

With all the flak flying around about the future of the old La Bahia Hotel, people seem to be losing sight of the historic building's past and present. The hotel — which is on the Santa Cruz Register of Historic Places — was, until five years ago, one of our city's most elegant and exclusive luxury hotels. Now, depending on who you talk to (or what you read), you might think the place is a gutted-out slum, fit only for rats and alley cats. Even the goldfish, according to our local daily, live in constant danger of being poisoned.

The *Express* decided to go see just how really bad off the La Bahia is. Well, it's a long way from Raymond Street in Beach Flats, but it ain't the Ritz either. Former La Bahia owner Harry Stutz described it best when he said the former grand hotel is suffering from "an advanced case of building cancer."

Actually, the *Express* was invited by some residents of La Bahia to come see their place. Unfortunately, when we got there, the very people who were so eager to come have us look around would not speak on the record for whatever reason. But once they were guaranteed a cloak of anonymity, the mostly low-income residents gave us the low-down, in their opinion, on the sudden downfall of the once-proud building. In a nutshell it all began in 1979 when Harry Stutz sold the place to a group of four investors, among them Donald Moore, who is now serving time in jail for the unsuccessful sinking of his yacht to collect the insurance money. Moore's son, Jeff (who has since left town), was appointed manager of La Bahia, and that's when the roof began to hit the sidewalk.

"During that time [when Jeff Moore was managing the place], we watched the rents go up and the old people move out," said one resident. "Maintenance was absolutely zip. There was no maintenance in this place. This place was a show-case."

Another resident, angered by the bad press the old hotel has been receiving, said that the building is the nicest place for the money in town. "I think a lot of people misunderstand this place. It's a healthy place for kids. If we have to move to Beach Flats, our kids would be out on the street."

While residents wish and believe the place could be renovated, they are realistic enough to know that, when there's big money involved, the wants of a few low-income people won't cause many ripples. "This place should be renovated — it *can* be renovated," said one resident, who said he had no idea what the future held in store if the La Bahia goes under. "But [the present owners] have worked so hard to make sure it *can't* be renovated. After letting a place go to hell for so many years, you look at it and say, 'What can you do?'"

Although it wasn't that easy to find anyone who agreed that the La Bahia is "a healthy place to raise kids," it was easy to find people who were dismayed at the downfall of the place. Mrs. A.E. Allegrini, who owned the building for several years in the 1960s, is one of those folks. "Believe me, it did not look like this when we lived there," said



PHOTO: SHMUEL THALER

A Landmark Faces the Future

S A M M I T C H E L L

Mrs. Allegrini. "That was a lovely place. It's really sad. It breaks my heart. What I think is really terrible is what they're going to put there."

Virginia Tappero, who managed the hotel in the early '70s, agrees with Allegrini that the hotel's collapse is tragic. But unlike her friend, she feels the new proposed hotel is the best thing for the property. "It was a lovely hotel when I had it," remembered Tappero. "[The present owners] are the ones who let it run down. They hired people who didn't know what they were doing and couldn't care less."

"That place was a landmark building," added Tappero. "It's gone now. It's just shot. Everything was smashed. I don't know how they could've done that. I won't even go down there anymore."

Local real estate agent and former La Bahia owner Stutz agrees that the downfall is unfortunate, but as a businessman he feels the building's "natural economic life has come to an end." Six years ago, he said, it would've cost \$600,000 to fix the place up. Furthermore, the people he sold the La Bahia to knew that all along. "Their interest was not to maintain it, but to maintain it on a minimal level until a good investor could be found." And now that a potential investor has been found, Stutz feels it's time to stop crying over spilled red roof tiles and start looking toward the future. He, personally, feels the proposed hotel is the form the future should take. "If this thing is defeated, then kiss good-bye any development in that area for tourists."

The potential developer the owners have found is Sacramento real estate developer Tom Underly. Underly has chosen to remain reticent about the pro-

ject until he's comfortable with the temperature of the political waters in this town, waters that are pretty near boiling at this point, if a recent Planning Commission decision is any indication. (Two weeks ago, the Planning Commission voted unanimously to deny any changes in the area that would pave the way for higher density hotel developments.)

While the *Express* has been less than successful in getting in touch with Underly, we have spoken to his right-hand man here in Santa Cruz, Richard Rahders. Rahders, of Thacher and Thompson Designers, is one of the movers and shakers who is trying to push this project through. Rahders (who is a planning commissioner when not designing buildings) has the unenviable job of convincing our city that a 210-room high-class hotel across the street from the Boardwalk is just what our town needs. In that capacity, Rahders has become what you might call the head flak-catcher.

And the flak that Rahders has been catching is a barrage of worries from city residents that the building itself will cause enough headaches that we can live without, not to mention the larger fact that a 210-room luxury hotel is just one more step in the San Josezization of Santa Cruz. Starting with the building itself, Rahders welcomed the chance last week to respond to the major concerns of residents. Those concerns are the sheer size of the thing, its impacts on traffic, its impact on La Bahia's residents, and its impact on neighborhood residents.

Addressing the fears of neighborhood residents that a loosening of density requirements would ultimately spell doom for the sur-

rounding Beach Flats neighborhood, Rahders stressed that he only wants to soften density requirements immediately surrounding the La Bahia — not the whole neighborhood. "It was *never* part of our plan to change the neighborhood's zoning district," said Rahders. "There's not going to be any building going in there that doesn't fit in the neighborhood."

Well, that's a matter of opinion. Even if Underly gets his zoning variance for density, he next has to get a variance to build a four-story hotel in an area that's presently zoned for three stories. Again, that's not a major problem, according to Rahders. "The question of how many stories is not a simple question to answer. The important thing is that, from the street, it *looks* like three stories." Actually, looking at Rahders' designs, it looks like *five* stories from the Beach Street Side, but Rahders stressed that the extra stories would be somehow swallowed up to a person looking from the Boardwalk, which probably has something to do with the fact that Thacher and Thompson Designers has chosen to release drawings of the building from the side of the building, not the front.

Anyway, before Underly can get clearance to build his extra story, he has to prove several things — including the facts that the building will not adversely affect *major* views and that it will not adversely affect traffic and parking. Speaking of views, Rahders wasn't going to pretend the building wouldn't block some views. "Views will certainly be changed," said Rahders. "But we've talked to neighbors behind the project who understand they will lose their views, and they understand that that's a trade-off for a facility that

will upgrade the neighborhood and the community." Even though the project will block some views, Rahders isn't so sure it will block *major* views. "What is a major view? We don't think the project will block major views."

Even if the view problem is settled, Rahders still has to convince the City Council that a 210-room hotel will not adversely affect traffic on Beach Street, traffic that is often gridlocked. Underly has commissioned a traffic report which shows traffic will increase in nearby intersections from three to 11 percent, which Rahders doesn't feel is that significant.

"It's already so crowded that the additional traffic will be negligible," said Rahders. "It's key to make sure the traffic will not get worse, and we don't think it will."

Rahders wants to comfort those residents on the inside of La Bahia as well as the ones on the outside. He assured us that Underly has no intention of shortsheeting the present residents when it's time to relocate. "It was part of the preconditions of our taking the job that Underly was going to take care of the relocation of the residents in a humane way and meet the spirit of the law [dealing with relocation]. He is not trying to get out of it."

Although the building itself is giving Rahders more than enough to contend with, an even bigger fear is the general paranoia in this town that another large hotel is one more step on the way to the San Josezization of Santa Cruz. Make that Montereyzation.

"Most people are scared that doing things that might attract tourists will screw up their lifestyles, screw up their town," said Rahders. "I understand that and I sympathize with them. I feel that way too. I don't want to have things happen here like are happening in Monterey with all those big hotels going in. But there *is* a place in Santa Cruz for a nice hotel. We think the hotel will add a sense of pride, a sense of place in the community. When people think of Santa Cruz, this is one of the places they'll think of fondly."

One reason people will think of the new luxury hotel fondly when they think of Santa Cruz is because they'll be the type of people who like things like luxury hotels. They are tourists of "the carefully controlled-tourism," as Rahders calls it, not that "other kind." "This type of project will not attract the kind of people who drive over the hill, get in traffic jams, sit on the beach and turn their radios up real loud, then leave at the end of the day after having bought one hot dog and having thrown trash on the beach."

So, what are the chances that these "carefully controlled" tourists will have a new luxury hotel waiting for them when they come to Santa Cruz in a few years? Naturally, Rahders is hopeful their chances will be good, but he's far from being overly optimistic. He's been in this business and this town long enough to know he's got a big struggle on his hands.

"There's going to be people who think it's a great idea and people who think it's a bad idea," said Rahders. "I don't know how it will come out in the wash. It's going to come down to what the people want."