

Just Call It 'Frisco, No, Wait—Call It San Fran

How much ink has been spilled on this Baghdad by the Bay? Home to the coldest summer-winters and long-forgotten hearts; boomtown, bust town, Fogtown, beat down. Born of a gold rush, home to gold-rushing prospectors still. The city, *The City*, once a manufacturing and shipping center, Western hub of organized labor, now spiritual home of tech monopoly capitalism an exemplar of polarized failure. Orphans, immigrants, civil rights pioneers, labor organizers, queers, beats, hippies, punks, ordinary people—all found a vibrant and generally functioning home embraced by San Francisco's little cat feet of fog after the Second World War, though not without internecine conflict. San Franciscans built expectations that the Pax Americana would last and advantage all who lived in the city that every American wanted to visit. And even as most of the rest of the country could not accept San Francisco's fruits and nuts—and all of the goddamned leftists in the only European city in America—they visited, and visited, ditching their priggishness for a holiday in the tender loin of American sexual liberation.

In truth San Franciscans' perception of a beneficent city were, as are all perceptions of beneficence, status-based. Even in liberal San Francisco there are hierarchies. Redevelopment saw to their reinforcement along racial lines in the Western Addition and Manilatown. Redlining kept suburbs white and gays were ghettoized. The city's post-war rising tide flooded many. By the time I arrived at the end of the nineteen-eighties the city was one in transition searching for the means of its metamorphosis. AIDS visited the place with ever-present, gut-wrenching dread. Heroin was king and crack its queen. Casual violence was common on the street. Not long after appearing on the scene I was told that the Hell's Angels and the San Francisco Police Department were the biggest gangs in town and there was truth in that. I had first-hand experience with all of it. San Francisco was not always an easy place to be even as, for me, it was often the easiest place to be.

There were margins to inhabit for those who disavowed the mainstream, as I did, or never stood a chance in it, whatever their bent. Substantial tracts of the forty-nine square mile city—along the bay and south of Market Street as far as what was then Army Street, now Cesar Chavez Street—had been effectively abandoned. Old commercial space, cheap-by-city-standards apartments, and unoccupied industrial facilities provided residence and scavenge. The city was a place where an enormous rented forklift could be driven from the Hunter's Point Shipyard at the city's southern end to its northernmost reaches South of Market with four or five people hanging off its back to counterbalance the two-and-a-quarter ton war-effort radial arm drill on its forks—all without raising an eyebrow about such a tool's appropriation and crosstown travel. I am not sure what this says of the place in time but this was the place it was.

Train cars were still maneuvered onto city streets to be unloaded and refilled. Grapes were crushed for wine in open North Beach garages, Chinatown-adjacent apartments became suddenly unavailable to non-Chinese in spite of "For Rent" signs still hanging at appointment showings, fishermen worked Fisherman's Wharf in numbers. How much ink does one spill on

a vanished, banished past? My list of defunct experiences in the city, agreeable or dreadful, firsthand or observed, in any case now dead and buried, is a long one. But the city, in spite of it all, mostly managed to work for the diverse group of people who made up its population. Mostly. There are always losers in America—we as a people are both inured to and at ease with this truth—as long as we are not losing worse than our perceived equals and can see aspirational rungs above. Our nation was established, partially, by the exploitation of those its settler founders identified as other, both native and immigrant, or those who were dragooned here and violently compelled to servitude, and no city in our republic is exempt from the consequences of this founding. This is our American way, the legacy cornerstone of our struggling empire: we necessarily manufacture our own dispossessed.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the public forum in San Francisco. As the city struggled to pull itself out of the recession of 1990 and into the longest period of American economic growth so far tracked, the Bay Area became the epicenter of a new, consumer-oriented internet and digital technology rush soon to be ubiquitous in life as few other industries had since the early twentieth century. As a photographer I watched scanning, Photoshop, digital printing, and digital cameras upend the craft and profession I loved. New, broad-based digital and internet technologies gained steam through the 1990s and their manufacturers became, at the turn of the new millennium, a juggernaut in civic life.

There was much hand-wringing about the disruption to employment and housing suddenly set upon the city but not much action to prevent “the market” from steamrolling the place and co-opting its politicians. And just as suddenly there were Webvan and Pets.com vans everywhere with their logos barely obscured—if at all—the delivery trucks of failure conveying a new recession. Perhaps this latest, far less beloved, tech Emperor Norton had no clothes, even as our omnipresent and state-of-the-art emperor minting his currency (remember flooz.com?) was far more ubiquitous than the old San Francisco character spending his own notes in North Beach bars—money that at least bought its bearer a drink when the chips were down.

It turns out that San Francisco’s tech overlords were clothed, and even well-shod. San Franciscans were living through what became a new, mightily compressed, version of the Industrial Revolution with its own procession of winners and losers and cycles of boom and bust. Robber barons, children at the loom; we have not traveled far and that paltry distance is on view all around San Francisco—the city today living as a microcosm of all that weighs on the country at large. Redlining and restrictive real estate covenants became NIMBYism. Plutocratic politics became better fed by tech money, the largest concentrations of capital in the world, and this wealth overwhelmed underfunded city bureaucracies. Federal and state drug wars bred street level desensitization to human suffering—just get them out of sight. A national housing crisis as a particular outcome of the crash of 2008 fed into San Francisco’s unique confluence as a walkable place in a relatively mild climate, the city’s role as a regional transportation hub (and one with extraordinarily high housing costs), and its diligent non-profit assistance ecosystem. These interconnected elements concentrated a national homelessness crisis locally.

That was yesterday, today San Francisco’s circumstances are further complicated by a fentanyl emergency, housing costs which preclude its being home to a vibrant working or middle class anytime soon—or even to children; the few who still reside being served by what’s left of a system of public and private schools that is segregated, by and large,

by family means. The city faces obligations to retreat from rising sea levels which threaten its waste infrastructure and choked by seasonal wildfire smoke, all while being made the butt of political vitriol and held up as exemplary of the failure of a woke climate-concerned left in conservative politics. No number of paper-of-record editorials by billionaire venture capitalists bemoaning the city's demise as a pleasant place to dwell will turn the tide that began to fill in when I made these photographs. No local policies will return the city to being the flawed, bewitching place it was when I arrived; lucky as I was to at least glimpse a city which functioned with its foundational needs fulfilled from within by its residents—today it is a place where most blue collar businesses that demand working space; cabinetmakers, HVAC shops, printers, and the like have pulled stake to fight unyielding traffic back into the city delivering the goods any municipality requires to function. Imagine, teachers and firefighters able to live in San Francisco. Not likely. This is the “Manhattanization” long-feared by city residents of all stripes. Stalwart American individualism and perverse corporate capitalism have come home to roost, both contributing equally to the morass the place has become.

San Francisco, in two fast-passing decades, has become a bellwether of our national reality; a reality of abject wealth disparity and with all the perfidy of American meritocracy clearly revealed. It is a city which sold out its culture and cultural institutions to become a wasteland of affluence and poverty block by block. Moneyed newcomers arrived, drawn, in part, to a historical mystique with little actuality today—the Platonic San Francisco of the imagination—constructing their own, new mystique of tech hedonism and Burning Man opulence, built on a simulacra of old San Francisco. To be sure I have friends who still remain in the city, dating to my studies at the San Francisco Art Institute. They are all still making art and run the gamut of art world “successes” from shop-clerk-to-pay-the-rent to international art star. (That is to say precious few are making it on the proceeds of their art work.)

That we all went to a 151 year-old school which itself has failed speaks to trends in American education; liberal and fine arts collegiate programs are in jeopardy nationally, and our culture's valuing of art as either blue chip investment or applied “content” leaves little room for survival between poles of stunning fame or commodified productivity. What good might a philosophy or photography degree be in an age of outsized school debt and in an economic climate where the haves increasingly concentrate wealth and the remainder scramble for scraps? Where is the new American noblesse oblige in retaining artists and thinkers to pirouette for them? Isn't this the first step in humanizing the hoi polloi for an aristocracy? And what lies in store for a society that materializes all imagination for the market alone?

“As California goes, so goes the nation,” according to the aphorism. But what if the nation went, in San Francisco's case, and the city only followed it? Corporate capitalism is eating the national lunch and fattening a minuscule but highly visible minority beyond Gilded Age proportions, why should life in San Francisco be any different? So-called deaths of despair are achieving new, staggering statistical heights and the national mood might charitably be described as unself-aware reactionary. The prevailing public perception of our time seems to be one of the general population's instability, accompanied by the specific invulnerability of the powerful. Anxiety rules. A consumptive remodeling is what the city's center furnished me to photograph during my last decade there and that's what I made pictures of, a moment in time. It was a time of transition as all of the decades of my life have been—to have been born into the relative stability of the Boomers' time and feel as if the world could be made to change for the better! Such luxury.

But real, ultimate, human luxury—relief from anxiety—is not a commodity we are any longer endowed with, even among the 0.01%. This isn't meant to parrot the punchline of innumerable cartoons from my childhood; the end is *not* nigh. There are no ends, only epochs and their transitions between. San Francisco has entered its current epoch and we are all traveling, together, into the age of a dangerously altered climate. The historical epochs we dwell in are ours alone—they are assembled of the consequences of the stories we tell and choose to believe. Howard Thurman, a profoundly influential presence in Martin Luther King's life, understood the importance of identifying the prevailing story of an epoch and asking the central question which that story begged. In his *Jesus and the Disinherited* he identifies the fundamental question of Jesus' youth in Palestine as, "what must be the attitude towards Rome?" He goes on to ask, relative to that primary question, "Was any attitude possible that would be morally tolerable and at the same time preserve a basic self-esteem—without which life couldn't have any meaning."

Thurman goes on to call this "the most crucial of questions," and characterizes Rome for Jews and other non-citizens as "the enemy; Rome symbolized total frustration; Rome was the great barrier to peace of mind." He then writes simply, "And Rome was everywhere." Thurman explains insightfully that no Jew could seek to settle any question in their personal circumstances without first facing and answering the question of what Rome meant to them. Their answer would render them collaborator or resister, and define where they stood in proximity to an exploitive power. He concludes, "This is the position of the disinherited of any age. What must be the attitude toward the rulers, the controllers of political, social, and economic life?" Thurman published the germ of this assessment in 1935, the essay I quote was published in 1949; very obviously he is writing with a Black American population in mind. But the strength of his work is that it transcends specificities of race and time and speaks to the dispossessed of any circumstance. Might it speak even to a city, all cities, dispossessed by an exploitive national ideology—the dogma of the market above all else?

The San Francisco I photographed in the decade prior to my departure was a city dispossessing itself of its stability, of the people and enterprises enabling it to function as a broadly serviceable metropolis, and of its very civic life itself—all under the guise of its satisfying the sovereignty of the market and its ineffable gluttony. I photographed a city answering moral questions such as Thurman might have posed with capital. It was a place mirroring the national enterprise; rewarding economic malfeasance and greed while devaluing social fabric, communities, and by extension, social stability. Both San Francisco and the United States were coming to the end of a long journey, arriving in a new epoch cooperatively constructed, and accompanied by cities and towns country-wide.

We citizens, who spin and choose to believe the stories that define epochs, cities, and nations would do well to ask ourselves what our attitude towards our own, present, Rome might be. And we might do well, while considering our answers, to recall Ursula Le Guin's 2014 concluding of her speech in acceptance of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contributions to American Letters, as oft-quoted a peroration as it might be. In addressing our lives under capitalism Le Guin reminds us, "...its power seems inescapable—but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings."

J. Matt
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About the Photographer and Author

J. Matt moved to San Francisco to attend the San Francisco Art Institute (R.I.P.) and graduated with a degree in photography having won the Sobel and photography merit scholarships. Studying there with Linda Connor, Pirkle Jones, and Hank Wessel they fell in love with SFAI and late '80s San Francisco—the place itself and its politically activist culture. Though shaken by the HIV epidemic and Loma Prieta, the love continued, even as it was tested significantly through an eviction, the demolition and development (condos) of their SOMA live-work space of twenty years, and an ensuing departure.

A photograph in this book appeared in *Places Journal's* publication of 'San Francisco: An Index of Influence,' a look at apparently mundane locations in the city which were, in fact, the sites of nationally consequential events. That story can be seen at bit.ly/sf_index and will interest those curious about San Francisco's hidden histories. The *New York Times* published one of these photographs in its coverage of 2006's "Day Without Immigrants" strike. One of these photographs was exhibited in "The Family of No Man" at Cosmos-Arles Books in 2018, and several were exhibited at Dickerson Print in San Francisco, part of a show responding to Robert Frank's *The Americans*, also in 2018. Otherwise all of these photographs are previously unpublished or unexhibited.

J. Matt is a documentary photographer and feature writer living and working in hometown Honolulu whose work generally focuses on global warming and its intersections with place and social, political, and economic histories. Represented by ZUMA Press, Inc., and a member of the Society of Environmental Journalists and the National Press Photographers Association, J. Matt may be reached at jmatt_photo@proton.me or via social media (@tinyschocks).

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