

San Francisco Examiner

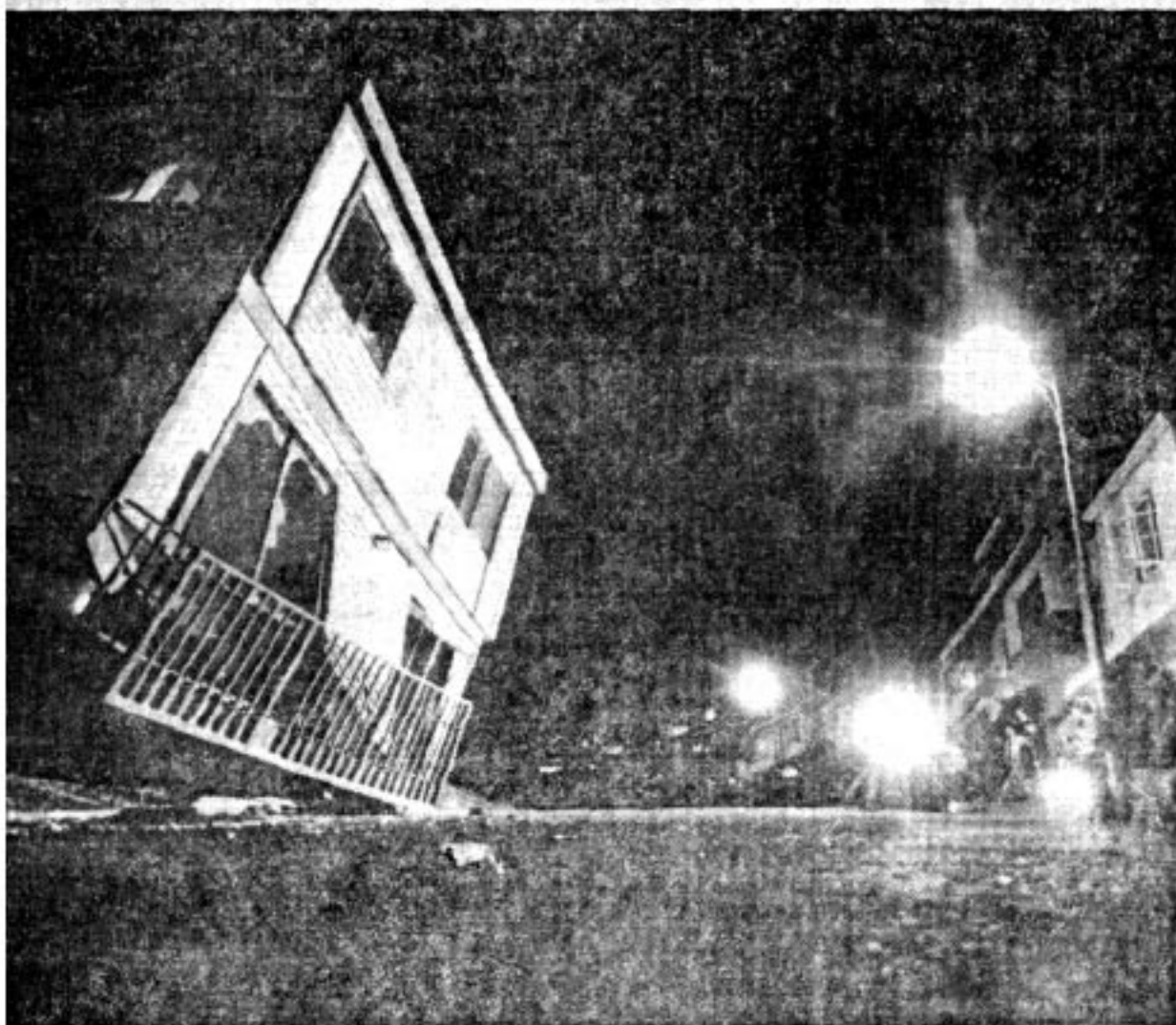
June 2, 1979

115th Year No. 118

HOME EDITION ...

SATURDAY,

An Eerie Slide in S.F.



By John Starry

The two-story structure leaned eerily into Warren Drive after it collapsed last night

Earth Pushes New Home Into Street

By Birney Jarvis

A hillside of earth slipped and crashed into a new \$150,000 house just below Mount Sutro last night, spilling it into the street like a tower of cards.

"It was all spic and span," said Mabel Ong, staring at the remains of the two-story house at 328 Warren Drive that she had planned to move into this weekend. "Now look at this."

Four other houses in the area were evacuated and power was cut off in ten more as a result of the slide, which occurred around 7 p.m.

Fire and building officials were attempting to determine the cause of the slide. Some officials speculated that recent construction nearby caused the earth to give way, while others said the ground in the area had been unstable for some time.

Following the slide, a deep crack appeared on the steep hillside behind the house. The house itself was pushed onto the sidewalk and partially into the street, which was cordoned off from traffic.

Fire Chief Andy Casper estimated damage to the house and surrounding property at \$200,000.

Ong, an executive assistant at Chinatown Federal Savings and Loan Association, said she had purchased the house two weeks ago and had just moved in a new bedroom set this week. It is the first home she's ever owned.

Residents in the 500 block of Devonshire Way, up the hill from Warren, said the earth began to shift Thursday afternoon, but it did not become alarming until about

EERIE S.F. SLIDE

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two hours before the house collapsed.

Marvin Barker, 42, who lives at 509 Devonshire, said he noticed the earth had pulled away about an inch from a fence in his yard on Thursday and that by yesterday it had pulled back several inches.

"I guess we should have done something (Thursday) night," he said, "but I thought I was seeing things."

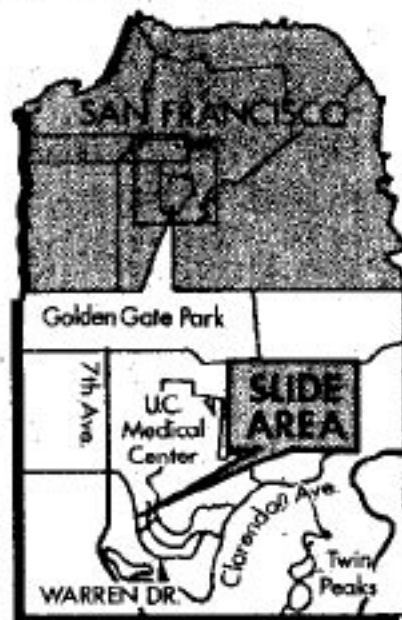
"Then again, whom would I have called?"

A 13-year-old boy playing on the doomed hill shortly before the crash said he heard a "loud ticking noise" from the house and went home to fetch a portable tape recorder to record the noise.

Another witness said he heard a "low, groaning, crunching noise, like the dying of a large animal."

Several residents recalled other, less severe earthslides in the early 1960s, and said a ten-year building moratorium, which has since expired, was imposed at that time.

Joe Walsh, a retiree who bought his home at 365 Warren Drive in 1961, said heavy rains running off the steep hill in 1962 turned the winding residential street "into a yellow river of mud."



There's always been a problem here," he said.

Walsh said contractors brought in earth-moving equipment three days ago and began excavating at the base of the hill, preparatory to building five new homes.

Fire Chief Andrew Casper said it is likely that further work on the new homes will be canceled until soil engineers determine the exact cause of the slide.

Ironically, a large cement retaining wall, designed to protect Miss Ong's house from slides, appeared to be the only structure left intact.

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'Excavation work probably caused it'

Saturday June 2, 1979

Hillside caves in her house

□ Inside the house / Page 4

By Carol Pogash

Five nearby homes were evacuated after a new \$150,000 house perched just below Mount Sutro crumbled and collapsed last night when the hillside above slid down. Firemen tentatively blamed nearby excavation work.

The wood frame, three-story house had been bought two weeks ago by Mabel Ong, a savings and loan company employee who has never owned a home before.

This morning, her home, with its new light fixtures still in place, was leaning crazily into Warren Drive.

Glass shards from shattered sliding windows circled the building. Metal frames from the windows were bent and broken like wire hangers.

In the slide, the second story was shoved in one direction and the first story in another. Walls are curved now and ceilings and floors dip and rise like a fun house at an amusement park.

Firemen guarded the area today in case more land tumbles, breaking gas and water mains.

Five houses, two below the crumbled home and three on the hillside above, were evacuated last night.

The hillside soil is parched and parted, with crevices four to six feet deep. Beside the house are two earthmovers that had been carving out land for five new homes.

Battalion Chief Joe Medina said: "The excavation work is probably the cause of it."

On the hill above, where three expensive homes are being closely watched, the land fell away and left five-foot drops where there had been none before.

Neighbors said a minor shift in the soil began Thursday. The earthmovers began working in the area earlier this week.



Examiner/Paul Glines

Mabel Ong's \$150,000 dream house looked like a nightmare this morning

S.F. EXAMINER ••• Thurs., June 7, 1979

Why city didn't stop builders on slide-prone land

By James A. Finefrock

Early one morning last week city building inspector Harold Lister dropped by the construction site on Warren Way next to the brand new house Mabel Ong planned to move into over the weekend.

"Everything was bright and clean," recalls Lister. "The bulldozers didn't even have dirt on them."

Less than 72 hours later, Ong's house was wrecked and the sliding earth fill of the steep hillside threatened at least four other homes nearby.

During his visit, Lister remembers that "excavation wasn't even on my mind." It was not a required inspec-

tion, just a friendly, five-minute chat with developer Ben Simon.

What happened on Warren Way now seems clear to city officials: The digging of the shiny bulldozers triggered a cascade of earth that shattered Ong's new home.

Why it happened and how it could have been prevented are more complicated issues.

But city engineers who approved the project now question whether building should have been allowed on a steep hillside with a history of slides. Their questions have impact beyond Warren Way: More than one-third of The City rests on identified landslide

hazards.

"I don't believe in that area," says Edward Chow, the city engineer who approved building permits for the four lots adjacent to Ong's home. "We have no grounds to stop anybody from building unless they violate a (city) code."

"If a good friend came to me and asked me to look at those lots," says Frank Lew, who is Chow's boss in the Bureau of Building Inspection, "I'd be hesitant to build on them."

No city official made an on-site inspection of the four lots on Warren

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Slide questions come too late

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ay before building permits were issued May 8. The city Office of Environmental Review, which demanded a soil engineering study of the site, never saw the study.

The city relied almost entirely on an out report, commissioned and paid for by two contractors, developer Simon's Gilko Construction Co. and Glan Construction W Co.

Glan built four homes on Warren, including Ong's, then sold six remaining lots to Gilko.

The city's behavior is a reflection of the way the system works.

Chow and his fellow plan checkers, he says, are simply too busy processing permits to make field trips. The environmental review office has no engineers, so they defer to the Bureau of Building Inspection. The engineers there defer to the soil engineer in charge, as Chow says, "He is the expert."

"The process is like a production line," Chow says. "You get a rivet at the site and go on to the next stop."

Even the work of the soil engineer,

the ultimate expert in the process, is more an art than a science, according to Lew. "It's basically an educated guess unless he makes Swiss cheese out of the site (with test holes)."

Neither Don Hillebrandt, the soil engineer, nor Ben Simon, the contractor, returned repeated phone calls.

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After the Warren Way area was graded 20 years ago, slides sent earth spilling out into the street. The hillside was graded again, this time with earth fill, and, according to residents in the area, a 10-year building moratorium was ordered.

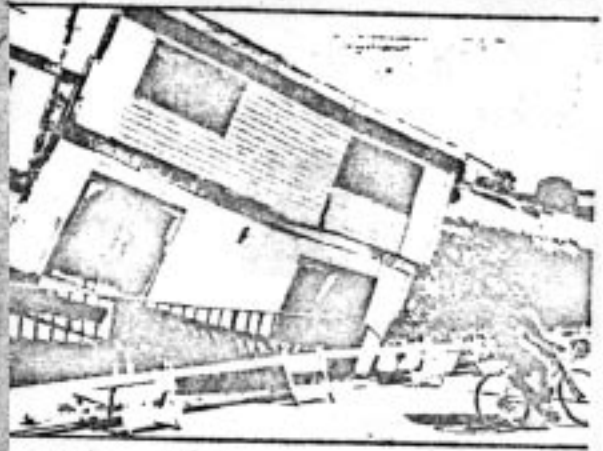
Hillebrandt's soil report mentions "shallow slides" but says nothing about a building moratorium. Officials in the Bureau of Building Inspection say they can find no record of a moratorium.

In December 1976, Glan Construction applied to develop lots 27 through 36 on Warren Way, according to city records. Because the project lay in an area of landslide hazard, an environmental review was required.

"If proper engineering design is not

technically or economically feasible, development of the site should not be permitted," The City's comprehensive plan states.

On Jan. 23, 1977, Glan Construction got an environmental go-ahead in a statement signed by Selma Bendix, The City's environmental review officer. It said, "The project could not have



made on Feb. 10, 1977. It contained a series of recommendations, including one that construction be done in stages, starting with two lots, to minimize the amount of open excavation.

Several supplemental reports were filed by Hillebrandt at the request of city engineers. One discussed the possibility of landslides.

"Minor 'creep' type movements as well as minor sloughing could still occur in the surface soil on the slopes," it said, particularly if these soils are in a saturated condition during a strong earthquake. However, such movements should not affect the proposed residences . . .

Glan built four homes on Warren Way, the last of which was Ong's, then sold the remaining lots to Gilko.

Gilko began seeking permits for those lots last September. Approval was held up, according to Chow, because Gilko had trouble getting Hillebrandt's soil report from Glan.

Meanwhile, the city Planning Department, noting that there had been a previous environmental review, signed off on the new project.

Once Gilko finally had Hillebrandt's report in hand, The City asked for more work, according to Chow. On April 27, Hillebrandt reported that he stood by his earlier study.

On May 9, building permits for the four lots were issued. On May 30, according to city officials, excavation began. On June 1, the landslide occurred, sweeping Ong's house into

the street.

Chow says that Gilko changed his plans, choosing to excavate on all four lots together rather than individually. Gilko did this, Chow says, to save money.

The excavation itself was deeper than ordinary, according to Chow. It required a 20-foot cut into the hillside, he says.

City inspector Lister said notices were posted on Warren Way 10 days before excavation began. "Had any neighbors called me, I would have taken action immediately, he says.

One neighbor did notice cracks in the hillside the night before the slide but didn't know whom to contact.

Two years ago, when Glan Construction began excavation for Ong's house and the house next door, the bulldozers "jumped the gun and went in there before building permits were issued," according to Lew.

Lew says the city forced Glan to obtain a special grading permit and imposed "a little bit of a penalty for jumping the gun," although his records are not clear on the latter point.

There was no landslide when the contractor skirted city regulations; there was this time when the contractor apparently complied.

The question remains: Should there have been building on the hillside above Warren Way?

"Everything's buildable," says Lister. "Everyone said the Golden Gate Bridge couldn't be built — except one man. He built it."

a significant effect on the environment."

"Could the project expose people or structures to major geologic hazards?" the standardized document asked. Below, a member of Bendix's staff, wrote, "Soil report of licensed engineer will be followed."

Hillebrandt's first soil report was