

## PREFACE

### *A RENOVATOR'S HISTORY*

When Seth Melchert first laid eyes on the Victorian that has been his Golden Gate home for nearly three decades, he knew he was there for the long haul. Raised in Berkeley, Melchert was drawn to this neighborhood in the late 1970s by the magnetic force of the Siddha Yoga Ashram Center. “There was an ineffable potency,” he recalled. “The atmosphere was so sacred, so thick with meditation. It was almost like you could spoon it out...people who know nothing about mysticism, about spirituality, about meditation, they would walk in and maybe they’d start to cry.”

The Ashram opened its doors in 1975 in the old Stanford Hotel, a historic building in a rough industrial area near the Emeryville border that had seen better days. According to Melchert, that was the point—to foster an accessible meditation community in the center of urban grit. Initially, many Ashram members lived in the hotel’s maze of small rooms. The Ashram served this nascent community through meditation courses, yoga classes, presentations and a vegetarian café.

By 1988, there were more than two hundred households connected to the Ashram in about a half mile radius of the Siddha Center. These mainly young white folks, some single, others with young families, constituted a major wave of change in a predominantly working-class African American neighborhood. Melchert felt that while the Ashram fostered a new white community, it coexisted rather than connected with the long-time black community, one that had defied post-World War II redlines: the racially discriminatory practice of denying home mortgage credit to African Americans.

As a young carpenter, Melchert readily found work within the Ashram community, renovating newly purchased homes that had fallen into disrepair. At first, he delved into renovating his own home, a careful process of resuscitating “its lost soul.” After entering the building trade by necessity, Melchert’s practice has evolved into a modest green construction and rebuilding company that embodies his personal philosophy of sincere listening and clear communication. For Melchert, a home is a vibrant and living skin that connects not only to the private self but also to the complex matrix of the neighborhood.

Melchert generously lent his home restoration narrative to the Golden Gate Library Local Collection. He describes the piece-by-piece reconstitution of his home’s Victorian features and how he built a sense of community on his street. Soon after moving in, Melchert and

As with many creative place-making projects, this one was concerned with this elusive yet overused concept of 'sense of place.' In these conversations, newcomers and longtime neighbors repeatedly expressed that 'sense of place' cannot be created or simply discovered. Understanding what makes a neighborhood distinct is essential, yet essentially intangible. It depends on a seasoned process of getting to know your neighbors.

Stories like these are easily lost. I am fortunate to have worked with the talented documentarian Matt Dibble, who filmed all of these conversations. Urged by neighbors to find a permanent form for these stories, we began to develop Commons Archive. I am indebted to the neighbors who shared their histories for this volume.

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