

San Diego CityBeat September 30, 2015

'They're Raping Our City Blind!'

Gaslamp artist / activist wants end to 'Hotelier Cabal' power

By John R. Lamb



George Mullen, Hotelier Cabal slayer

Photo by John R. Lamb

The secret of my influence has always been that it remained secret.

—Salvador Dali

The old walls of George Mullen's Market Street workspace—dubbed StudioRevolution—are filled with paintings (nudes and landscapes, interspersed with his "City of Life" renderings) that might belie the button-down appearance of their creator. But it's Mullen's latest venture that will surely brand him among San Diego's ruling elite as a radical crazier than Van Gogh.

Three weeks ago, the investment manager launched the website hoteliercabal.com. Described as "a community-inspired effort to eradicate the hotelier cabal from San Diego's civic landscape,"

the website makes the case that a handful of powerful hotel operators in town have been “proudly carpet-bombing” this city’s image and big-ticket projects since 2005.

Mullen, in an interview at his studio just days after the website launched, acknowledged that he first considered publishing anonymously. “I don’t need to have people shooting at me,” he said with a smile, “but I realized if you’re going to say something, you’ve got to stand up and put your name behind it. And so I did.”

Culled from years of research and observations, the website posits that when San Diego hit the “Enron by the Sea” financial skids a decade ago, these hoteliers “seized upon this golden opportunity born of our civic crisis.”

With campaign donations in hand, Mullen said, these hotel magnates gained the attention of politicians of every stripe and have been running the show ever since.

“They act like hotels are the drivers of everything in this town,” Mullen said. “I’ve done a lot of traveling, but I’ve never gone anywhere based on a hotel. People come to San Diego because it’s a great place. All they’re trying to do is fill rooms short term.”

On his website, the Valhalla High graduate makes the case that these hoteliers have screwed the civic pooch with impunity on a variety of levels.

The way Mullen sees it, the residents of San Diego have witnessed a series of civic failures—from the impasse with the Chargers and downtown development, a botched Balboa Park centennial planning effort, legal woes with a convention-center expansion, and even the loss of the 2017 America’s Cup to the Bahamas and The San Diego Union-Tribune to Los Angeles interests—that can be laid at the feet of the all-powerful hoteliers who control the city’s branding, message and political leadership.

Cory Briggs, the activist attorney City Hall loves to hate, met Mullen when he was invited to speak before the downtown Rotary recently. “It’s pretty sad,” Briggs told Spin Cycle, “that George had to do the media’s job of putting that information out there for public education. Yes, he’s using some rhetoric that the media might avoid. But factually he has the hoteliers dead to rights. He’s doing a great public service.”

The targets of Mullen’s ire are the hotel magnates that dominate Mission Valley, Point Loma and Mission Bay: C. Terry Brown, head of Atlas Hotels; Richard Bartell of Bartell Hotels; and William Evans of Evans Hotels, respectively. All three, Mullen notes, inherited their sizable holdings but act like “they’re the greatest business impresarios ever.”

Of the trio, only Evans, chairman of the hotel-dominated Tourism Marketing District board, would comment on Mullen’s theory, calling it “junk” and “total nutter.”

“You will note there is no meat to his claims that we are some secret society that controls the city,” Evans said via email. “We have one goal and that is to increase TOT [transient-occupancy tax] for the city. If that is somehow harmful to the citizens of San Diego, then I guess we are guilty. TOT is the second largest contributor to the general fund, over \$170 million last year, and it is used to fill potholes, pay cops and improve the city in thousands of ways, all at a zero cost to the citizens of San Diego.”

Evans added that over the years, “an increasingly small percentage of the TOT was used to promote the city. The TMD has attempted to correct that and uses 100 percent of our funds to promote San Diego.”

Asked if he and his hotel brethren share any blame for the city’s recent failures, Evans snarked back, “No, we did not shoot JFK,” before conceding, “We haven’t had 100 percent success rate but at least we are trying to move the flag forward for the benefit of the city...The city needs more people engaged, not fewer.”

Evans suggested that Mullen is simply mad because his proposal for a new city slogan—“City of Life”—“was spurned by us.” (www.CityofLife.com)

In response, Mullen asked, “Who put Bill Evans in charge of our city marketing? Happy Happens? Shit Happens? Well, I guess we all can see that Bill is in charge after all. Our city is sadly reaping what it has sown. The Cabal must be eradicated. They’re raping our city blind!”

These types of battles for the soul of San Diego are not new. In the mid-’60s, Brown’s father, Charles Brown—who kicked off the building boom in bucolic Mission Valley with his Town & Country Hotel (now part of Atlas Hotels)—opposed a 4-percent “visitor tax” enacted by the City Council on the grounds it was “immoral legislation, on the assumption that the Marxist theory of socialism is immoral,” San Diego Magazine quoted him as saying.

“The overriding thing for me with this website—and I welcome anyone to challenge me—is why in the world would anyone want these old white guys running our affairs?” Mullen said. “What have any of them done for this community, for humanity? They control the Tourism Authority, the message, the money—that’s \$30 million a year.

“They don’t own the land for a Chargers stadium downtown or Mission Valley, and they don’t own the convention center. But they own the politicians, and it’s pretty extraordinary. Check my spreadsheets. This hotelier cabal is holding our city back in a big way, and what do we get in return? High-school-cheerleading slogans and a mayor who’s a straight-out puppet.”

Mayor Kevin Faulconer’s office did not respond to a request for comment.