

LOCAL NEWS

Art-draped hotel focus of suit

SoMa building may be seized to make room for affordable housing

By John Upton
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The building is furnished, but the beds and sofas hang off its walls.

That's not good enough for frustrated government officials who want the fire-damaged Hugo Hotel at Howard and Sixth streets demolished and replaced with a new building.

San Francisco's most quaintly decorated blight had furniture hung off its exterior walls by an artist in the late 1990s and has been vacant for more than 20 years.

The 144-room hotel is slated to be demolished and replaced with low-cost housing if its owners lose an eminent domain court battle scheduled to begin today.

SoMa contains residential hotels that housed mostly male, transient workers during the first half of the 20th century.

But after 1950, following a nationwide trend of declining



Grisso

downtowns, ground-floor stores shuttered around the hotel and once vibrant streets lost commercial appeal.

By the end of the 20th century, pawn shops, liquor stores, pornography merchants and storage rooms occupied many of the area's storefronts, and nearly half were vacant.

The San Francisco Redevelopment Agency began working in the area after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, mostly helping property owners repair damage and building or rehabilitating more than 1,000 low-cost homes.

In 2005, the agency broadened its authority in the area and took control of economic development and the creation of additional affordable housing units.

The agency has helped repair or improve more than 70 buildings



EXAMINER FILE PHOTO

Defenestration: The Hugo Hotel became a giant sculpture in the late 1990s when furniture began adorning its walls.

in the area and has filled dozens of formerly vacant storefronts with businesses and nonprofits, including grocery stores.

But its efforts to encourage the owners of the Hugo Hotel to replace, rehabilitate or sell their property have failed.

The owners are willing to sell to the Redevelopment Agency, but balked at a \$3.25 million offer in 2007 and sought more than twice that, documents show.

The specific type of affordable housing to be built at the site if it's acquired hasn't been determined, but it won't be used for a single-residency hotel, according to agency Project Manager Mike Grisso.

The agency filed an eminent domain lawsuit in June 2008 in an effort to purchase the high-profile corner property, and the San Francisco Superior Court is scheduled today to begin hearing the case.

The property owners declined to discuss the pending case with The Examiner.

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Something's cooking on Sixth

Seedy Sixth Street is sprouting into a culinary corridor.

Since 2005, four restaurants and a cafe have opened on Sixth Street between Market and Howard streets, and two more are preparing to open in the coming months.

The eateries include catering companies that offer to-go menus and a classy French cafe and bistro that's being readied in a building that formerly housed a pawn shop and a liquor store.

Additionally, a sandwich shop is close to leasing space at Sixth and Howard streets, according to Tracy Everwire, a project director at Urban Solutions, which is contracted by the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency to provide business support along the corridor.

The eateries are proving popular with local residents and office workers, according to Everwire.

"It's a dense resident base and people are really happy to be able to walk to food," she said.

Steve Barton, a builder and business owner who is putting the finishing touches on the Passion Cafe at Jessie and

Block renaissance

Restaurants and cafes:

Louisiana Fried Chicken
Miss Saigon
Mythic Pizza
Passion Cafe
(opening later this year)
Rancho Parnassus
(opening later this year)
Small Potatoes
Split Pea Seduction

Bars:

Matador
The Room Ultra Lounge

Markets and grocers:

City Produce
Mi Tierra Market
Stop and Go Market

Source: Urban Solutions

Sixth streets, said he's optimistic that his French-themed bistro will prove popular with residents, downtown workers and bar patrons when it opens later this year.

Nearby restaurants are packed during mealtimes and lines frequently snake outside, Barton said.

"We're on a little corridor of foods," he said.

— John Upton