



Guillermina Meriscal and child in their apartment.

# Unsafe housing

## City crackdown producing changes

By STEVE SHENDER  
(First of two articles)

Miguel Mesa, 52, lives with his wife and three daughters in a two-room apartment over a run-down laundromat on Front Street. The Mesas' apartment has two rooms — a bedroom shared by the entire family and a kitchen — and a bath. The hot water doesn't work and the faucet recently fell off the kitchen sink. The roof leaks.

The Mesas have done their best to make the cramped apartment homey. The two rooms are immaculate. The walls of the bedroom have been covered with wood-look Contact paper and cheap, simulated-wood-grain paneling. A shelf in one corner of the room is loaded with porcelain knick-knacks.

Mesa's rent for the two-room apartment (utilities included) is \$190 a month.

Across a barren gravel courtyard from the Mesas, Angela Murillo, 59, lives in a three-room ground-floor apartment with her husband and three children. The Murrillos have lived there for five years. The bathroom floor is rotting through. There is no glass in the bathroom window. There are holes in the ceiling and no working electrical outlets on the walls. A refrigerator, TV set, and several lamps run off a spaghetti-like array of extension cords running from a single light bulb outlet in the kitchen.

Like the Mesas, the Murrillos pay \$190 a month for their apartment.

In a sense, the Murrillos and Mesas, longer-term residents of the ramshackle complex of

apartments at Main and Front streets, are fortunate. They could be paying more.

Guillermina Meriscal, 25, and her husband pay \$225 a month for an apartment no larger than the Mesas'. They heat the small apartment with the kitchen stove because the electric wall heater doesn't work. The kitchen sink vent is broken and the Meriscals have covered the open vent with an old aerosol can to keep sewer gases from infiltrating their dwelling.

Emerita Gonzales, 29, and her husband and small child, who moved in next door to the Mesas in January, pay \$275 monthly for an apartment identical to their neighbors'. Their walls and floors are bare. As in Mrs. Murrillo's apartment, there are no working electrical outlets, and a TV, refrigerator and clock are running off a single extension cord which has been fixed to the ceiling with a thumbtack.

As grim as things are, at least one aspect of life is improving for residents of the 20-unit apartment complex. Under pressure from the city, which this winter inaugurated a residential inspection program aimed at eliminating fire safety hazards around town, the Aptos man who owns the apartments recently began to install new wall outlets.

The electricians are working fast and the workmanship is cheap. The new wiring runs down the walls, shielded by inexpensive metal conduits leading to new outlet boxes. It's hardly pleasing from an aesthetic standpoint, but definitely safer than the ad hoc wiring that tenants depend on now.

Watsonville Fire Capt. Don Frazee is the official whose inspections led the Aptos landlord to commence repairs at the Main and Front Street apartment complex.

Last November, Frazee, a 16-year veteran with the Watsonville Fire Department, embarked on a residential inspection program aimed squarely at the city's most dilapidated housing. The program was authorized last fall by the City Council at the urging of Assistant City Manager and Fire Chief Vern Hamilton.

Hamilton said then that the inspections were needed to identify fire and structural hazards and prevent a tragic fire of the kind which killed two people at a Murphy Crossing labor camp last summer.

Assistant Fire Chief Dave Williams said recently that city officials' awareness of the extent of Watsonville's sub-standard housing problems was heightened over the course of a

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two-year inspection program focusing on two-story residences. That program, carried out under a state mandate, was also conducted by Frazee.

"The city," said Williams, "found there was a lot more substandard housing than had previously been thought."

Garages and sheds which have been turned into dwellings are prime candidates for fires, Williams said. Fires in such "residences" and other substandard dwellings, he said, are generally started by faulty electrical wiring. Heaters and gas stoves also frequently spark blazes in run-down housing, he said. The Murphy Camp conflagration was believed to have been caused by a gas-leaking stove.

Five areas have been specifically targeted for inspection by Frazee: Seventh, Eighth and Ninth streets, Grant and Elm streets and lower Second Street. In his rounds, Frazee is looking for more than obvious fire hazards, such as overloaded extension cords.

"We're looking at more than life safety items," explained Williams. "We're also noting things like substandard plumbing and structural problems — where we can see a good potential for collapse."

On a recent tour of the apartments at Main and Front streets, in the company of a reporter and Jose De Anda, a county health inspector, Frazee pointed to a cracked and bulging exterior wall that would need repairs and noted that the stairs leading to the apartments over the laundromat were shaky. Downstairs in the laundromat, over a row of dryers, he spotted a chunk of plaster missing from the ceiling, exposing the timbers of the floor above.

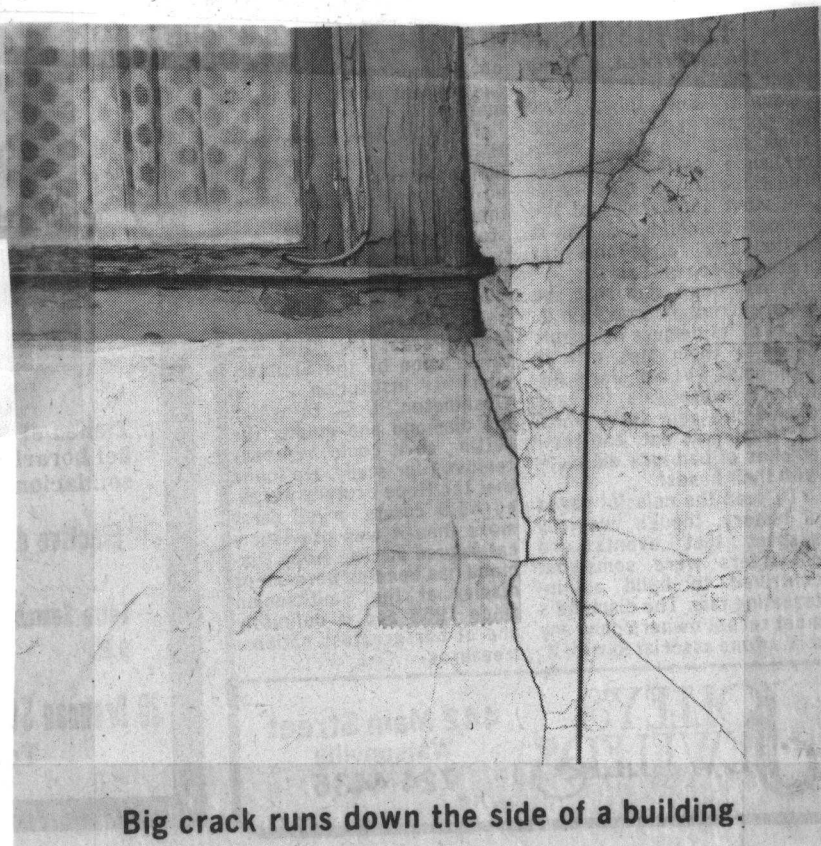
"If a fire started down here," he said, "it would shoot right upstairs."

A number of dwellings at the Main and Front Street apartment complex had been inspected by Frazee before — and posted as unsafe for habitation. But only three upstairs units, at the opposite corner of the complex from the Mesas' apartment, were actually vacated. In the others, renovative work is going on around the tenants.

"We don't anticipate moving anybody out as long as the building is capable of being rehabilitated and the owner is willing to get things done," Williams explained. The assistant fire chief said "indications are" that as long as the city has posted a building and notified both tenants and the landlord that the structure is considered unsafe, the city itself cannot be held liable for damages if tenants remain in the posted residences.

City officials, said Williams, are reluctant to order people out of their homes, however run-down they may be, because there is simply nowhere else for them to go.

The numbers of people Frazee has found living in garages and sheds and tenement conditions, said Williams, is silent testimony to the fact that "we really have a shortage of housing, or at least, of affordable housing."



Big crack runs down the side of a building.