

## Pictures from a Not Quite Gone City: A Field Tripper's Rambling Guide to San Francisco

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*This article contains links to images which provide a supplement of visual ethnography. Readers can follow links one by one, or go to the [gallery on Dropbox](#) where they can all be viewed together.*



### Near views from afar

Schoolboys of my generation learnt one thing that stuck in our minds about San Francisco: earthquakes ([sf0](#)). The frequent earthquakes which devastated large parts of the city had something to do with the San Andreas fault and meant inhabitants went about in daily dread of the world collapsing ([sf1](#)). Later, this impression of a city living dangerously, on borrowed time, was confirmed whilst watching the eponymous Hollywood movie featuring the great 1906 quake plus Clark Gable, Jeanette MacDonald and Spencer Tracy ([sf2/ 3a](#)): at the end of the film the ruins dissolve into a modern rebuilt urban landscape ([sf3b](#)).

Fast forward to the 1960's and San Francisco is again the epicentre of an upheaval, only this time a cultural one. To those of us who grew our hair long, went on CND marches, and hit the road with a copy of Ginsberg's *Howl* in our back pockets, San Francisco, and in particular the City Lights Bookshop were the *fons et origo* of the Beat Scene, a source of inspiration at once poetical and political. Nowadays the bookshop is a shrine to the beats, and like many a pilgrim I was delighted to come across texts I had thought long out of print, and even more so to sample the work of contemporary poets who are doing their best to move out of the long shadow thrown by Ginsberg, Corso, McClure, Snyder, Ferlinghetti, Rexroth and the rest. They – or their avatar manuscripts - can all be found in the Beat Museum just down the road from City Lights. Perhaps fittingly it is a rather ramshackle affair, the faded photographs and battered typewriters evoking, nostalgically enough, a pre-digital world we have all but lost ([sf 4-7](#)).

The mutation of beat culture into the hippy 'youth quake' of the late 60's shifted the action from North Beach to Haight-Ashbury and instilled the city with a psychedelic New Age aura which it has never entirely lost ([sf7-10](#)). Much of the creative energy released during that time was channelled into making capitalism hip and cool, as exemplified by the growth of the corporate Infotech giants in Silicon Valley in the 1990s and, more recently, by the creation of enormous wealth through the farming of marihuana now that the drug has been legalised in California. Perhaps it is not entirely coincidental that in a recent survey 16% of the local population claimed to have been abducted by aliens and to have thoroughly enjoyed the experience. There is clearly more than one way to get high. This is a city that has consistently lived up to its zany SF reputation.

Laurence Ferlinghetti, the doyen of the beat poets, still lives in the city and has played a leading role in organising opposition to its sweeping gentrification. This process started in the old port area and its immediate hinterland, but now affects most of the Bay Area, rendering it uninhabitable for people on low incomes and resulting in mass homelessness. In his famous early poem, *Pictures of a Gone World*, Ferlinghetti vividly describes the scene of his childhood and youth growing up in what was still a largely working-class port city:

*Away above a harborful  
of caulkless houses  
among the charley noble chimneypots  
of a rooftop rigged with clotheslines  
a woman pastes up sails  
upon the wind  
hanging out her morning sheets  
with wooden pins*

Half a century later, in his inaugural address as the city's Poet Laureate, Ferlinghetti writes:

All that made the city so unique in the first place is in danger of going down the tubes, it is a city undergoing radical transformation from a diverse metropolis that welcomed immigrants and refugees to a wealthy homogeneous enclave.

This will shock readers of *Tales of the City*, the series of novels by Armistead Maupin which depict San Francisco's gay and alternative culture from the 1970s through to 2008 in such a positive light. We are used to thinking that the city which elected Harvey Milk as the first openly gay civic administrator in the USA, someone with strong roots in the local counter culture, must be bulwark of opposition to the onward march of corporate and rentier capitalism. Gay culture remains strong in some areas (sf31-32) but, as I was to discover when I visited the Castro district, the gay presence can actually accelerate the process of gentrification, not only because the growth of the city's creative industries is concentrated here and nurtures gay entrepreneurialism, but also because the power of the pink pound serves to inflate rents (sf10).

Much more recently I read a collection of essays and maps by local writers and artists, which Rebecca Solnit has assembled into a San Francisco Atlas (sf 11a/11b). The book's title is *Infinite City* and Solnit makes the point in her introduction that an atlas, however comprehensive, can never be more than a highly selective exercise. Yet what a selection! This is how the frontispiece sets out its stall:

Of principal landmarks and treasures of the region, including butterfly species, queer sites, murders, coffee, water, power, contingent identities, social types, libraries, early morning bars, the lost labour landscape of 1960, and the monumental cypresses of San Francisco, of indigenous place names, women environmentalists, toxins, food sites, right wing organisations, World War 2 shipyards, Zen Buddhist centres, salmon migration, and musical histories of the Bay Area; with details of cultural geographies of the Mission District, the Fillmore's culture wars and metamorphoses, the racial discourses of United Nations plaza, the South of Market world that redevelopment devoured. And other significant phenomena, vanished and extant.

Solnit's inspiration for her Atlas project is Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, with its surreal cartography of a multitude of possible – and impossible – urbanisms, all of them loosely based on Venice. But the rich mosaic of themes selected for the San Francisco Atlas are far from arbitrary. They are designed to trace and interconnect the lines of force, both hidden and visible, economic and political, ecological and cultural, that have shaped and transformed the city over the last century. This is done through a series of judicious juxtapositions, bringing into sudden and surprising alignment fragments of the past, present

and even future. My favourite is the map that accompanies Chris Carlsson's magisterial essay on the industrial archaeology of the city. It shows the spatial distribution of the now vanished shipyards and their close proximity to the surviving earlybird bars which the workers used to visit after they came off the night shift, and which are now patronised by the denizens of the 24/7 city. This brings home with graphic immediacy the impact of de-industrialisation which Carlsson's text so cogently dissects.

## Re-orientations: a tale of more than two cities

As readers will have gathered, San Francisco has for a long time held a special place in my personal cultural geography, albeit one overlaid by what academics call *social imaginaries*. So, when I was invited earlier this year to visit the city by the publishers of my new book, PM Press (based in the Bay Area), I jumped at the chance. Yet none of the prior mappings I have just described prepared me for the culture shock I experienced on arrival.

I stayed initially with an Irish landlady in the Sunset district on the edge of Golden Gate Park, and got a crash course on the American Dream, which, after all, is a narrative of successful immigration, of people coming from difficult circumstances elsewhere in the world and making a better life for themselves and their families. Mary Daley and her husband emigrated from Cork in 1958 when times were hard and the Celtic Tiger economy not even a distant dream. Their building business prospered during the postwar housing boom in San Francisco and they were able to send their two sons to private Catholic schools. Their photographs and trophies on the sideboard in the front parlour pay tribute to all American boyhood and constitute a shrine to sporting and academic success. Mary was a fierce republican in both the Irish and American sense. In the first case she was mightily impressed by the fact that my son had married the daughter of the head of the IRA Army Council in Belfast and worked as a Press Officer for Sinn Fein. However, as a keen Trump supporter, she was much less enthusiastic about my own political biography, although she insisted that I give her a signed copy of my book, *Archive that, Comrade*, despite the fact that it wears its Leftist credentials on its cover, if not its sleeve.

There was still a Catholic church and social centre in Sunset, but the neighbourhood was overwhelmingly Chinese, including all the restaurants, shops and businesses. Given that San Francisco has been home to the Chinese diaspora for more than a century I was surprised to discover that few of the older folk spoke any English, until I realised that many of them had emigrated quite recently from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Sunset is a prosperous and solidly settled area but if you were to construct a map of San Francisco showing the population distribution by ethnicity and class, in many areas it would show a high degree of correlation, the poorest neighbourhoods - and the ones most ripe for gentrification - being invariably inhabited by Latinos and African-Americans.

It is always interesting to find one's way around a strange city and I had no trouble in following Walter Benjamin's injunction to get lost in order to do so. Given the city's rigorous grid system it is easy, in theory, to get one's bearings with or without the help of a map. However, mental maps are analogue and not digital homing devices, and therefore work their navigational magic by drawing on phenomenological or landscape space, not Cartesian co-ordinates. My points of reference, a local community café and supermarket, a convenient ATM, the bus stop for downtown, were not easily locatable on a Google map, but in any case it was their relations of contexture *and* contiguity that were important. Downtown I found the cavernous grid of the CBD oppressive (sf12-13c). The fact that some of the main streets went on for miles meant that translating the scale of a map designed for cars into a viable pedestrian route was hard work and I often arrived late. Given the erratic public transport system and ubiquitous traffic jams, it is no wonder so many 'SFers' get around on

electric scooters; these can be picked up and dropped off almost anywhere and tackle even the steepest hills. In the end I overcame my ideological squeamishness and used an Uber. This works brilliantly until the Sat Nav system breaks down and the drivers, who have little or no locally situated knowledge, do not have a clue where to go. In one instance I had to get someone at my bookstore destination to give the driver directions on his mobile phone and then had the difficult task of translating these onto a Google map the driver could follow, since he spoke little English. So yes, mobile privatism rules okay and yes, the map is not the territory. On the other hand, the Bay Area rapid transit system still does the business, not least in providing a moving platform for the city's break dancers who made commuting out to Berkeley a real pleasure (sf13a/13b).

What I found most dis-orienting was the fact that the ecology of San Francisco is made up of very discrete districts, in demographic and sociological terms. They do not feel or behave like the kind of urban villages I am used to in London and other European cities, and even in New York. They are more like microcultures that have taken temporary root in the interstices of a very tightly planned urban structure. The one exception was Haight-Ashbury, which still trades off its flower power past and has cultivated a kind of retropsychedelic chic, complete with some aging but still decorative hippies.

San Francisco is, however, not Los Angeles. It has a recognisable centre now dominated by elegant skyscrapers, supposedly quake proof (although a scandal was brewing because it seems that many of them did not in fact conform to building regulations). Between 1960 and 1980 the downtown skyline was transformed by 30 million square feet of new office space and there were many further largescale developments between 1994 and 2011 in formerly industrial, warehouse, and railroad areas.

Take Mission Street for example. Once the heart of Boholand, this working-class district, with small businesses, workshops, lodging houses and cheap cafes, fought off early attempts at gentrification but is now in the throes of rapid hipsterisation, another front line in the ongoing confrontation between real estate interests (the so called 'coalition for growth') and long-established resident populations (sf15). The result has been mass evictions as landlords rush to exploit the rent gap and hike rents beyond the reach of those on low incomes. Mission Street is now a home away from home for the homeless, accommodating a pop-up tent encampment of several hundred people of all ages and ethnicities. It was the sheer scale and blatancy of this accumulation by dispossession that was shocking. San Francisco is the richest city in the richest nation in the world, yet in places it looks like a refugee camp in some benighted 'third world' country (sf14). Indeed, with the rapid deterioration of its infrastructure and public services, San Francisco can be regarded as a failed local state. A local newspaper put it like this:

It's becoming impossible for a lot of the people who have made this a world class city, from the fishermen and pasta makers and blue-collar workers to the jazz musicians, beat poets, hippies and punks – to exist here anymore. And when you've lost that part of the city, you've lost San Francisco.

Nevertheless, the city is not quite gone. The boho community still manages to hold on and find niches for itself amidst the tightening net of gentrification, living neither fully on- nor totally off-grid. I experienced this possibility for myself when I moved from my AirBnB digs in Sunset to a houseboat in Berkeley marina. The boat was owned by an artist friend of my wife and consisted of a wooden shed-like structure perched somewhat precariously on a concrete floating pontoon salvaged from the Second World War. The locals nicknamed it, appropriately enough, The Ark, and it was moored on the dock, sandwiched between two gleaming million dollar yachts (sf16). The Ark was one of many boats, housing what is left of Berkeley's alternative society. This is a community which traces its roots back to the campus movement of the 1960s. Some of these once-upon-a-time student radicals have become intellectual luminaries of the New Left and successful academics well able to afford the



inflated house prices. Yet many continue to eke out a precarious existence on the margins, and like our host are being put under pressure by the threat of rent increases designed to make the marina an exclusive safe harbour for the wealthy yacht owning classes.

## From the other side of the tracks

There is also resistance to gentrification from community activists. The most visible sign of opposition is to be found in an alleyway off Mission Street, which features a display of stunning street art, providing a dramatic graphic narrative for the many community campaigns and struggles for social justice which have taken place in the city over the past decade ([sf17-25](#)).

It was here that I came across the work of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project in the form of a mural wall map ([sf26-27](#)) and arranged to meet up to interview one of the members of the collective. It was explained that AEMP uses digital cartography for the purpose of data visualization and analysis, and combines this with narrative interviews documenting the dispossession and resistance of San Francisco Bay Area residents to the process of gentrification. The project not only documents the displacement of people and but intervenes politically to try to halt evictions and to put pressure on unscrupulous landlords. The investigative focus is on the relationship between speculation, high tech corporations, property flipping, racial profiling, and luxury development. To guard against the danger of producing statistically based maps that reduce complex social and political worlds to simple dots, in 2013 the group began an exercise in narrative research, collecting numerous stories from a range of groups, those evicted by shell companies, those who have experienced increased racial profiling, and those who have fought their evictions through direct action and sometimes won.

AEMP is staffed by volunteers, many of them working in what is left of the city public services and with both access to official data bases and the skills to analyse them. There is little doubt that their strategic location coupled with their political commitment is the reason for their success.

On my way to do this interview, I ran into a street demonstration which had been organised by a Bay Area coalition of housing and environmental action groups ([sf29-30](#)). It was taking place outside a five-star hotel because inside the mayor and other city officials were being wined and dined by real estate companies, members of the coalition for growth, as part of their campaign to win planning consent for further major developments. The influence of the Black Lives Matter campaign was evident in many of the placards and talking to some of the organisers it became clear that racial profiling was not just about discrimination by the police and courts, but was a practice being actively pursued by landlords.

The current situation in San Francisco is the culmination of a much wider process of globalisation and de-industrialisation. To get a sense of both its local impact and *long durée*, I went to talk to Chris Carlsson, the eminent labour and social historian of San Francisco who has established an archive focussing on just this theme ([sf36](#)). What follows is a summary of the interview.

*Shaping San Francisco adopts a nonlinear, multi-level approach to telling the history of the city. We wanted to develop a data structure for the project that was independent of a particular piece of software. The project brings together labour history and ecology (and many other themes), and tries to make connections between those silos. There is no mapping interface as such, because this would*

*have meant having to geolocate thousands of texts and images and there simply was not the resources to do that. The site is organised thematically, for example, into decades, neighbourhoods and populations.*

*My involvement with Rebecca Solnit's atlas was minimal; my chapter grew out of a series of email exchanges when she picked my brains about a lot of stuff, but it was essentially her project. She was the hub and the rest of us were the spokes. The problem I have with a lot of counter mapping is that it is very beautiful to look at but there is not much you can do with it. What do you actually learn from many of these maps which you couldn't get in greater depth elsewhere. Some of them are very dense with data but they are also very time specific; they are snapshots of particular moments. You can show before and after quite dramatically, but the actual process of change, how you get from then to now, from there to here, remains largely invisible. And as a historian it is that process I want to capture.*

*We are witnesses to a commodification of history, its organisation into fragmentary byte-size packages for easy consumption. Shaping San Francisco's collection at [foundsf.org](http://foundsf.org) is a living archive. It is a public utility that relies heavily on community support and participation. The funding bodies don't like it because it doesn't fit neatly into any of their categories. But there is a broader problem to do with the impact of neo-liberalism, and the privatisation of social experience. This has led to a de-historicising of everyday life. Most people do not think of themselves as historical agents. The idea that they can shape history rather than merely be subject to it has come to feel strange, even 'unAmerican'. There is a large reservoir of popular participation that remains untapped, and which this archival project is attempting to reach. For example, we need to expand the notion of labour history to include all the work that people do for which they are not paid. Not just housework or do-it yourself home improvements, but the countless ways in which people seek out non alienated forms of manual and mental labour, collaboratively and voluntarily. This not only contributes to the reproduction of society but also creates an improved sense of well-being.*

Leaving Cal's house, I walked straight into an example of what he was talking about. It was a warm Friday night and a large graffiti-ed parking lot (sf37-38) had been commandeered by a local DJ and rap crew. Hundreds of people, mostly young, mostly Black or Latino, were standing around chatting and chilling out, taking in the vibe, listening to the music and smoking spliffs. Apparently, this was a regular community event, which moved around the neighbourhood to a different spot each week. People heard about the location by word of mouth or social media and so it stayed ahead of police interference. No-one got paid for organising this gig, and you won't find it on any of the tourist maps or entertainment guides. Nevertheless, it spoke volumes about what is not quite gone in San Francisco.

## Left fields forever

The main purpose of my visit to San Francisco was to give a series of talks, readings and signings of my new book ([sf39](#)). The book is published by a small and very energetic outfit based in the Bay Area, and through its presiding genius, Ramsey Kanaan, I met some very interesting local lefties, many of whom had a long track record of engagement in community and national politics dating back to the 1960s. It was certainly an immersive experience which at times I found rather overwhelming. In my day job as an urban ethnographer I do not spend much time talking politics with activists, but rather with what might be called the inactivists. I get them to tell me stories about their lives and try to figure out why their evident sense of social injustice, and that of others like them, has come about, and how this manifests itself either in self-destructive behaviour or in lashing out at scapegoats.

So it was a refreshing change to present my arguments about Left memory politics to sympathetic audiences, which ranged from anthropology students to radical archivists, and included a very Young Trotskyist group (who actually laughed at my Jewish joke about the Lenin/Trotsky debacle<sup>1</sup>) and a very old Marxist Study group, many of whom had great difficulty in hearing what I said but nevertheless asked some very pertinent questions.

One highlight of my visit was an event at the Green Arcade bookstore downtown, where I shared a platform with Dick Walker who was launching his new book *Pictures of a Gone City*. The book explores the impact of Silicon Valley and what he calls 'the dark side of prosperity' in the San Francisco Bay Area. It is a *tour de force*, by a Marxist geographer who is a political activist as well as an emeritus professor at Berkeley. Dick's approach was not at all academic, and while he marshalled an impressive array of facts and figures in support of his argument, his informal style of address was full of quips and telling anecdotes. Imagine Michael Moore explaining the theory of surplus value to a bunch of teenagers or David Harvey illustrating rent gap theory by telling a joke and you will get some idea of Dick's performance. All that was missing from his analysis were the voices and stories of the people all this had happened to. Geography without ethnography gives us the city in stone but not in the flesh.

Another highlight was an event at the Prelinger Archives, an independent film collection and library housed downtown and run by a remarkable couple, Megan and Rick Prelinger. The library where we met is a huge room with floor to ceiling bookcases – so much so familiar – but the 50,000 books which explore different aspects of San Francisco's history are arranged in a unique fashion designed to promote browsing and serendipity. For example, the section on 'Suburbia' is next to the section on 'Domestic Environments' then 'Architecture', which becomes 'Graphic Design', which in turn leads to 'Typography' and 'Fine Arts', and then 'Advertising' and finally 'Sales'. There is no Dewey Classification system or card catalogue and the distinction between digital and analogue texts is deliberately blurred. Megan conceives of the library as

a local workshop, not an institution. We serve tea, and we encourage photography and scanning and any other form of non-destructive appropriation. That kind of environment is very natural to people in the millennial generation and people who have grown up during the resurgence of craft and DIY spaces.

If every archive is implicitly or explicitly a kind of map, then this is one that encourages you to explore the territory in your own way without having to follow directions slavishly. But if you are in a hurry to get from A to B in the quickest possible time, as many researchers are today, then you will find a visit to the Prelingers' archives a frustrating experience ([sf40](#)).

Being interviewed by Sasha Lilley for her KPFA radio programme 'Against the Grain' has definitely got to be one of my best memories of the trip. Started by a pacifist after the Second

World War, the station has gone through many changes in personnel over the years, but has consistently broadcast dissenting voices: writers, artists, public intellectuals and political activists. It is owned and controlled by its listeners, is strongly embedded in the counter culture and remains a thorn in the flesh of the West Coast corporate and political establishment. Its continued existence in the age of social media is a small miracle. There is no equivalent in the UK, with Resonance FM the nearest we get. So it was a real pleasure and privilege to be interviewed by Sasha, the station's chief programme animator. Her shrewd and knowledgeable questions about contemporary memory/identity politics and their relationship to the Left forced me to dig deep to come up with replies that were worthy of them.<sup>2</sup>

On my few free days, I checked out some of the city's many museums and galleries. There were two shows that made an impact on me. Tiffany Chung is a Vietnamese American artist who makes delicate cartographic drawings exploring the different ways in which natural and manmade disasters transform the ecology of urban spaces and their inhabitants. Much of her work depicts the displacement of populations through war, famine and poverty, but she is also concerned about the potential destructive effect of global warming. In 'One Giant Great Flood' for example she super-imposes the existing and future transport network in Ho Chi Minh city, where she lives, as the authorities try to anticipate the impact of sea level rise (sf 41-42).

Another show which explores ecological themes features a giant 'Fog Machine' (sf 43-45). San Francisco, of course, is famous for its fog (although I enjoyed brilliantly sunny days throughout my stay), but in this installation the fog is treated as a benign natural phenomenon that actually protects the city's animal, plant and even human ecology. This show was sponsored by the Future Farmers of America, a student youth organisation based in agricultural colleges across the country which takes a very progressive and pro-active stance towards environmental issues.

Finally, I visited the Retort Collective, a network of radical intellectuals convened by the redoubtable Iain Boal, a leading figure in the San Francisco scene, as part of his commitment to keeping alive the spirit of critical inquiry which characterised 1968 at its best. The group includes the art historians T.J. Clark, Anne Wagner and other luminaries of the New Left. Iain is one of the co-editors of *West of Eden*, a study of Utopian communes in Northern California and as a welcome weekend break from the promotional grind, he took me out of town to Mendocino County, a major area of settlement by the Hippie 'back to the land' movement in its exodus from Haight in the late 60's and early 70's. We stayed with Cal Winslow, a distinguished social and labour historian of the West Coast and one of the contributors to the book. Cal still lives and works there and runs the Mendocino Institute, which promotes communitarian values. He told lots of stories about the pioneer days of the Sixties and I was intrigued to learn that some of the established farmers took the hippy city kids under their wing and showed them the ropes. One of them had been an IWW activist in the 1930s so his long-haired apprentices got a lesson in labour history as well as in how (not) to let the grass grow under their feet.

Another surprising link between the alternative society and the labour movement came from discovering the poetry of Philip Levine in the Mendocino bookstore. He was a working-class poet who grew up in Detroit, when it was at the heart of the American car industry and ended up living in Mendocino. In his posthumous collection *The Last Shift* he chronicles with humour and anger, but also great lyrical precision the culture of blue-collar workers and the destruction of their labourhood as Capital fled to more profitable locations abroad.

The fact that it was 50 years after 1968 was brought home during my trip to Mendocino by the arrival of a TV company who wanted to make a series of programmes looking at what had happened to the original hippy settlers. As Cal stressed to them, the importance of 1968 for today is that it offered a glimpse of a civil society founded on principles of co-operation



not competition, and built on networks not hierarchy. This is society whose objective conditions exist within an advanced post-industrial economy, but whose subjective conditions are eroded by the hyper-individualisation and precarity associated with the just-in-time production not only of goods but of the quantified self (sf 34-35, 49).

## Political cartography revisited

The whole experience made me think about how political cartographies are constructed. We are all too familiar with the Left/Centre/Right distinctions which today no longer correspond to much of political activity. Their logic derives from a historical and now outdated image of the body politic institutionalised in the spatial arrangements of parliamentary assemblies. It certainly does not adequately represent the full array of ideological positions and practices now emerging outside the domain of party politics, and rooted in specific sites of conflict in civil society.

In depicting the demographic distribution of such phenomena, we need to take much more account of the spatial dimension. It is not just that a lot of community politics focus on issues of identity and belonging, but that these issues are strongly indexed to place, and to narratives of place. In the UK we used to refer to 'red' villages and towns which had a tradition of labour militancy. Nowadays we talk about these same places as 'left-behind areas' whose populations are attracted to populism - whether authoritarian or libertarian - and who vote with their feet for Trump or Brexit.

The presence or absence of a critical mass of activist organisations and support networks can certainly make a difference to political outcomes in such areas. In San Francisco the sheer scale of population displacement means that activists are always fighting a rear guard action, yet their embeddedness in the social fabric of the city remains a source of strength. There are lessons to be learned here for what is happening nearer to home in the UK. In London, the 2050 development plan has identified 36 'opportunity areas' where major regeneration projects are scheduled to take place. In many of these areas there is little or no tradition of community activism, and a mix of elderly and transient youthful populations. One of the key challenges for the Citizens Atlas of London, which Livingmaps is currently developing, is to reach the inactivists and to engage them in a form of participatory mapping that will empower their involvement in popular planning and local decision making. The Shaping San Francisco project and the Anti-Eviction Mapping Network are encouraging examples, demonstrating that given the determination to keep on keeping on, it is possible for small groups to make a big difference.

If counter-mapping is to develop as part of a strategy of politically effective community action then it has to develop a methodology that moves from capturing purely reactive responses - stopping a fracking project here, a luxury housing scheme there, the destruction of public amenity everywhere - to a pro-active one. It needs to create a vision of the kind of neighbourhood, the kind of city, that people want to live in. This not just a question of converting Nimbyism into Yimbyism but of changing the rules of the game. If this cannot be done, then we are all in for a bumpy ride. In his talk, Dick Walker argued that San Francisco is *the* city of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in that it represents the true trajectory of digital capitalism, providing a utopia for a small wealthy elite and a savage dystopia for the rest. In other words, Blade Runner 2049. Even that film suggests that life is not a video game. The problem is that the imagineers and planners who are now in charge of mapping out our urban futures increasingly act as if it was.

## Books

Iain Boal et al West of Eden Communes and Utopia in Northern California Retort PM Press 2012

Chris Carlsson Ten Days that Shook the City 1968-1978 City Lights 2011 / Reclaiming San Francisco 1995-98 City Lights 2014/ Shaping San Francisco: A guide to lost landscapes, unsung heroes and hidden histories City Lights 2019

Phil Cohen Archive that, Comrade Left Legacies and the Counter Culture of Remembrance Retort PM Press 2018

Lawrence Ferlinghetti San Francisco Poems City Light Foundation 2001

Philip Levine The Last Shift Alfred Knopf 2016

Rebecca Solnit Infinite City a San Francisco Atlas University of California Press 2010

Dick Walker Pictures of a Gone City: Tech and the dark side of prosperity in the San Francisco Bay Area PM Press 2018

Cal Winslow Rivers of Fire: Commons, Crisis and the Imagination 2016

## Organisations

Anti-Eviction Mapping Network <https://www.antievictionmap.com>

Future Farmers of America: <https://www.ffa.org>

KPFA <https://kpfa.org>

Prelinger Archives: <https://archive.org/details/prelinger>

PM Press <http://pmpress.org>

Shaping San Francisco Talks, Tours, Books, Special Projects: <https://www.shapingsf.org>  
Digital Archive: <http://foundsf.org/>

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> At a meeting of the Soviet Communist Party shortly after the split between Lenin and Trotsky, one of the delegates approaches the central committee who are sitting on the podium with a telegram. Lenin opens it, and in a shrill voice trembling with a mixture of excitement and triumph turns to the assembled delegates:

‘Comrades, great news! I have in my hand a communication to me from Trotsky. It reads “I was wrong. You were right. I should apologise”. A wave of emotion sweeps over the hall, some delegates are cheering, others crying. The ideological split in the international communist movement is over, unity is henceforth assured. In the midst of all this pandemonium a Jewish delegate from Minsk gets up and addresses the hall. ‘Comrades, I do not wish to be a party pooper and dampen your enthusiasm, but I am afraid that Comrade Lenin has not quite understood the message in the way it was intended. It should read: *‘I was wrong? You were right? I should apologise?’*

<sup>2</sup> The interview can be heard on my website: <http://www.philcohenworks.com/>