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MY HOME IS YOUR PLAYGROUND

## **An Evolving Place in History:**

### **In the face of progress, displacement and re-invention.**

Since I first migrated to the Bay Area, eighteen years ago, I had the desire to live in San Francisco. The city reminded me of the city where I was born and raised, Valparaíso, Chile, because it is an old port. San Francisco, like Valparaíso, is a historic place dating all the way back to the Spanish conquest but as it has moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> century; it has changed into a mega modern city where neighborhoods are constantly challenged by displacement and re-invention.

Born from the dispossession of the native inhabitants, dominated by New Spain (Spanish Era 1700-1821)<sup>1</sup>, then by the independence of Alta California (Mexican ranchos, 1821-1846)<sup>2</sup>, and later by the Anglo-American Gold Rush<sup>3</sup> and Victorian era<sup>4</sup> (1846-1900), San Francisco prior to WWII was still part of an older world that was formed around ethnic neighborhoods. Thus we have legendary neighborhoods like Chinatown, the Fillmore, Japantown, the Castro and the Mission. However, during WWII and the Cold War era, (late 1940's through the 1980's) while the United States was attempting to expand its own global influence on democracy and capitalism, the whole country was under massive urbanization. This was a period of sustained economic expansion where primarily White politicians and developers took the opportunity to change the urban and economical landscape with the pretense of protecting the country from foreign invasion and creating a more efficient, productive middle class nation<sup>5</sup>.

Based on this rationale, in a recent conversation I had with scholar Karl Beitel (a friend that has lived in the Inner Mission for several decades), he pointed out that during the 50's and into the 70's the city of San Francisco began the reconstruction of Downtown, which was the first area to be drastically changed under this national "urban revitalization". Then Japantown and the Fillmore followed. However, this urbanization was also going to affect the Mission District in particular the Inner Mission, thus endangering the neighborhood character as a whole.

Based on Beitel's account the Mission District was going to have the same fate as the Fillmore. Developers of the time were going to renew (modernize) everything between 25th Street and 14th Street, Valencia and Folsom. Developers in the 60's had the idea of creating condominiums and a whole set of new building and roads that, in their view, would revitalize the area. However, they didn't realize that there was already a community of people living in the Mission that had created a unique neighborhood character. This community strongly opposed the developers, especially after witnessing what had happened to the Fillmore, where the urban revitalization initiatives had displaced the largely African American population<sup>6</sup>.

Between 1940 and 1970, the Inner Mission had grown prominently into a blue-collar Chicano and immigrant Mexican/Latin-American community that not only was becoming influential in the local culture and politics but also state wide<sup>7</sup>. *"In 'The Magical Urbanism', Mike Davis has argued that the Latino migration into American cities has helped to invigorate city character and the **democracy of public space**."*<sup>8</sup> It was in the Inner Mission where many artistic and social movements were flourishing<sup>9</sup>. One of the most inspiring is the movement of Las Mujeres Muralistas<sup>10</sup>. As one of the founders, Patricia Rodriguez<sup>11</sup>, had told me that up until this time, murals were mostly recognized by men and done by men. However, Las Mujeres, founded by 3 Chicanas and 1 Latin American, challenged the sexism and conventions of the art world and the characterization of second-class citizenship that created a certain displacement. Inspired by the civil rights, these women were the first to paint in the famous Balmy Alley, and influenced women artists all around California and the nation, by contributing to the reinvention of what "Chicanismo" and "Latina-American" was through social and artistic activism.

In a similar way the Mission District played a strong leadership role in the social and political front and the Inner Mission, in particular, was a Mecca for organizations that had long been establishing local/political power in defense of labor, human and migrant rights. Through this social revolution, *"thousands of people in the Mission District were linked into the Mission Coalition Organization (MCO)"*<sup>12</sup> – an organization that was responsible for some of the most prominent non-profit groups that still exist today as the *"Mission Housing Development Corporation (MHDC), a builder for affordable housing, and the Mission Economic Development Association (MEDA), which provides services for small businesses."*<sup>13</sup> It was this conglomerate of people represented by the MCO that was able to block the demolition of the heart of neighborhood and helped dissipate the effect of gentrification. Thus the developers in the 60's were only able to build the 16<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Street BART stations, which incapacitated the neighborhood for three years.<sup>14</sup>

## The Inner Mission in the Face of the Dot-com and Post dot-com Eras

In our present state of affairs there have been recent events of a similar magnitude that I am finding very troublesome. These events are the “dot.com boom” (1997-2001) and what I call the *post dot.com syndrome* (2001-Present). I define this as a syndrome because it shows a considerable shift in opinions, emotions, and behaviors that are contributing to the erasure of the social landscape, in particular challenging and questioning the legitimacy and ownership of the Inner Mission’s character and its communities.

Between the years (1997-2001) the Inner Mission of the Mission District was facing a second wave of massive gentrification that would not only transform it but also the City into the most expensive rental market in the country<sup>15</sup>. Known as the Dot.com era, this event was the effect of the Internet industry that boomed in Silicon Valley between 1995 and 2000, and which brought concentrated wealth to the financial district<sup>16</sup>. This vast influx of money

... unleashed an unprecedented appreciation of housing prices and rents in San Francisco. Median rents for a two bedroom apartment would rise by over 300% between 1993 and 2000, while housing prices have recovered and surpassed prior levels seen at the end of the 1980’s housing market bubble in real terms (San Francisco Planning Department, 2001). New residents poured into San Francisco during the dot.com boom, drawn by the expansion of well paid employment in the financial sector, the multimedia industrial enclave springing up south of Market, and the spill over workers employed in Silicon Valley facing even greater difficulties finding affordable housing in the South Bay. (Beitel)<sup>17</sup>

Due to this drastic event,

... a significant portion of once solidly working class neighborhoods in San Francisco’s southeastern corridor - South of Market, the Mission, and Hunters Point - have been transformed into luxury consumption playgrounds for the region’s nouveau bourgeois and professional/ administrative cadre possessed of ample sums of disposable cash and a desire to live in close proximity to urban cultural amenities. (Beitel)<sup>18</sup>

Based on these historical events more than 200 dot.com businesses were situated in the Mission alone.

Faced with this drastic digital makeover, “*the Anti-Displacement Coalition (MAC) would rapidly emerge as the city’s most vocal and militant opponent of the displacements brought about by the digital office conversion boom, and by the summer of 2000 was a principal protagonists leading a groundswell of neighborhood opposition. . . .*”<sup>19</sup> Similar to the push back of 30 years earlier, the displacement of people has continued, though in a lesser form. The legacy of the Dot.com era had re-opened the landscape of the Inner Mission as a new kind of testing ground for displacement and re-invention. Based on the archives of the San Francisco Tenant Union last quarter of 2005, there were 900 plus Ellis Evictions<sup>20</sup> in process. These were concentrated primarily in the Mission District and neighboring districts.

Among all of these changes, the Inner Mission is becoming more desirable and touristy. Today in 2006, the Mission is not just attracting marginalized societies as it once used to, such as illegal immigrants, community of color (blue collar workers) and radical activists, but rather it is also attracting a mainstream middle class that is bringing new capitalistic values and, most importantly, a new kind of tourist industry - cultural tourism. Hence, the post dot.com syndrome is the after effect of the dot.com where neighborhoods like the Inner Mission, that are still facing gentrification, are being perceived as an amusement park, as the playground for an affluent population that is moving into or to the periphery of the neighborhood. In addition, there is a new population that is also coming just to hang out in the Mission and not necessarily to contribute culturally and politically to the necessities of the neighborhood.

The Inner Mission as an amusement park is the “eccentric”, “exotic”, and “amusing” place, but this is true as long as it maintains a sense of distance from the actual Inner Mission that for some is “too mission”. This term refers to the immigrant experience of the neighborhood, particularly the “Latin American” that is culturally and racially diverse. Thus esthetically it seems “colorful”, a mismatch of cultural styles, where people from different nationalities with both modern and indigenous traditions are here together to survive, and this is most apparent along Mission Street and 24<sup>th</sup> Street.

However, the Inner Mission is in an extraordinary position, it is no longer being defined by immigrants but by an privilege and affluent population that is manifesting its presence along Valencia Street. Prior to 1995, Valencia Street was primarily residential, with a few body-shops, stores and centers, but today it is thriving with new types of businesses that are a creation of a new entrepreneurial endeavor which, to an extent, is exploiting the local “multicultural” character to entertain what I called a new kind of people – the tourist as the multi-cultural consumer.

Thus, the street is thriving with “exotic” amenities, such as Salvadoran, Thai, Japanese, Indian, Mexican, Middle Eastern and Vegetarian restaurants, as well as Burger joints, Pizza and Coffee shops, High cost Organic Food Markets, art galleries, boutiques and furniture stores. Similarly in a lesser way the Mission Street (between 26<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> streets) is also experiencing this type of tourism that has made its way into the neighborhood. Nevertheless, this side of the Mission, divided from Valencia Street by Bartlett Street is characterized as being the dangerous side<sup>21</sup> and so most of what you will read in the national news is about the murals, which Precita Eyes, in their efforts to preserve this history, has transformed into a tourist attraction.

It is then this form of tourist culture that has little connection to the local communities and history that is contributing to the re-invention of the Inner Mission. Newcomers visit Valencia Street with the fantasy that this is the Mission, but little do they know that this street had been primarily residential and is culturally very new. In this regard, it is a make believe paradise that isn't the Mission but rather a new place that is much closer to the values of, for instance, Noe Valley. However, this street is in close proximity to Mission Street and so is often mistaken as being “the Mission”.



The character of the Inner Mission is now being represented, not to empower what is here but to serve a particularly affluent consumer that is used to traveling, visiting historic places, is well read and has a progressive sensitivity. As a result, there is a boom in the number of newspapers and travel agencies promoting “the Mission” or “the Mission District”, but they are actually promoting the west side of the Inner Mission, that borders Dolores Mission, Dolores Heights and Noe Valley, three neighborhoods transformed by an affluent professional class of people. In a recent article in the travel section of the New York Times, Gregory Dicum describes the Mission post 1970's as an “urban wasteland” which is “only now...coming into its own again.”<sup>22</sup> Ironically, he focuses most of his attention on the new businesses on Valencia Street. Thus the post dot.com syndrome is the re-invention of the neighborhood as an amusement park, where outsiders see it as an “eccentric” place, rather than as their home.

## Before it is Fully Re-invented:

The Inner Mission historically has stood up for decades to many waves of urban redevelopments endangering the livelihood of what I consider to be a community that deserves to be respected. Living in the Inner Mission has been a unique experience that is unlike any other place even inside the city. Here I mean that the Inner Mission has a particular way of being as a Latin American community that has a unique character. One that welcomes diverse constituencies of people that, once they find their way in, ultimately gain the respect of the community. In this regard, the Inner Mission has maintained an attitude to a particular sense of community that is hard to find in any other place in the Bay Area. Unlike the suburbs of the Bay Area - Burlingame, Redwood City or Palo Alto - the Inner Mission has maintained an urban plan that welcomes pedestrians and, more importantly, a public kind of neighborhood that is similar to Chinatown.

But how did I end up living in the Inner Mission of the Mission District? I never intended to live in the Inner Mission but, in my High School years, I came with my family regularly, and later, I would visit friends who were residents in the neighborhood so the area was familiar. However, I moved here because my income was very low, the house market was cheaper than any other place and because Ariel, then my partner, and I were both, in principle, Latinos and immigrants. We moved to a complex of four units that is owned by a man from El Salvador, who has been a citizen for decades.

Consequently, over the years, the Inner Mission has adopted me and I have adopted it as my home. Through this process of acceptance and adaptation, my understanding of "community" has been shaped by this experience. I am Chilean and though there is a large population of Chilean in the Bay Area, in the Inner Mission I am in the minority. But, within the context of the political alliance of Latin Americans/Immigrants, I have been able to learn to accept our differences with great respect. In my experience living here, it has been very important to learn from the existing members of this community because it is their experience that has inspired me to understand that I have a home (place) in this country. It has been here where I have been able to meet Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Cubans and a whole other set of people who have given me the most generous support. It is this place that has provided me with people that have been crucial to my self-identity as an immigrant, even though we don't share the same nationality or cultural background.

In my experience living in this neighborhood has meant that we have pride in ourselves; a notion that has been very important in this neighborhood and that has been passed on to me. In a strange way, living in this neighborhood where so many Latinos congregate, has opened the door for me to be able to succeed as a Latina and an Immigrant outside of the community. The neighborhood even with its limited resources provides a social landscape where artists, teachers, and leaders can be nurtured and mature.

Similarly, this neighborhood is also proud to have social centers that provide education and health services and various other commodities that make it unique. It is a place which has a host population that is multi generational; you can see children and youth playing, and elders hanging out talking and reminiscing on their old times. It is a place where it feels good to be multinational, multiracial, and multicultural. It is a place that is funky, funny but committed to survive in the face of all odds.

However, to see this neighborhood changed by forces that are beyond my control is deeply painful. This population of well-off middle-class values, young professionals, that are primarily White and Euro-Centric, indirectly has created a new kind of criminalization of the existing non-White community in order to feel "safe". (Since, the dot.com boom, I have often witnessed the harassment of residents who are the least able to defend themselves due to a language barrier.) In this regard as these new residents are changing the economic face of a proudly working class ethnic community, they are also changing the character. When I look at the dynamics in the neighborhood, in considering the Euro-centric and Middle class community that is moving in, there is a sense of distance and segregation from these newer residents that, ultimately, hold the economic and political upper hand. Or, even more insidious, there is a sense of denial, in particular among the more radical of this population, to the fact that their own sense of transformation of the place and space is authorizing the re-invention.

So, watching these social changes in relationship to the (racial and economic) power dynamics generated by this makeover, and observing, as the "other being privileged", that "cannot speak and participate in the production of theories of resistance without bearing in mind [that I am] among those who have been provided with the opportunity to speak [about my] condition."<sup>23</sup>(Trinh T. Minh-ha) I am going to speak of a situation that is very challenging because as a resident of the Inner Mission – who in the eyes of the "master", the White population, is the "other" and "marginal" but is also pursuing a higher education in their own institutions – I have crossed the boundary that would have kept me as a perpetual "subject of knowledge". I am now coming around to use the very same tools that would have placed me as a perpetual "subject of knowledge", to question, disturb, and displace the very same regime (authority) that is re-inventing, transforming the neighborhood that has hosted me and has provided me with a sense of home.



Thus, in pursuing this goal, I have created a conceptual project that aims to challenge the paradigm of power relationships that are most evident between Mission Street and Valencia Street (25<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> streets). The project is entitled **The Agency of Community Tours (TACT)**, and it is a temporary agency (as action/live/installation art project), that will conduct a social campaign entitled *Bringing America Closer to Unfamiliar Places*.

Through this project, my main goal is to open the possibilities of these two distinct geographical locations into a place that ultimately can bring recognition and a sense of understanding from the people on “both sides of the fence”. On one hand I want to give people from Mission Street an opportunity to understand that Valencia Street is theirs as well, by giving them the authority to peruse the street as visitors invited by residents, and as consumers and tourists. On the other hand, I want to give the people from Valencia Street, who by default had been privileged to have the authority, as cultural tourists, a chance to visit Mission Street in a way that they would have not expected - as visitors that were actually invited by members of this community, but also help them understand that this area is not theirs to take but actually to experience it and grow.

## The Agency of Community Tours (TACT)

*Bringing America Closer to Unfamiliar Places* is a three phase, 6-7 months campaign that intends to highlight with humor the unique idiosyncrasies of two streets that are only apart by one block but due to economics, demographics and cultural boundaries, they are distinctly separated, deified and even often unknown to each other. By focusing on these two streets (Mission and Valencia) the campaign will invite residents, migrants and/or tourists, depending from which street they are from, to win one of our two tours that will familiarize them with the “other” environment.



Based on this inquiry and process, TACT will organize *Bringing America Closer to Unfamiliar Places* in 3 phases:

**Phase 1:** The agency will conduct a three-week survey/outreach campaign, one on Mission Street and one on Valencia Street. The objective is to take a **random survey** to document the public opinion that people have about the “other” street and by completing the survey, each person will be able to **enter a raffle to win one of our “Deluxe Tours.”** Through this survey TACT will extrapolate, what people think of the “other” street and why they use the street they are standing on. Then, through this information, the agency will design the tours and the surveys will become part of two binders that will accompany two installations (described in phase 2).

**Phase 2:** TACT will host a small public event in its two temporary offices to **choose the winners and design the tours**. Each street will host an installation/office to plan the tours. Besides using the survey, the agency will conduct research and invite specific community businesses, cultural centers and residents to participate and/or to help inform the tours. The agency will also plan to create **two brochures** that will accompany the tours and that can be used in the future, as informational material.

**Phase 3:** The agency intends to conduct two of its “**Deluxe Tours**” simultaneously through a weekend (Friday, Saturday and Sunday). One tour will take place on Valencia Street with people from Mission Street and the other on Mission Street with people from Valencia Street. Using tailored tours, TACT will show to respective participants both recent and historic events that have led to the formation of the two streets and who actually occupies them. As part of the tours, the agency will provide the winners with an all expenses paid tour to selected restaurants, cafés and cultural centers to have a closer experience to the way these streets are used, thus bringing them closer to these unfamiliar places that are only separated by one block.

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Final Project for the Critical Theory: *Tourists and Vagabonds* by Stephanie Ellis

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<sup>1</sup> López Urrutía, Carlos. “El Ejército real de California” Ch. 2, <http://www.bbslaguna.com.mx/California02.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Website: Presidio of San Francisco “Spanish and Mexico Period: 1776-1846”, [http://www.nps.gov/prsf/coast\\_defense/spanish/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/prsf/coast_defense/spanish/index.htm)  
National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior Golden Gate National Recreation Area

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<sup>3</sup> Mission Housing Development Corporation, 1974. "Plan for the Inner Mission, S.F.: Inner Mission History 1776-1974", San Francisco Historic Center.

<sup>4</sup> Website: Victorian Station 1999-2000. "Victorian Architecture" <http://www.victorianstation.com/vicarch.html>

<sup>5</sup> Article: "United States", Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States)

<sup>6</sup> Peter L. Stein | Rick Butler | Elizabeth Pepin | Joseph De Francesco | Camara Kambon | Ossie Davis, 1999. Video: "The Fillmore: It Was Called 'The Harlem of the West'- Then Urban Renewal Came to Save it", <http://www.pbs.org/kqed/fillmore/program/index.html>, An episode of Neighborhoods: The Hidden Cities of San Francisco [www.kqed.org](http://www.kqed.org), c 1999 Calif: KQED, Inc.

<sup>7</sup> Allende, Isabel and Pam Rorke Levy, 1994. Video: "The Mission", <http://www.kqed.org/w/hood/mission/> VHS (60 min.) An episode of Neighborhoods: The Hidden Cities of San Francisco, [www.kqed.org](http://www.kqed.org), c 1994 Calif.: KQED, Inc.

<sup>8</sup> Wetzel, Tom. 2001. Article: "San Francisco's Space Wars", pg. 51. Process World

<sup>9</sup> Allende, Isabel and Pam Rorke Levy, 1994. Video: "The Mission: A Barrio of many Colors" <http://www.kqed.org/w/hood/mission/barrio.html>", VHS (60 min.) An episode of Neighborhoods: The Hidden Cities of San Francisco, [www.kqed.org](http://www.kqed.org), c 1994 Calif.: KQED, Inc.

<sup>10</sup> Terezita Romo, "A Collective History: Las Mujeres Muralistas," in *Art/Women/California 1950-2000*, eds. Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 177-186.

<sup>11</sup> Patricia Rodriguez in 1972 was the lead artist who organized the "Las Mujeres Muralistas" in the San Francisco Bay Area, with members Consuelo Méndez, Irene Pérez, and Graciela Carillo. From the *Cronicas* at Stanford University: [http://cronicas.stanford.edu/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=38&Itemid=53](http://cronicas.stanford.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=38&Itemid=53),

<sup>12</sup> Wetzel, Tom. 2001. Article: "San Francisco's Space Wars", pg. 51. Process World

<sup>13</sup> Wetzel, Tom. 2001. Article: "San Francisco's Space Wars", pg. 51. Process World

<sup>14</sup> Wetzel, Tom. 2001. Article: "San Francisco's Space Wars", pg. 50. Process World

<sup>15</sup> Beitel, Karl. 2003. "Chapter 4. Digital Networks and the Dialectics of Opposition: Struggles in the Mission" From *Transforming San Francisco: Community, Capital, and the Local State in the Era of Globalization, 1956-2002*. "unpublished dissertation, University of California, Davis, 2003

<sup>16</sup> Beitel, Karl. 2003. "Chapter 4. Digital Networks and the Dialectics of Opposition: Struggles in the Mission" From *Transforming San Francisco: Community, Capital, and the Local State in the Era of Globalization, 1956-2002*. "unpublished dissertation, University of California, Davis, 2003

<sup>17</sup> Beitel, Karl. 2003. "Chapter 4. Digital Networks and the Dialectics of Opposition: Struggles in the Mission" From *Transforming San Francisco: Community, Capital, and the Local State in the Era of Globalization, 1956-2002*. "unpublished dissertation, University of California, Davis, 2003

<sup>18</sup> Beitel, Karl. 2003. "Chapter 4. Digital Networks and the Dialectics of Opposition: Struggles in the Mission" From *Transforming San Francisco: Community, Capital, and the Local State in the Era of Globalization, 1956-2002*. "unpublished dissertation, University of California, Davis, 2003

<sup>19</sup> Beitel, Karl. 2003. "Chapter 4. Digital Networks and the Dialectics of Opposition: Struggles in the Mission" From *Transforming San Francisco: Community, Capital, and the Local State in the Era of Globalization, 1956-2002*. "unpublished dissertation, University of California, Davis, 2003

<sup>20</sup> Ellis Evictions refers to the Ellis Act that "is a state law which says landlords have the unconditional right to evict tenants to 'go out of business.' ... Ellis Act evictions generally are used to "change the use" of the building. Most Ellis evictions are used to convert rental units to condominiums, using loopholes in the condo law." Information by the San Francisco Tenant Union - <http://www.sftu.org/ellis.html>

<sup>21</sup> From the San Francisco Department of Health, "Article: Alcohol-related Pedestrian injuries in the Inner Mission 2000-2004", there is a significant number of injuries along Mission Street, [http://www.dph.sf.ca.us/traffic\\_safety/innermission\\_all\\_including\\_alcohol.pdf](http://www.dph.sf.ca.us/traffic_safety/innermission_all_including_alcohol.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Dicum, Gregory. Nov. 2, 2005. Article: "San Francisco's Mission District: Eclectic, Eccentric, Electric", Travel section, The New York Times.

<sup>23</sup> Minh-ha, Trinh T. 1991. *When the Moon Waxes Red: "The World as Foreign Land"*, pg. 186, NY: Routledge.