, to establish a home for once and for all.

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