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Cover Page Footnote

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ERAS

*Daniel Solomon**

Most seven or eight year olds have only a dim memory of being two and a half. For them, the period five years before lies across an unbridgeable gulf of history, lost in the mists of time. If one happens to have been born in late 1939, the experience of being seven or eight years old was particularly odd, because it seemed that for everyone, grown-ups too, the period five years before lay across the same unbridgeable gulf of history. When people returned from whatever extraordinary way they had spent the years of World War II, the time before the war did not seem retrievable, nor for most Americans of the middle class was there any desire to retrieve those struggling, doubt-ridden times. In many forms of endeavor there was no going back, but in no field was the sense of a decisive break, a total severing of the distant past of five years before more complete than in town planning.

There are multiple reasons for this abrupt severing of history and many are well documented. The stories of the G.I. Bill, the Federal Highway Act of 1949, the actions of the Federal Housing Administration have been told by Kenneth Jackson in *Crabgrass Frontier*, later by James Howard Kunstler in *The Geography of Nowhere* and Mike Davis in *City of Quartz*. They describe the public policies that kept the nation from sliding back into depression after the War, but which also decanted the wealth of cities and built the post-war world of slum clearance, urban renewal, the suburban sub-division, the shopping center and the highway.

But these vast and influential public policies were only political and economic gasoline poured on a psychological fire. The War changed people. For so many it was an absolutely unprecedented and life-forming experience of competence. The veterans returned from war in a stupor of hyper-competence, ready to build the world anew. And the places they returned to were the dingy cities of depression neglect where whole neighborhoods had not even had a coat of paint since the 1920's.

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My former teaching colleague Donn Reay was chief architect for the Royal Canadian Air Force in Greenland. By the age of twenty-six, he had built a city in a few months, a form of intoxication from which there is no recovery. My favorite movie as a little boy was "The Fighting Seebees" starring Richard Widmark as the commander of a battalion of combat engineers, hacking down jungles and building their way across the Pacific. The war economy had drawn millions of Southern blacks to these neglected city neighborhoods, and the reaction of the veterans, the Richard Widmarks with their aviator shades and cigarettes dangling from their lips was, "Tear it all down, build something else."

The new San Francisco, planned for better living, replaces the dilapidation and disorder of more than half a century. The rigid street system with its deathtrap intersections is reorganized, simplified. The indiscriminate mixture of commercial, industrial, and residential structures that is the disease of blighted areas is nowhere to be seen.

In this new city of space and living green there are no densely built-up blocks. Here no families live in murky cubicles, damp basements, rooms that are hardly more than closets. Public health nurses find no overcrowded households. No children or young people sleep in the same rooms with victims of tuberculosis. Nor do building inspectors discover unvented heaters, termite-riddled floors and walls. No conflagrations menace whole blocks of firetraps.

Gone are the disreputable joints, the so-called smoke shops, hotels, and pool hall hangouts known to the police. Gone too are the alleys in which juvenile gangs plotted mischief that sometimes ended in murder. In the new neighborhoods of the Western Addition district the cost of municipal services is less than half of what it formerly was but San Francisco counts its gain in more than money — in greater civic pride, in better health, in lives saved.

The New City
San Francisco Department of
City Planning, 1948

In 1948, San Francisco planning director Mel Scott and his academic colleague T.J. Kent issued a document called *The New City*, which proposed tearing down *most* of the Victorian fabric of the city and replacing it with a big green space (at least a space represented by a big splotch of lurid green ink spread across two pages) with widely spaced slab buildings dotted around in it. The prologue to their report quoted above left no doubt as to what they

thought of San Francisco. To them the city of Dashell Hammet and Sam Spade was not merely ugly – it was evil and degrading. One wonders where all the characters of *The Maltese Falcon* would have lived if the whole of their *New City* had been built. It is hard to imagine Sidney Greenstreet in a jogging suit enjoying that great swath of green ink that was to replace San Francisco. It took around fifteen years for a couple of dozen blocks of the Scott/Kent vision of a beneficent and moral place to be realized, but by then people were beginning to sober up from their post-war binge. They began to realize what is now generally known, that San Francisco was not so bad after all, and it was worth a coat of paint and some new electric meters and plumbing. The very parts of the city that Mel Scott and Jack Kent were so intent on tearing down more than fifty years ago are now among the most expensive large tracts of urban real estate in North America.

Jack Kent lived to be a very old man, well into his nineties, and I used to see him frequently, going in and out of the office he kept in the U.C. Berkeley College of Environmental Design. It seemed that he was neither a monster nor a fool, quite the contrary. He was a handsome, distinguished looking fellow in a baggy corduroy sort of way, always friendly, and I deeply regret never learning what he thought about things at the end of his life. Most of the big figures of the post-war years died off before they even had a chance to feel foolish, but Jack Kent went on and for decades. Was he bitter? Was he wise? Was he simply oblivious? It would be so interesting to know, but I never figured out how to ask.

The whole evolution of the American townscape can be divided into eras—one that begins with the earliest colonial settlements and ends at World War II, one that extends from then almost to the present, and now a new era with the work of a current generation reacting to what was built on such a vast scale with such hubris, blind optimism and historiophobia in the fifty years after the war.

The first era of the American town commenced when the great agrarian grids were drawn across the continent: the 640-acre sections and six-mile-square townships established by Congress in the east and Midwest, and the Spanish land grants laid out according to the Laws of the Indies in California and the Southwest. Roads followed section lines, and section lines followed the compass through swamps and over hilltops, a transcontinental triumph of the abstract over the particular. Almost all of the builders of towns in the American West, the speculators, the hucksters, the railroad men, the missionaries and the visionaries came with more or less the

same idea of town fully formed in their heads. There were just a few who had different ideas, neo-baroque deviates like Charles l'Enfant and Augustus Woodward (Washington and Detroit), and there was the romantic planning of Frederick Law Olmsted and his sons and followers, but for the most part, urban America shunned diagonals and wiggles. Our cities and towns were based simply and powerfully on an uninflected rationalist subdivision of the agrarian grid that served as an armature for real estate speculation and a grafting of the urban culture of Europe onto the wilderness. The grid of San Francisco is as ruthless to its topography as the agrarian grids of the hinterlands are to lakes and forests.

There are a number of milestones one could take as the birth date of the second era of the American town, but as good a date as any is the day in 1938 that the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) began work on a national planning code. The residential planning done by the FHA resulted in the FHA Minimum Property Standards (FHA-MPS), a document of incredible power that required obedience to its principles as a condition for federal mortgage insurance. This document shaped the whole explosion of postwar suburbia underwritten by the GI Bill. The polemic behind the FHA-MPS was born in the 1920s. It was that of Clarence Stein, Henry Wright, and Charles Perry. The MPS was based on the belief that American gridiron towns could not accommodate the automobile. It imposed a pattern of enclaves in place of continuous urban fabric, traffic was restricted to arterials, and houses stood on curving cul-de-sacs. The second era of the American townscape took shape after World War II and reached its final form by 1965 with the advent of the business park, the introduction of the Planned Unit Development, and the commercial triumph of the regional mall.

Today, half of what is built in California is new—less than twenty-five years old. But half of it is not new. Much, in fact, is the record of California's great wave of settlement in the 1850s and 1860s. Today the new parts and the old parts house the same culture and the same economy. People in Seal Beach, which is mostly old, aren't very different from people in Newport Beach, which is mostly new. San Franciscans may dress a little differently from people in Irvine, but they work at the same kinds of jobs and watch the same TV shows. Some nice old towns like Crockett have died, but most old towns—big ones like San Francisco and little ones like Calistoga—have hung on and are doing just fine. Most people who live in the new places come to the old places all the time for things

they don't have: streets where you can walk around, bars and cafes, music, theatre, things like that. People who live in the old places tend to go to the new places only when they have to—for work, or to go to the airport or places that discount tires.

Many people in the old places live in ways that were inconceivable at the time the old places were first laid out. They own cars. They shop in supermarkets. They work for large corporations with computers and fax machines. They worry about security and getting from their car to their house without being mugged. They have sun-lit kitchens and sometimes they barbecue outdoors. They exercise like mad all the time. The refitting of the first era town so that modern life can take place within it is something that has occurred spontaneously throughout the world. California is one place that is half old and half new, half built before World War II and half after the War and it is easy to compare this refitted second era town with the first era town. Many people go from one to the other every day and see the differences.

The deficiencies of the sprawling, congested second era town have been noted by many people over the last two decades. Because they are viewed as serious problems by so many people in so many forms of endeavor, a third era of American town building is now underway. This new era was not launched on the tide of a great historic watershed like World War II, or by a collective sense of having reached a single decisive moment from which there is no turning back. It grows from the cumulative experience and convictions of people in fields as disparate as water management and historic preservation, and from the scale of regional planning to that of urban infill on tiny lots. The foothold this new way of building has secured is a tenuous one and its methods and conventions are still being formed. This new era of town making is based on appreciation and affection for many aspects of the first era of the American town, but it is not and cannot be just a re-creation of the time before World War II. Much too much has changed. Population pressures and the demographics of our cities are sharply different from years ago, the basis of our economy is different and we must contend with and master great transformative technologies that infiltrate every moment of our day and that our first era ancestors never thought about.

