

GOVERNMENT

‘I feel like I was preyed upon:’ District inspectors say DBI director Patrick O’Riordan kept them off connected builders’ sites – Part II



by **JOE ESKENAZI**
OCTOBER 18, 2021



Illustration by Molly Oleson

See Part I here

Before his recent retirement, Norman Gutierrez was perhaps the Department of Building Inspection's longest-serving employee. He was hired in 1987 and worked there for 34 years. As such, you see his name festooned upon many, many jobs.

Even the ones he did not do.



You'll recall the department's janky, archaic, and easy-to-manipulate computer system. Among its many shortcomings, inspection reports can be altered post-facto, or assigned to people who did not perform them. And, remember, the district inspector's name remains tied to the file.

So, on the publicly accessible reports for 700 Valencia St., a five-story building with residences over a ground-floor restaurant, Gutierrez is listed as performing three of the four final inspections in 2009, and then issuing a Certificate of Final Completion in 2012. But on the Department of Building Inspection's internal system, which is not readily accessible to the public, these jobs are listed as "inspected by senior building inspector Patrick O'Riordan."

Then a senior building inspector, O'Riordan was later chief building inspector, and is now the interim head of the department following Tom Hui's ouster in 2020. O'Riordan is an aspirant for the permanent job.

When asked about what happened at 700 Valencia St., a DBI spokesman replied:

“The project contractor has said they contacted Gutierrez to conduct a site visit to discuss the project with the new district inspector assigned to the area. Not receiving a response, the owner escalated his request to the senior inspector for the district, O’Riordan, who spoke with the owner and subsequently determined the project was sufficiently complicated that he needed to conduct a site visit. In November 2009, O’Riordan conducted the inspections himself and, on 3/29/12, issued the CFC [Certificate of Final Completion]. Having the senior inspector step in is standard protocol when there’s an issue at a property or a member of the public complains about an inspector.”

When read this answer, Gutierrez chuckled. “Ah, no,” he said dryly. “There’s a fallacy in that.”

Gutierrez seemed amused at the notion that O’Riordan deemed this project “sufficiently complicated” that Gutierrez could not handle it: “I have *much* more experience than Patrick O’Riordan,” said Gutierrez, who earned a master’s degree in architecture from University of California, Berkeley. “I have more education than Patrick O’Riordan. I have been in all of our divisions. And he has not been in the department for as long as I was.”

The situation, in Gutierrez’s recollection, wasn’t so complicated: He was taken off this job because he was applying the code impartially and inconveniencing a

connected builder. The end. O’Riordan, Gutierrez says, called him into the office of then-Deputy Director Ed Sweeney to “badger me” regarding this project. And then he never went back.

“Senior inspectors aren’t supposed to go out and do district inspectors’ work,” Gutierrez said. But connected builders know they can make calls when a district inspector tells them no. They can complain that the inspector was rude and unhelpful. And, in essence, they can choose who inspects their work. Or who *doesn’t* inspect it.

This was a situation longtime building inspector Christopher Schroeder described as well.

“I fix problems,” Gutierrez says. “But not the way they do it. I do not do people favors.”

But this is a department that’s built on favors. And they often go to the people who need and deserve them the least.

The records for the 700 Valencia St. project as they appear in the external, publicly accessible system (above) and as they are recorded in the Department of Building Inspection's internal system (below).

On Nov. 16, 2011, a complaint came in on a single-family home at 2207 25th Street. While this building was in Schroeder's assigned inspection district, O'Riordan issued a Notice of Violation on that very same day.

When asked why O'Riordan, and not the district inspector, wrote this document, a spokesman said there was no record of why. While the department noted that there was also no record of a site visit by Schroeder, it's unclear when he would have scheduled one; this complaint came in on a working day, when inspectors tend to be out inspecting. O'Riordan, for whatever reason, took his initiative within hours.

This address was, clearly, already on the department's radar; a subsequent comment ascribed to Schroeder on the Permit Tracking System notes that four separate complaints were active on this site simultaneously. So it seems hard to accuse any of the district inspectors of shirking their duty here.

The Notice of Violation penned by O’Riordan states that “the front building has been demolished except for the front facade” — a description that clearly describes an unlawful demolition but avoids using the term “unlawful demolition” or citing the San Francisco Building Code.

Again, Schroeder says he’d have done it differently. He’d have written it up as an unlawful demolition. And, in doing so, he’d have vastly circumscribed what could be built on this site. The owner, or his successors would be limited to matching what was previously there: “Same size, same footprint, same everything,” Schroeder says. “It’s to discourage people from tearing down these buildings.”

Interim Department of Building Inspection head
Patrick O’Riordan

The owner, at the time, was a man named Jamie Karrick, a mechanic and restorer of vintage motorcycles and cars who wanted to do the same to his former ’06 earthquake shack, and quickly got in over his head.

Karrick, reached at his garage in Oregon, is apologetic. The things the Department of Building Inspection says he did? He did them. He did work beyond the scope of the permits. He did unlawfully demolish the house. It turns out there was far more rot in the walls than he knew, and things went sideways.

Schroeder, for his part, says he believes Karrick had no malign intent and the situation simply got out of hand. But he’d have still written Karrick up for an unlawful demolition per the San Francisco Building Code, rather than merely referring to the Planning Department, as O’Riordan did.

This probably wouldn’t have changed things much for Karrick, who sold this property in 2012. But, for the eventual buyer, it was a significant distinction.

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by [JOE ESKENAZI](#) APRIL 21, 2021

It's worth, again, contrasting the way Karrick was treated with how former Building Inspection Commission President [Mel Murphy fared a few years later](#) at 3418 26th St. [A glance at the addenda details](#) for Murphy's project reveal Tom Hui personally intervening on multiple occasions.

It's notable that any higher-up was taking an interest in this project, and it's more so when Hui is involved. Between his first mention in the addenda details regarding Murphy's project in 2012 and his second in 2013, DBI director Vivian Day was ousted and Hui was given her job.

“I denied Mel’s permit and he told me he’d have my ass — verbatim.”

— FORMER DEPARTMENT OF BUILDING INSPECTION DIRECTOR VIVIAN DAY

“I denied Mel’s permit and he told me he’d have my ass — verbatim,” Day told me this year. That happened, and Hui granted Murphy what Day would not: The permit for his dream home at 125 Crown Terrace.

“Tom let him have his permit,” Day says, “and his house fell down the friggin’ hill.”

Karrick didn't have Murphy's level of firepower. Instead of dictating his terms or having a sit-down with the director he worked to install, Karrick recalls instead being called into a meeting of building inspectors for a browbeating session. He admits culpability in wrecking his home, but wishes DBI officials hadn't ducked his calls and snubbed someone who was in clear need of guidance: “I feel like they wanted me out of there.”

Karrick's broker, Rich Lewetzow, notes that “Jamie was compelled to sell.”

And his house was bought on the cheap by — *surprise, surprise, surprise* — a connected builder. Only a connected builder would think to buy a house in this condition and then hope to maneuver through Scylla and Charybdis at the building department.

“He obviously had the knowledge and skill to get it through the city in a way Jamie couldn’t,” Lewetzow says. San Francisco’s building department “is an animal unto itself. Average Joes spin their wheels and don’t know what to do. When you’re not in San Francisco and you want to remodel a house, you generally do that with an over-the-counter permit. In San Francisco it can take years to get some of those permits.”

But not if you’re a connected builder. And not if you hire permit expediter (and accused federal criminal) Rodrigo Santos, as the buyer did. And, thanks to O’Riordan’s decision to not write up the violations as an unlawful demolition, that new owner had a far freer hand to build as he pleased.

In 2016, he was granted a permit to enclose a porch and relocate a door and window — which, you’d think, would eliminate that last remaining bit of front facade.

Regardless, glancing at Google Street View, it appears such work was actually completed by 2014, years before any permit was issued. There are, in fact, no recorded inspections on the 2016 permit.

Karrick, again, admits wrongdoing. But he hardly thinks the way he was squeezed here was a coincidence: “I feel like I was preyed upon by people within the system.”

Dealing with the Department of Building Inspection, he says, “left me with PTSD. ... Leaving California was the best decision I ever made.”

PART I

‘I’d have done things differently:’ District inspectors say DBI director Patrick O’Riordan kept them off connected builders’ sites

by JOE ESKENAZI OCTOBER 17, 2021

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JOE ESKENAZI

Joe was born in San Francisco, raised in the Bay Area, and attended U.C. Berkeley. He never left. “Your humble narrator” was a writer and columnist for SF Weekly from 2007 to 2015, and a senior... **More by Joe Eskenazi**

SF NATIVE

October 18, 2021 at 1:22 pm

This whole SF DBI doesn't pass the smell test. Why would the commission seat O' Rodian (sic) as head of Dept .

It's needs a whole cleaning of dept.mess.

Now if the Mayor and BPS can see beyond their personal political ambitions...

Steve

October 18, 2021 at 4:34 pm

It's all MAD – mutually assured destruction. No one calls out anyone else for corruption in the City because, as the Nuru mess shows, they'll turn on each other.

ken

October 18, 2021 at 1:44 pm

this department is CORRUPT

Cadence

October 18, 2021 at 2:21 pm

Shouldn't O'Riordan be removed from his job?
There's been a lot of shenanigans under his watch.

RLE

October 18, 2021 at 6:27 pm

Jamie is a good dude – the article reflects his honesty and sensitivity to a T. I can totally see him opening up that house and then not being able to stop himself from wanting to make everything just so.

San Fransickened

October 18, 2021 at 7:48 pm

Another great article and discovery Joe.

Norman Gutierrez is a good man and was one the more capable guys at SFDDBI. It is a shame to see him jump ship but why not since it's sinking fast. And yes Cadence, O'Riordan is as crooked as Lombard and he has watched over everything. He is most definitely unfit for his current posting.

Juan Doe

October 19, 2021 at 7:05 am

Surely London Breed is aware of this and has read these articles. The fact that she has not fired O'Riordan suggests she is implicated in this circle of corruption as well. Joe, incredible reporting thank you!