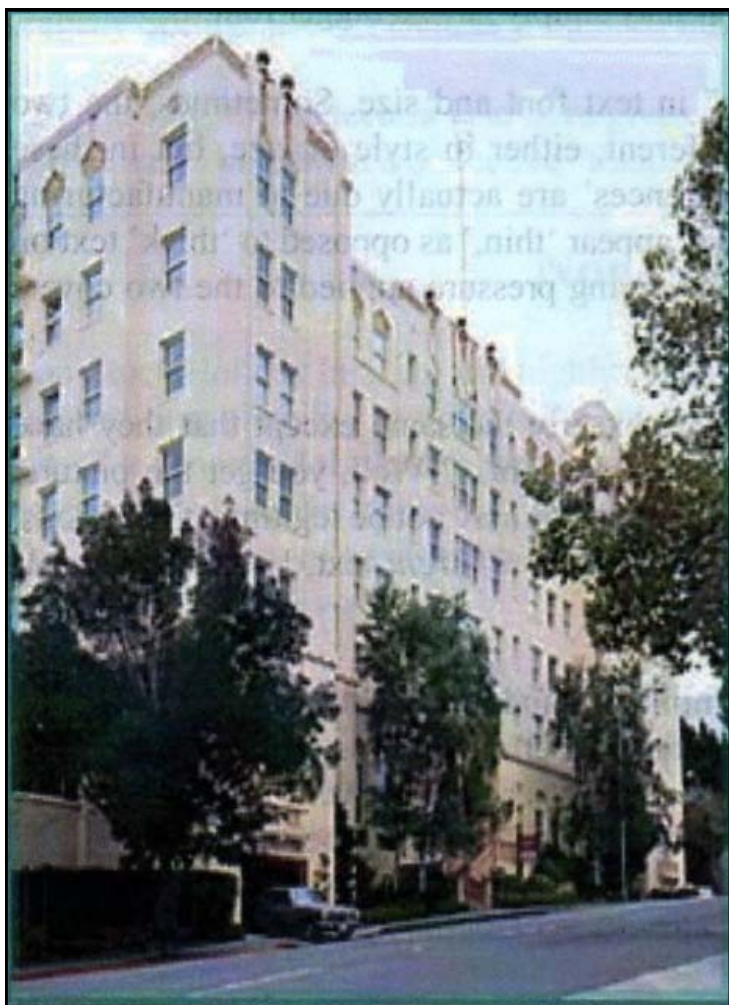


XII: Oakland's *Lake Merritt Hotel*

“Saved from the wrecking ball by the howls of preservationists and the pocketbook of Randall Berger, the grand old dame known as the Lake Merritt Hotel has just emerged from yet another incarnation. And she's looking darn good for all her 73 years. With an almost \$2 million facelift, the 51-room hotel perched on the shores of Oakland's Lake Merritt is poised to take advantage of the renaissance sweeping the city. And Berger can't wait. "This is a hot spot," said the developer and investor. "The secret that was Oakland is gone."

Berger purchased the hotel in the late 1980s with a silent partner. Since then, he has stuck with it through thick and thin – and there's been a lot of thin. But as Oakland emerges from its tarnished past, the Lake Merritt Hotel is ready. The charm that was 1927 Oakland has been restored to its original Mediterranean art deco splendor with vintage geometric fabric, terra cotta-painted walls, wrought-iron chandeliers, wicker chairs and large plants. General Manager Johanna Stein said making an old hotel palatable for 21st century customers isn't easy. "A lot of our people are high-tech. People either like us or don't like us," Stein said. "A lot of people go for brass and glass – they like new and modern. But then there's that small population of people who like old because there's charm, there's history, there's presence." There's also hot water – no small thing in a 72-year-old building. "Plenty and high pressure," Stein said proudly. "That was the best thing we ever did. New plumbing may have been a big one, but it wasn't the only one. Yes, Berger saved the hotel from demolition. But he had no idea what was in store when he signed on the dotted line.



Berger said, "Where can you go wrong by owning property by the water?" And then the Loma Prieta earthquake ripped through the Bay Area in 1989. Like most old buildings that successfully weathered the temblor the hotel emerged with only slight damage. But the silent partner wasn't interested in repairing the elevator shaft, saying tenants could climb the stairs of the seven-story building. Many moved out and Berger saw the opportunity to turn the residence hotel into a real hotel. "We opened New Year's Eve, Dec. 31, 1990," Berger recalled."

[From Katherine Conrad, *Business Times*, Sep. 22, 2000]

