



*Eight years after neighbors defeated a proposed apartment building, a prime piece of San Francisco's waterfront remains as a parking lot and private health club.*

# The City of Love and its Discontents

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Abstract: Dan Solomon articulates a compelling critique of the rationalist architectural modernism – what he calls the “City of Hope” – that dominated urban design for much of the 20th century. His answer, the “City of Love,” prizes particularity and sensitivity to physical, social, and historic contexts, and has become a new planning orthodoxy, particularly in the San Francisco Bay Area. But the City of Love takes longer and costs more. It is careful, sensitive, seeks to do no harm, and defaults to inaction. While these are valid principles in response to the excesses of Modernism, they do not provide an urban program capable of meeting the mounting urban crises of housing, homelessness, and climate change.

Dan Solomon articulates in clear and engaging prose a compelling critique of the architectural modernism that dominated urban design for much of the 20th century. This is the so-called “City of Hope” that sought to eradicate urban ills through the erasure of the city’s physical fabric and the application of a purely rational urban program. His answer, the “City of Love,” like those of Jane Jacobs, Kevin Lynch, Leon Krier, and Colin Rowe, re-valorizes traditional urban fabric, with its human scale, legible patterns, and rich layers of social life. It prizes particularity and sensitivity to physical, social, and historic contexts, and has, in the generation since its ascension, formed the foundation of American urban design practice.

But like every point of view, the “City of Love” has its blind spots and unintended consequences. Its emphasis on localism, particularity, and citizen engagement has become a new orthodoxy, and has

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been encoded (quite imperfectly) into planning practice and law. In the San Francisco Bay Area, a generation of policies designed to ensure thorough public consideration of city-building and its social, aesthetic, and environmental consequences, have made this region one of the most difficult and expensive regions on earth to build housing, just as its economy has exploded, drawing new residents from around the world. Endless public hearings, appeals and environmental review processes (that ironically favor suburban sprawl over sustainable infill) create delays and sow uncertainty, with project approval decisions often falling to the moods of local elected officials. Land use decisions are devolved to the region's 101 local municipalities, with no mandate to respond to mounting regional crises in housing and transportation. Local planning commissions and city councils become venues for scandalized local homeowners (a privileged elite who benefit from housing scarcity) to resist housing projects on the basis of parking, traffic, shadows, and "neighborhood character" – the darker side of urban particularity.

Coded language about "those people" (ie- the poor and people of color) moving into new apartments is common. As a result, the Bay Area – a booming region of 7.5 million people – has seen its average annual housing production reduced by nearly half since the mid 1980s. Prices have skyrocketed, but the friction introduced (with the best of intentions) into urban growth has kept housing production from scaling up to meet the demand. The region's valiant nonprofit affordable housing developers can offer only a drop in the ocean of need, and the US shows no inclination toward a serious social housing program of adequate scale (or any, in fact). As a result, thousands live in vans and in huge, squalid tent encampment under freeways, and thousands more have left the region entirely despite abundant jobs.

The City of Love and its practitioners gave planners and designers fundamental insights about urbanism. But the City of Love takes longer and costs more. It is careful, sensitive, seeks to do no harm, and defaults to inaction. While these are valid principles in response to the excesses of Modernism, they do not provide an urban program capable of meeting the mounting urban crises of housing, homelessness, and climate change. None would disagree that the best suit is bespoke and made to measure by a tailor, but that is cold comfort to the naked man.

The physical fabric of the city is an essential expression of its social life, and can either facilitate or impede the kind of community cherished by urbanists. Cities embody the economic and spatial logic of a particular time and place. The careful replication of a bygone urban form is no more an authentic urbanism than the imposition of an exogenous rational order. This is in no way an endorsement of the wrecking ball. But lest we think timidity of intervention is harmless, we must remember that a city may also undergo a profound social and economic transformation with little change to the physical fabric, as in Venice, or San Francisco's Mission district, whose middle classes have been hollowed out with almost no physical development. indeed, sometimes the reticence to make big urban changes in the face of big urban crises is actually complicit in social injustice and dislocation. Such is the case in San Francisco.

I believe a synthesis is possible. There is no reason we cannot provide large amounts of new housing quickly, in a physical form that internalizes the lessons of the City of Love. We have learned an enormous amount about how the physical city can facilitate the social city. And how to create welcoming, humanizing places. We can put those lessons to work at a scale and urgency appropriate to the current crisis.



*Thomas Hawk: East Bay Express Rated #1 Best Homeless Camp in Bay Area (Flickr).*