

A Landmark Transformed

Truman Annex Project Unfolds

BY BRIAN PAUL KAUFMAN

A year ago, the chunk of Key West history known as Truman Annex looked like a suburb of Beirut. But where most people saw decaying buildings, garbage strewn lots and rubble, Pritam Singh pictured restored Victorian elegance and a chance to wrest Key West's identity away from the keg-tappers on Duval Street.

While the bawdy crowd parties a few blocks away, Singh's \$250-million, 19th Century-style mini-city is rising from the abandoned, oceanfront Key West Navy base like clockwork. Luxury hotel chain Ritz-Carlton has signed on to co-develop a three story \$80 million hotel on nearby Tank Island by late 1991. More than 70 percent of the exclusive condominiums, townhomes, and tin-roofed houses Singh planned for the community have been sold. In a year, the restoration and development of the Truman Annex will be old news. However you look at it as a Conch who fears escalating prices, or as a landowner who's drooling at higher property values the development will change the island forever.

Singh's wispy beard is blowing in a warm breeze as he strides down Green Street toward Key West Natural Market for a pre-umpteenth meeting snack. Before you can read the list of ingredients on the high protein gluten flour and poppy seed confection he grabs from a freezer, his money is on the counter and he's headed out the door.

He'd stop to eat but the 11 hired yuppies bearing note pads are gathered around an oval swimming pool-sized table on the second floor of Truman Annex Development Company central, awaiting their turban clad leader. Ever since he bought the 103-acre site for \$17.25 million at a government auction in 1986, the 37 year old former commune member and Vietnam protester has been immersed in the details of turning his dream into reality. Huge profit aside - Singh once estimated his investment may return \$100 million - he says that his love for preserving the history of Key West and the Naval base drive him to oversee everything from the paint color on the trim to the number of fiery bougainvilleas planted along the white picket fences rimming the streets of the development.

"If we are able to add the sense of community and quality here, then we will have succeeded," he says. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

As construction reaches the halfway mark, Conchs are, as the saying goes, cautiously optimistic. "Overall, I think it will be good for the City," says one local hotel manager. "He seems to have good taste. If it were any other developer, there's a good chance that we would have gotten stuck with another concrete monster like some of the hotels on Front Street."

Singh, an aggressive deal-maker who sometimes even frustrates his own staff with frequent changes, draws criticism from some Conchs who say they have been victims of hardball business tactics. Contractors describe elaborate deals that have been thoroughly discussed, sealed with a verbal agreement or a handshake- and then simply disappeared into the ether without explanation.

“When that happens, you can’t even get him on the phone. Totally incommunicado. He’s burned a lot of bridges like that and I’m not sure that’s a good thing,” claims one contractor. Responds Singh: “That’s not being a bad guy. It’s a tough businessman.”

It’s important to remember that these hearty descendants of pirates, rum runners and sailors retain a lingering distrust for outsiders - particularly outsiders who don’t drink, smoke, eat meat, cut their hair, and who follow an ancient Hindu religion and also happen to own local historical monuments that have been a rich source of income and amusement for decades.

Truman Annex’s most famous resident, give-‘em-hell Harry Truman, visited the Naval base 11 times between 1946 and 1952. But local historians report the presidential duties weren’t high on the agenda when he stayed in the Conch Republic. The leader of the free world would rise around 7 a.m., toddle downstairs for a shot of bourbon and ramble out the back door for a jaunt into town. On less-ambitious occasions, he would answer his mail and swim on a private beach reserved for him at the base.

Truman Annex had been a Naval base since 1822 and was active during the Civil and Spanish-American wars. The country’s first Navy fliers trained there in 1917; at one time during WWII, 15,000 men called the base home.

The Navy didn’t use the base much after the war, but Truman fell in love with his accommodations and the city. He visited so often that the press dubbed the retreat “Truman’s Little White House.” Eisenhower spent time there during his presidency, and the base was under full alert during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Even JFK paid a visit, though he preferred the family compound in Palm Beach.

For larger Naval facilities in Jacksonville and the Gulf eventually made the base obsolete. The property, along with an offshore island fuel depot, was declared surplus in 1974. During the next 12 years, a variety of public and private plans for the base fell through. The GSA decided to auction the decaying parcel to the highest bidder in 1986.

Furious bidding pushed the property past the appraised value by millions, but a curious looking man in a foot-long beard, blue turban and jeans led the pack. When two Eskimo Indians with millions in government credits were unable to match his final offer, the Annex went to Singh.

Singh, a developer and founder of the Great Bay Company in Portland, Maine, made his fortune in historical renovations. In March 1987, when he opened the wrought-iron gates at the front of the base during a public ceremony, Singh told the crowd he intended to restore the classic structures on the Annex and that each new building would complement those landmarks. “I have

made this covenant with the people of Key West, and I will keep my promises,” he said solemnly.

The undertaking was even larger than Singh envisioned. First came the fun stuff - the public fanfare and the architectural renderings. Next came the less glamorous business of obtaining city approvals, securing financing, hiring a construction company, installing water, sewer and electrical lines, and paving streets.

The low-glamour stuff can keep a guy in the office until after the janitors have locked up for the night. Initially, Turner Construction, the largest construction company in the country, was Singh’s choice for the project. But when bids came in too high, Charter Building of Dallas got the job. Elaborate plans for Tank Island, which included a waterfall, a maze, an aviary and a tropical fish aquarium, were scrapped when Singh discovered there wasn’t enough room on Tank’s 55 acres. And then there was the matter of waiting until water, sewer, and electrical lines and streets were in place.

But over the past eight months, construction on the project has exploded. The weed-covered lots that adjoin Singh’s own lushly landscaped, rebuilt two-story home have given way to seven wood frame homes built with Victorian gingerbread trim and white picket fences.

Three of the homes are occupied, and if you stand in the right spot at dinner time, you can smell supper on the stove and hear kids thumping on the wood floors. A painter is carefully brushing dove gray on the fourth house, built for the guy who owns the company that sells bumpers to General Motors. The bumper magnate also is building the adjoining home as a guest quarters, connecting the two with a wooden walkway and a gazebo at the halfway point.

Singh isn’t building houses, just selling lots (ranging in price from \$150,000 to \$300,000). But to make sure the homes are consistent with the rest of the development, he’s specified the criteria in a quarter-inch thick book.

The guidelines, approved by the city’s Historical Architectural Review Committee, mandate that “owners strive to preserve the natural environment,” and that they remove no trees. Single-family lot owners are instructed to build a home that resembles a “Key Conch house and its variations,” with silver metal roofs and clapboard walls. Reflective glass, Belair doors, garages, satellite dishes, wire fences, mailboxes, clothes lines, and primary colors and bright tones, except as accents on front doors, are prohibited. Arbors, trellises and gazebos planted with vines are encouraged. A list of approved plants is included in the guidelines. In addition to several reviews of the building proposal, an occupancy permit will not be granted unless the building has been inspected and approved by the “architectural control committee.”

Across the street from the single-family homes, a sunburned laborer recently was mixing cement in a boat-sized tub on the third floor of the former Navy administration building. Rechristened Harbor Place, the three-story structure has been stripped to the frame to make way for two- and three-bedroom condominiums originally priced between \$200,000 and \$400,000. Adjoining Harbor Court is Harbor Court Annex, a rambling three-story building that overlooks the harbor.

Those who bought before construction began got a bargain. Of 62 available units, only 11 remain unclaimed and the price has gone up: Singh is now asking \$400,000 to \$600,000 each.

Construction was to begin in late fall on the three remaining residential buildings: Mills Place, Porter Court and Admirals Court. Mills Place, a former U.S. Marine Hospital designed in 1844 by Robert Mills, who also designed the Washington Monument, will consist of 20 residences priced between the \$200s and mid-\$400s.

Nineteen townhomes priced in the mid \$200,000s are planned for Porter Court, each featuring two bedrooms, individual decks, balconies, and Jacuzzis.

Every townhome in Admirals Court blends Victorian architectural details with contemporary touches like soaring ceilings and French doors. They are priced \$275,000 to \$350,000.

The entire development is planned to have 121 condominium units and 61 single-family homes. This does not include 10 lots and 14 villas priced at \$1 million each planned for Tank Island, and a home Singh will build for himself there. Tank Island, which has an unobstructed view of the sunset, will also be the site for the 285 room Ritz-Carlton Hotel, where guests can expect to spend \$300 a night.

Singh's imprint on the development includes an old-fashioned post office with porch rockers to encourage residents to stay and chat. Security guards and tour guides will be dressed in snappy uniforms.

But Singh has saved his finest touch for Little White House, where he is creating a museum to honor Truman. Singh claims he's recovered the original decorating instructions and will recreate them, down to the wallpaper. Once the Little White House, including the presidential suite, is restored in April 1990, he'll invite President George Bush and top state officials to a public dedication. If he's interested, Bush will have unlimited use of the presidential suite. "He can stay as long as he wants," Singh says.

As if the Truman Annex isn't big enough for the job, offers have been pouring in for Singh to do his thing on projects across the country and Caribbean. Singh says he won't commit to anything until the Annex is completed. "I've got everything I need to worry about here," he says.