Back to the Garden

ROBERT ALTMAN

By BARBARA GRAHAM

I first went to San Francisco in February 1967, the winter before the Summer of Love. The trip was more pilgrimage than planned vacation. I had just turned 19, and was living on St. Mark's Place in New York City's East Village.

Feelin' Groovy
The city's lush Golden Gate Park was where the tribes gathered to hold ritual be-ins, ushering in the Age of Aquarius

A few weeks before embarking on my journey westward, I'd been in the audience at the Fillmore East when Timothy Leary issued his psychedelic rallying cry, "Turn on, tune in, drop out!" Like someone swept away by religious fervor, I heard the call and followed. But after turning on and tuning in, I wasn't sure what to do next, so I set off to find the answer in the place where dropping out was invented.

As it happened, I only stayed for a couple of party-filled weeks (actually, it was one continuous party, interrupted by the occasional be-in in Golden Gate Park), crashing with people I had just met. But I fell in love—with brightly colored gingerbread houses, staggering vistas and a robin's egg–blue sky that licked the bay and gave off a diaphanous light unlike anything I'd ever seen in the bricked-in East. I promised myself that someday I would return for good.

It took seven years, one divorce, numerous pit

STEPHEN FRISCH

Pre-Starbucks
Cappuccino, laid-back conversation and (for sure) a little contraband were always available at the Drugstore café, a cultural hub of the Haight

stops (Boulder, Colo.; Topanga Canyon; British Columbia) and one small child finally to arrive at my destination. I was not disappointed. The San Francisco Bay Area was more than a breathtakingly beautiful place; it was a state of mind—the edge of the culture as well as the continent—that embraced the misfit, dreamer, bohemian, gay, artist, hippie, rabble-rouser types who had been flocking there in successive waves since the Gold Rush and in whose company I counted myself. My first digs were in a feminist communal household on Potrero Hill, where we shared meals, child care and feelings for a grand total of $500 a month rent, or $150 for my share. It was the perfect arrangement, allowing me to live well (with "vu") and follow my bliss as an actress and writer for a song. Practically everyone I knew was on a similar track. We felt smug and superior to our arty counterparts who were toughing it out in New York City.

I heard the call and set off for the place where **DROPPING OUT** was invented

"Generation after generation has repossessed San Francisco physically and imaginatively as the expression of their ideal life," says Kevin Starr, California state librarian and a fourth-generation San Franciscan. "In the '60s and '70s people saw San Francisco as an alternative to escape the competitiveness of American life. There was an enormous availability of housing stock. You could go out to the Castro or the Mission and find Victorians built for working-class people that are just stunning."

We had our cake and ate it too (at Chez Panisse, when we felt like splurging) without having to worry about such pesky grownup considerations as having a real job or buying real estate. This was still true in 1988, when I followed my new husband to New York and gave up a $600-a-month, shabby but charming three-bedroom Victorian flat in sunny Noe Valley. As the movers drove off with our belongings, I vowed—as I had back in 1967—to come back someday.

My son, Clay, now 29, has beaten me to it. After a few postcollege years in Boston, he hightailed it back to the only city in America he deems worth living in and found an affordable but tiny basement apartment before the rents went sky-high. But as my husband and I toy with the possibility of joining him there, it's becoming clear that the San Francisco we once knew is in peril of disappearing.

"This city is over!" shouts a character in *City for Sale*, a recent offering by the San Francisco Mime Troupe, which has been serving as the city's theatrical conscience since the 1960s. By all accounts there's been a war going on—between neighborhood preservationists and developers, between low-income artists and the dotcommers who've invaded their turf, between small businesses that can no longer afford skyrocketing rents and the chains, real estate offices and pricey boutiques that can. Says Mime Troupe playwright Joan Holden: "It's been a David-and-Goliath knockdown, drag-out fight—the people against city hall." In the November election, the battleground was competing ballot propositions. Prop L, advanced by artists and activists, would have protected artists' spaces from dotcom takeovers, while Mayor Willie Brown's Prop K would have set less stringent limits on new office development. Both propositions lost—L by a razor-thin margin. But the people may be gaining the upper hand. In December's district runoff elections, the 11-member board of supervisors swerved sharply to the left, upsetting the mayor's politically moderate, growth-friendly power base.

There's no question that the city's struggles are the result of a—until recently—booming economy, and in that respect San Francisco mirrors what's taking place in Austin, Seattle, New York and other cities that have benefited from a hefty infusion of cash: unprecedented housing prices, hellish traffic and a growing gap between the haves and have-nots. The difference in San Francisco—apart from its jewel-like beauty—may lie in its mythology.

"Cities have stories to tell about themselves," explains Starr. For example, "New York's story is that 'if you can make it here, you can make it anywhere.' You go to San Francisco—mythwise—to enjoy the hippie Summer of Love, a progressive-politics daydream, a lifestyle as a wine-and-foodie, any number of competing but interlocking visions

of the '60s and '70s." But, he adds, "that narrative is over, and San Francisco doesn't have a new story to tell about itself. It doesn't have a metaphor to embrace its new identity."

This may be one reason why those who, like me, migrated to San Francisco for its anything-goes culture have been in such an uproar. "Everybody's just spitting mad," says Carol Lloyd, who writes a column called "Surreal Estate" for sfgate.com, the San Francisco *Chronicle's* website. "Something essential about San Francisco is changing, and even people who aren't negatively affected are upset." Interestingly, she notes, many of the dotcoms reviled by artists and neighborhood activists started out like a lot of other quirky, creative San Francisco projects. "They just happened to coincide with the rise of Silicon Valley and the high-tech industry," Lloyd says.

The flash point of the crisis is real estate, which is ironic when you consider the antimaterialistic attitudes of the people who drifted west in the '60s and '70s and helped shape the character of the city for the past four decades. For many of us, buying a house was the last thing on our mind. But despite the recent economic downturn, those who haven't already secured their turf are in danger of being priced out—of both the rental and sales markets. "I have several friends who are seriously considering moving to other places because the economic pressures are just too great," says *Tales of the City* author Armistead Maupin, adding that Mary Ann Singleton, his protagonist in the series first published in the *Chronicle,* couldn't afford to rent in San Francisco today. Singleton, like Maupin, lived for a pittance in a rustic roof apartment with sweeping views of the bay. "I spent my 20s in San Francisco simply grateful that I could pay the $175 it took to live in paradise," he recalls. "I could practically find the money on the street." Maupin, who purchased a house in 1993 before the market went haywire, says he would be hard pressed to buy something comparable for a similar price today.

Of course, the real estate crisis is not just about real estate. "It feels as though the soul of the place is in jeopardy," says Wes (Scoop) Nisker, a legendary local radio commentator whose smooth voice has been practically synonymous with Bay Area counterculture for 30 years. "Ever since its inception, San Francisco has been a place where adventurers came, the last outpost of the continent, where you could experience a sense of rugged, outlaw freedom. Now it feels like a theme park of itself—the San Francisco Experience."

The place does feel different. You can almost taste the money, especially in the area south of Market Street, where funkiness has given way to flash, symbolized by the brand-new baseball stadium and the dozens of upscale eateries, hotels and condominiums that surround it. The changes are even more nakedly apparent in the Mission District, ground zero in the war between entrepreneurs—dotcom and otherwise—and the artists, community activists and working people, many of them Latinos, who have lived there for decades. Increasingly, standard-issue low riders and banged-up Toyotas are being edged out by Volvos and SUVs. Over on Mission Street, Foreign Cinema, a limo-flanked, chichi restaurant that opened up right across the street from La Taqueria, legendary purveyor of my favorite cheap burrito, has become the latest target of neighborhood rage. And in nearby Noe Valley, the rundown Victorian duplex where I rented a two-bedroom for $600 a month sold last year for $840,000 (a steal, I'm told).

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So what's an expat who wants to go back to do? Very little, I suspect—unless the housing market crashes completely, which is unlikely. What's more, in the interest of full disclosure, I must confess that my story, like San Francisco's, has changed. I have also grown up and, in spite of my youthful protestations, acquired a taste for a more comfortable life. Even if by magic I could return to San Francisco and live on a pittance in a ramshackle flat—even one with a fabulous "vu"—I'm not so sure I would jump at the chance. To paraphrase William Butler Yeats: That is no country for middle-aged men and women who, like the city itself, have gone a trifle soft. ■

Barbara Graham is a contributor to numerous magazines and is currently at work on a memoir

No Strings
In the late 1960s and the '70s, bohemians, gays, hippies, artists and visionaries flocked to San Francisco to escape the competitiveness of American life

ERICH HARTMANN—MAGNUM