



The San Francisco Ferry Building on the Embarcadero with the Bay Bridge in the background

# Walking Through Time

by Mitchell Near

image info

Asphalt. More asphalt. Concrete. More concrete. The sidewalk shrouded by a series of driveways. Where there are no curb cuts leading to garages, cars occupy every possible space, parallel parked and crammed into the linear limits of the curb. Where there are driveways, cars frequently park across the sidewalk, blocking the walking path. San Francisco, an American city, a California city, blithely set up for the convenience of the car.

It's February 1987. I've packed my sparse belongings and stuffed them into the trunk and back seat of my beat-up Volkswagen Bug. I've driven from San Diego to San Francisco, hoping to build a new life in a vibrant walkable city on the west coast. When I emerge on the north side of Golden Gate Park in the Richmond District, the only plant I see is a single scrawny ten-foot-high street tree struggling toward the sunlight on a block that stretches over two hundred feet. Not one planting bed, of even the smallest size, adorns the front facades of the row houses.

Somehow, I find a parking place, wedging my Volkswagen into the miraculous gap between two cars. I get out of my car and pull out the scrap of paper in my wallet with the address of my friend. I'd met Ken, a resident of San Francisco, when he visited my roommate, Richard, in San Diego. The three of us spent one evening drinking wine and conversing. Richard and Ken, both being therapists, were easy to talk to. I asked Ken if I could stay with him for a bit as I was planning on moving to San Francisco. He said yes.

I find the correct address, press the

## San Francisco Earthquake and Fire of 1906



buzzer and say hello to Ken over the intercom. He buzzes me in. I open the iron gate, walk up the hall-like stairway to his flat on the second floor. He stands in the open door frame of his flat, a wiry Asian man, midthirties, with black hair and glasses. He greets me with a smile and guides me into his place.

Nineteenth-century San Francisco was destroyed by the [1906 earthquake](#) and fire. After three days of urban inferno, little of the city remained standing. For the twentieth-century version of San Francisco, local developers followed a suburban pattern. They laid out streets with curb cuts, driveways, and garages, all in front, breaking the continuity of the sidewalk. They created a city where the vast majority of streets have no true pedestrian space.

Many neighborhoods in the older cities of the eastern United States were designed with alleys. Chicago's current network of alleys totals more than nineteen hundred miles. The alleys provide service spaces that include garages and trash bins. The sidewalks are continuous and pleasant places for pedestrians. You can walk down the sidewalk without being confronted by a driver pulling into or out of a garage or a car parked right over the sidewalk, creating a barrier like the Great Wall of China. You can enjoy the facades of the nineteenth-century row houses and not be visually assaulted by the gaping, blank-walled spaces of garages and the helipads of driveways.

San Francisco is a city of driveways. Or, more accurately, it is an American suburb, with the buildings crammed closely together, masquerading as a city.

image info

## The Loma Prieta Earthquake of 1989



October 17, 1989, 5:04 pm. The [Loma Prieta earthquake](#), magnitude 6.9, rolls through the San Francisco Bay Area in earthbound waves that shatter windows, topple buildings, and collapse freeway decks that moments before had floated above the earth in haughty disregard of the planet's power.

During the quake, I hold onto the side of the wide opening leading into my office on the sixth floor of a San Francisco financial district skyscraper. I'd probably be safer under my desk. Time itself slows down as the fifteen seconds of shaking seems to extend several minutes. I hear co-workers moaning in fear. One woman cries out, "Please stop!" The shuddering ceases and a female manager orders us out of the building. We all proceed in stunned silence down the stairway to Sansome Street.

Upon reaching the ground floor and stepping out of the building, I stand on the sidewalk and survey a bit of the damage done when plates of the earth collide. I see chunks of decorative plaster leaves descended from the Corinthian capitals of a neoGreco bank building on the corner of California and Sansome splayed on the sidewalk. Shards of glass litter the streets and sidewalks. I thread my way around impediments, walking south toward Market Street. "No power for the subway," I hear from a passing pedestrian. Okay, I'll walk home. Five miles to the flat I share with my girlfriend in Golden Gate Heights, about two hours to get there.

I walk west on Market with hundreds of other pedestrians. Despite the life-threatening earthquake of only minutes before, or perhaps because of it, there's a celebratory vibe in the air. Many people smile, some laugh, as we amble together down the

wide sidewalk, moving at a faster pace than the cars crawling down Market Street. Young men stand in the middle of intersections and direct traffic, voluntarily replacing the failed traffic signals.

After a mile of walking, I glance across the street to see water cascading in sheets down the inside of a five-story glass-clad building. I reach mid-Market, passing the entrance to the Civic Center subway station, yellow warning tape draped across the entryway. Several homeless people sit on the sidewalk, staring into the distance. A bit further on, I see a hand-printed sign in a shop window reading, “Bay Bridge Collapses!”

Another mile and I spy a pizza joint on Church Street a bit north of Market. I make a quick detour and walk into the restaurant. A middle-aged man stands behind the counter. I’m the only customer. “Sorry, buddy,” he says. “I’ve only got cold pizza.”

“I’ll take a slice,” I say and hand him some cash. I stand in the restaurant and eat my veggie pizza.

I return to walking west on Market. After another half mile, I pass Castro Street and climb the steep grade of upper Market. Halfway up the hill, I stop and turn to look out over the expanse of the city. Black curls of smoke rise from the Marina District. I wonder how extensive the fire below the smoke is. I turn around and begin walking the remaining two-and-a-half miles home, aware of the fragility and transience of the city.

The [San Francisco Ferry Building](#), built between 1892 and 1898, survived intact both the 1906 and 1989 earthquakes. For many years, it served as the visual anchor at the foot of Market Street, the portal into and out

of the city, as thousands of commuters arrived and departed each day via ferry boats. With the advent of the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge in the 1930s, Bay Area commuters turned their backs on travel by ferries, instead embracing the rise of the private automobile. In 1959, with construction of the Embarcadero Freeway and its double-decker roadway running directly in front of the Ferry Building, the city lost its connection to the majestic gateway that united the waters of the Bay with San Francisco’s main thoroughfare of Market Street.

The Embarcadero Freeway sustained extensive damage in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake and was closed to traffic. San Francisco Mayor Art Agnos spearheaded a campaign to remove the elephantine expressway that sliced through the city’s waterfront. A year of disputatious wrangling between those who saw the double-decker roadway as essential and those who perceived an opportunity to improve the city and reclaim a connection to the Ferry Building ensued. At last, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted six to five in favor of demolishing the freeway. The wrecking balls came out on February 27, 1991.

During that year of bickering, I walked by a stub of the dead freeway just north of Embarcadero Center, the 1970s-era modernist development of four slab-like office buildings, the tallest being the forty-five-story Four Embarcadero Center, fused with a three-level outdoor shopping mall. I stood in front of the freeway remnant, a dystopian vision, the ramp sheared off to reveal a roadway devoid of cars and supported by massive concrete columns, protruding into the Financial District—an empty fragment of mid-twentieth-century arrogance.

After the monster freeway was broken into bits and carted off into oblivion, the Ferry Building came back into view. We, the citizens and visitors of San Francisco, could once again see that grand portal at the end of Market Street at the edge of the Bay.

An extensive renovation of the Ferry Building proceeded in the late 1990s. The skylight above the grand nave, covered over in the 1950s with cheap ceiling panels, was revealed in all its glory. The Ferry Building Marketplace opened in 2004. Shops and restaurants celebrating local food culture populated each side of the arcade below the skylight. Tourists and locals strolled into shops selling shitake mushrooms, California olive oil, single origin chocolate, cranberry walnut bread, and wild Alaska salmon. Natural light illumined the arcade. Human voices drifted through the walkway. The conversations of the present merged with those of the past as life returned to the San Francisco Ferry Building.

My first year in San Francisco I explored the city on foot. I stayed with Ken for a few weeks, then rented a room in the outer Sunset, not far from the ocean. My Volkswagen Bug soon died. I paid \$20 to have it towed to a junkyard. I traversed the city on foot and in subways and streetcars.

I rode the L-Taraval streetcar downtown and disembarked at Powell or Montgomery or Embarcadero Station. I ambled up and over and down [Russian Hill](#), [Nob Hill](#), [Telegraph Hill](#). I walked past the mansions on Broadway in Pacific Heights, reveling in the view of the waters of the Golden Gate and the tawny-colored hills of Marin County.

I wandered about Fort Mason, a military fort reclaimed as a cultural center, its two-

story wood frame buildings enfolding art galleries, theaters, a music school, and exhibition spaces. Leaving Fort Mason, I walked past the boatyard of sailboats and motor launches, the water gently lapping at the hulls. I proceeded along the Marina Green, its verdant lawn framing a view of the Golden Gate Bridge. Wisps of fog slid past the bridge’s orange towers, a brisk breeze blew in off the water. I held onto my Panama Hat.

In 1864, Samuel Clemens worked as a beat reporter for the *Morning Call*, walking from one end of San Francisco to another, speaking with criminals, prostitutes, policemen, and theater-goers. As he trudged along the sidewalks and encountered the denizens of the city, he became Mark Twain, the archetypal American writer.

In 1921, Dashiell Hammett, employed as a Pinkerton detective, tailed suspects on foot, on foggy nights through the [Tenderloin](#), San Francisco’s neighborhood of crime and intrigue. His fictional private investigator, Sam Spade, walked the same streets as his creator, attempting to solve a puzzle where no one could be trusted.

In the 1950s, the dense, walkable San Francisco neighborhood of [North Beach](#) provided the backdrop for the beat poets to drink and converse and write. They imbibed cocktails and double espressos at Vesuvio Cafe, perused books at City Lights Bookstore, and read their poetry at the Coexistence Bagel Shop, ambling the short distances between the trinity of cafe, bookstore, and performance space.

Cities—where people walk and encounter friends and strangers, wander into bookstores and coffeehouses—engender



a sense of place. Art and life coalesce into a maelstrom of creativity.

•

It's 1999. I'm walking on 9th Avenue, up the hill, a few blocks south of [Golden Gate Park](#). I sense a hulking presence behind me. I turn around to see a man driving his car on the sidewalk, heading toward me at a slow speed. I'm not surprised. This is a city where people park their cars on the sidewalk. This is a city where people drive their cars on the sidewalk. I cross the street.

I'm on the board of directors for Walk SF, a pedestrian advocacy group. Four of us form a committee to fight sidewalk parking. We meet at the Thirsty Bear, a bar on Howard Street, and brainstorm ideas. Perhaps we can sue the city. We could find legal help and use the Americans with Disabilities Act as a fulcrum to reclaim the sidewalks. Nothing happens.

In the city of San Francisco, there are still tens of thousands of cars parked on the sidewalks day and night. The city tacitly allows this. Sure, you can call parking enforcement and complain, one car at a time, and a parking officer may or may not show up to ticket a car that may or may not still be parked on the sidewalk.

When Enrique Peñalosa became mayor of Bogotá, Colombia, in 1998, car owners parked their vehicles on the sidewalk with impunity. Mayor Peñalosa successfully banned cars from the sidewalks of Bogotá. He stated: "I was almost impeached for getting cars off sidewalks which car-owning upper classes had illegally appropriated for parking."

Walk in virtually any neighborhood of San Francisco and you will be confronted with cars parked on sidewalks, cars pulling into and out of driveways, and even cars driving on sidewalks. Drivers will blast through stop signs and red lights. Drivers will speed down



residential streets. And, worst of all, drivers will hit pedestrians.

The San Francisco Department of Public Health reports that incidents of pedestrians being hit by cars is 30 percent higher here, on a per-walking-trip basis, than in all other locations in the United States. This is both a dangerous and unpleasant city to walk in. In Denmark's Copenhagen, Belgium's Ghent, Spain's Cordoba, cars have been banned from whole neighborhoods. The entire city of Venice is car-free.

I have walked in the center of Ghent, marveling at its collection of medieval buildings standing side-by-side along a canal. I have walked in the old Jewish quarter in Cordoba, delighting in the flowers displayed in terracotta pots hung on white-washed walls defining narrow cobblestone streets. I have walked on the streets of Venice, alongside neighborhood canals, relishing the gentle slosh of water and the bougainvillea spilling over garden walls. When I strolled the venerable and visually rich streets of those historic cities, a great weight was lifted from my shoulders. I could hear my thoughts and the reverberations of my footsteps. I emerged into plazas where people sat outside at small round tables to drink wine or coffee, to regale a friend with a story, to contemplate the sky as day slipped into night.

The cities of Europe are in the forefront of reclaiming streets for people. The cities of America remain places devoted to the storage and movement of cars.

It's 2021. I'm walking in the Forest Hill neighborhood, a few blocks from my house, on a crisp October morning, a bit past 7 am. I'm on Sotelo, looking at the barn-like expansive

house designed by the arts and crafts architect Bernard Maybeck just across the narrow street from me. Is that a dog? With no owner? No, it's a coyote, trotting down the middle of the street with an engaged look and tall ears. This is his, or her, street as well as mine. The coyote ignores me and moves through the early morning light with a silent dignity.

Coyotes now live in cities throughout America—Chicago, New York, San Francisco. Humans aren't killing predators as they did so rampantly in the past, and the coyote knows how to adapt to cities. They're not hunted here, and there are plenty of squirrels, pet food, and garbage to munch on. The main cause of death for coyotes in cities is being hit by a car.

We are not alone on this planet, whether we live in cities or small towns or rural areas. We share the earth with coyotes and falcons, mountain lions and owls. Our cities are human creations. At the same time, they are outcroppings of nature, in a sense no different than a termite mound or a beaver lodge or a bird nest. Bower birds build structures composed of sticks that form what can be construed as a foot-high pointed Gothic arch. The males build these bowers to court the females of their species. Beavers build lodges that contain dining areas. Termites construct mounds with ventilation systems consisting of tunnels that bring fresh air to an underground nest. Perhaps our skyscrapers, built with steel and glass and lobbies clad in marble, are no different than the mounds and lodges and nests created by our fellow animals.

As of 2018, according to the United Nations, 55 percent of humanity lived in cities. That



percentage is projected to increase to 68 percent by 2050. Tokyo, the largest city in the world, has a population of thirty-seven million. We cannot continue to devote the public space of our cities to cars. And the streets are public spaces—or at least they were at one time. Before the automobile colonized our streets, pedestrians shared the streets with horse-drawn carts, crossing where they desired and walking on the street. The streets may have been muddy, but they were unrestricted spaces, not dominated by cars. And, in many places, they are once again becoming public spaces where you can walk, bicycle, or hop on a tram or streetcar that glides down steel tracks.

The technophiles and many environmentalists envision a gadget-filled version 2.0 for the future of our cities. We will all have electric cars, and computers will drive those cars. That projected future is simply

another iteration of the car-based city. Instead of a city where cars aggressively dominate our public space, we can transform our cities. We can walk down quiet streets and converse with our fellow citizens. We can hear each other talk. We can hear trees rustling in the wind. We can hear American robins and white-crowned sparrows sing their dawn chorus. We can move about with a sense of ease, dropping the stressful vigilance we maintain to avoid the onslaught of cars.

The choice is ours. But, as one portion of humanity proceeds towards cities for people, not cars, another speeds along the highway of the status quo. We have an opportunity to transform our cities into places of joy and beauty and safety. Let us choose the walking and bicycling streets of Copenhagen as our role model, not the car-clogged horror of America's suburbanized cities. ❄️