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Pacific Heights home featured in 'Towering Inferno' on the market

By Jordan Guinn By Jordan Guinn
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2898 Vallejo St. is a six-bedroom mansion and was featured in the movie "The Towering Inferno." It is available for $16.5 million. Photo: Jacob Elliott Photography

Karen Lamson descended the wooden staircase with an elaborate iron bannister prior to saying her wedding vows in the summer of 1983. As she stepped past intricate stained glass windows and ornate chandeliers, the artistry of the location rivaled that of her gown.

A harpist from Dominican University provided the soundtrack for the celebration hosted at the European-style mansion in Pacific Heights.

On a southwestern terrace flanked by arched doorways and stately columns, she took her groom's hand and the pair began their life together. During the ceremony, the couple looked at the full expanse of the Golden Gate Bridge and shimmering San Francisco Bay.

Once the union had been sealed with a kiss, family and friends returned inside, not only to continue the festivities, but also to escape the heat.

"It was the absolute hottest day of the year; way over 90 degrees," Lamson recalls.

The couple retreated for an intimate dinner as guests lingered around the property, their conversations taking place in areas once used as the set of an Oscar-winning film.

Lamson could secure the location for the wedding, 2898 Vallejo St., for one simple reason: Her parents lived there.

Frank Nunzio Alioto and Frances Alioto purchased the home in 1973 while operating the landmark restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf bearing the family name. They hosted Christmas celebrations, family gatherings and campaign parties at the six-bedroom home.

Frank Nunzio Alioto's cousin, Joseph Alioto, was the focus of several soirees there during his eight years as mayor of San Francisco. More recently, politicians such as Willie Brown and Gavin Newsom have been celebrated at the home, which features ornate millwork and bas-relief panels above arched doorways.

The four-level mansion was once featured in "The Towering Inferno," an action disaster film which was nominated for Best Picture in 1975 and won an Academy Award for best cinematography that same year.

Starring Paul Newman and Steve McQueen, the film revolved around a fire in the world's tallest building. In the movie, electrical engineer Roger Simmons, portrayed by Richard Chamberlain, lived at 2898 Vallejo St. His character's haphazard work is deemed responsible for the blaze that starts during the dedication.

Several scenes were shot at the corner house, but Lamson said she knows the home as the place where social events and family gatherings regularly occurred.

"In the dining room, my mom had a long table that seated 24 of us," Lamson said.

With its coved ceiling, wood paneling, crystal chandelier and silver sconces, the stately formal dining room exudes grace.

The dining room connects with a breakfast nook featuring tile floors and etched windows. Painted inside decorative arches at all four corners are of Roman landscapes. At first, the breakfast nook served as the gathering area for the children during large gatherings, Lamson said, but that changed with the family's dynamic.

"There got to be so many grandchildren and great-grandchildren that the adults were sent to the breakfast nook and (the children) got the dining room," she said.

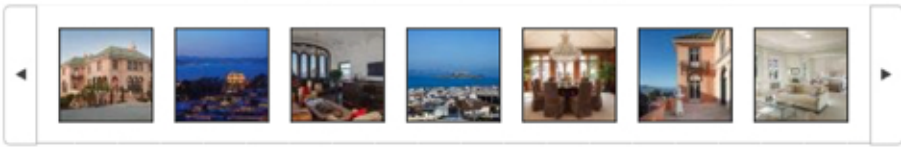
Period details such as decorative plasterwork in the living room ceiling and etched glass can be found throughout the home.

Illuminating the landing area on the second floor is a stained-glass window featuring flames, mythical creatures and flowers.

"There's a (cherub's) face in the glass, it's unique; it's like a signature," she said. "I understand redoing kitchens and bathrooms, but I hope those period details are left."

One suggestion Lamson has is to turn the library into the master bedroom. The room features a woodburning fireplace and a large rectangular window framing views of Alcatraz and north San Francisco.

"Last year America's Cup was held during Fleet Week, so the Blue Angels were putting on a show during the races. You had them flying over your head and coming at you through the window while the sailing went on below; it was a perfect day," Lamson said.



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One of Lamson's favorite rooms is the family room, which boasts a stage, extravagant wet bar and a backdrop of San Francisco. Offering an area for live music to a place to pour drinks, it's almost self-sufficient, she said.

Sharing a wall with the family room is the living room, which is adorned by an etched plaster ceiling and fireplace. A narrow balcony rests outside the room, and Smith suggests a quick remodel could capitalize on the location.

"If this wall were given a larger window, it would look out on the water and Golden Gate Bridge," she said. "It would change the dynamic."

The lowest level of the home is an unfinished basement. Concrete pillars dot the space which could be used for a variety of purposes, said Gloria Smith, who is listing the home through Sotheby's International Realty for $16.5 million.

Beneath the main level is an au-pair level. It features a bedroom, office and storage area, as well as a wine cellar and kitchen. The five-car garage is also situated on this level, which offers a separate entrance and has typically been used as a servant's quarters.

The home's laundry room is located on this level, and a laundry chute serves the two levels above it.

"It's such a cool feature," Lamson said. "It's something you don't always see."

Though the home has no backyard, it offers a gated portico, terrace and courtyard.

The very top level of the home comes with a rooftop terrace and two bedrooms. The terrace provides potential for outdoor entertaining.

The majority of the bedrooms, including the master suite, are housed on the third level.

A long gallery separates the spacious master suite from the other three bedrooms, and the suite, set on the south side of the home, features his-and-hers dressing rooms and bathrooms.

Though built in 1924, the foundation of the home remains in excellent shape, said Smith.

Though the kitchen and bathrooms haven't been updated for decades, they remain in pristine condition, she said.

"It's truly move-in ready," Smith said. "The trend in San Francisco right now is to take a home to the studs and remodel everything, but this doesn't require that."

Even so, Smith sees potential should the next owner want to renovate and update the Pacific Heights mansion.

"There are two servant's staircases, and an elevator could easily be put where one of them is," she said. "There's also an undeveloped attic space and basement. Whomever lives in this home next has plenty of options."

Listing agents: *Gloria Smith, Sotheby's International Realty (415) 722-2812, gloria@smithtaylorsf.com, Jon Taylor, Sotheby's International Realty, (415) 377-5410, jon@smithtaylorsf.com, Neill Bassi, Sotheby's International Realty, (415) 296-2233, nb@neillbassi.com*

Details

Address: 2898 Vallejo St.

Price: $16.5 million

Features: Six bedrooms, 5.75 bathrooms, formal dining room, views of the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz and the Palace of Fine Arts