**An Organizer Looks at Loss of Community in the Fillmore, by Mike Miller. *San Francisco Progress*, 8/21/87.**

As the City observes the groundbreaking of Fillmore Center, I’m reminded of the devastation wreaked upon San Francisco by the combination of private speculation and greed, and the hubris of the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency.

The roots of the crisis of affordable housing go back a long way: the Blyth-Zellerbach (forerunner of SPUR) Report on South of Market (leading to the Yerba Buena Center plan), the beginning erosion of the Black community with the Western Addition A-1 project (along the expanded Geary Boulevard on Cathedral Hill), the destruction of the old waterfront community of sailors, longshoremen and the old Produce Market to be replaced by the hotels and highrises of Embarcadero Center. And so the skyline changed.

I’m a veteran of almost all the anti-urban renewal flights of the City. In Western Addition A-2 (the Fillmore and Japantown) I remember that the ILWU (International Longshoremen’s & Warehousemen’s Union) Local 6 was against urban renewal. The International, of which Local 6 is but one member, had other ideas and the alliance of the Longshoremen’s Union with the Black ministers of the Western Addition took form. Left to wage the battle were the NAACP, mostly on relocation grounds (the NAACP’s interest was in racial integration more than in maintaining a specific neighborhood or community), and a motley crew of smaller Black churches, the Fillmore strip Black business people, a small number of block clubs organized by people associated with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Carleton Goodlett, publisher of the Sun Reporter. I was then the regional staff person for SNCC.

In South of Market, for a brief period of time, an impressive alliance developed: civil rights groups, the AFL-CIO Central Labor Council, resident organizations of the elderly, owners of the small and medium sized hotels, and small and medium sized businesses.

Here we were, all together in this coalition. At that time, the Machinists, Ladies Garment Workers Union and Printing Trades Unions prevailed in the Labor Council. Each represented many workers employed in shops in the area. George Johns, then Secretary of the Council, issued a magnificent statement defending the jobs, small businesses and affordable housing of the area. Here was the clue: It wasn’t jobs vs. environment but which kinds of jobs and which kinds of businesses. The national tendency of concentrated wealth and power was manifested in the local scene: centralized power and wealth do well in urban renewal. Free markets, small businesses and autonomous citizen organizations don’t. A public sector representing corporate interest doesn’t represent the citizenry – quite the opposite. When our coalition was defeated, the weight of gravity shifted to the Building Trades, with the result that organized labor supported urban renewal in the South of Market. It was analogous to the shift of early Black opponents of urban renewal to subsequent support for Western Addition A-2 redevelopment.

Today, our City Mothers and Fathers bemoan the loss of good-paying, blue-collar jobs. But by and large they support the development forces and strategies that led to the present result. So did their predecessors.

In 1965, I became involved with people in the Mission District who were the next target on Justin Herman’s Redevelopment Agency agenda. (M. Justin Herman, first appointed Executive Director of Redevelopment by Mayor George Christopher in 1959, ran the agency during the 1960’s.) By this time we had learned that if you want to stop the behemoth you had to do it at the planning grant stage. A “sketch plan” had been drawn for the Mission Corridor – that part of Mission Street that went roughly between the two new BART stations at 16th and 24th Streets. It looked terrific, until you asked the question: “Where’s my store or church or apartment in that plan?”

This time we beat urban renewal. At a dramatic meeting of the Board of Supervisors in 1967, a last minute vote shift by Bill Blake gave the Mission a 6 to 5 majority to defeat the Redevelopment Agency’s request for a planning grant for the Mission District.

Since that time other forces have been at work as well, and over these little has been done besides the defensive policy of rent control. Private gentrification, speculation and investment are at work and have been for some time. We had some handles on skyrocketing rents in the Mission back then, but nothing that could hope to last. We organized buildings, conducted pickets and rent strikes – even a sit-in at one realtor’s office. At our peak, one business friend asked me if I didn’t realize that we were “creating an atmosphere inhospitable to investment” in the Mission District. It wasn’t intended as a compliment to our organizing success, but it remains one of the best compliments I’ve ever received. Zoning, rent control, height and bulk limitations on buildings, mitigation impact money – none of it has reversed the inexorable tendency to force low and moderate income people out of San Francisco.

The truth is we lack the combination of public and private tools necessary to preserve stable neighborhoods and good paying jobs in our cities while providing for the flexibility and development of private entrepreneurship.

What was being destroyed in San Francisco was not simply affordable housing, but the very fabric of community life – that complex of neighborliness, local institutions, services and social stability that make a place worthy of being called a “community”.

The challenge to our City is not only the challenge of balancing the development of good jobs, affordable housing, quality education, excellent health care, decent public transportation and other services with the protection of our environment but the equally important task of renewing our sense of community. Indeed, the quality of community is built through the struggle for social and economic justice, by an aroused citizenry rededicating itself to democracy. This task is accomplished through the autonomous organizations of the people themselves.

We are reminded of all this by this week’s Fillmore Center groundbreaking. Buildings are being built, indeed a substantial number of affordable units precede the Center. But what has happened to the Fillmore community that once flourished, to its vibrancy, to the organizations of people, to its food, music, culture and values? Much has disappeared in the name of “progress”.

The place to look for rebirth is not City Hall but in the community institutions of the people of a city. These have been weakened in San Francisco. The question is whether new ones will rise in their place. If neither, we will continue to see the rise of drugs and crime, greed and “me-first”, alienation and isolation, and the impoverishment of the spirit that can spell the ultimate destruction of America’s democratic tradition. We all should be rooting for the communities and their organizers who are struggling against these tendencies of our times.