

SundayReview | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

# The Tent Cities of San Francisco

By DANIEL DUANE DEC. 17, 2016

SAN FRANCISCO — California may be the new capital of American liberalism, but everybody who likes the sound of that ought to consider the fate of three recent San Francisco ballot initiatives.

The first, Proposition Q, aimed to eliminate homeless people’s unsightly tent camps by banning sidewalk tents and empowering the police to confiscate them with 24 hours notice so long as occupants were offered beds in shelters. San Francisco has only 1,203 emergency adult shelter beds, for a homeless population of 6,700, but a second initiative, Proposition J, promised to ease that shortfall by earmarking \$50 million a year from a small sales-tax increase, proposed in a third initiative, Proposition K.

In an exquisite illustration of California’s core political neurosis — the tension between our attachment to the pretty view and our desire to care for the least among us without personal inconvenience, even as our population and economy explode — we San Franciscans voted yes on Q and J, and no on K. The people spoke, in other words, and we said, “Get rid of those filthy tents and set aside heaps of money to make sure it’s done in a compassionate way so I don’t have to feel guilty, but don’t squeeze me for a dime.”

Similar contradictions were on display this month, after the Ghost Ship warehouse fire in Oakland killed 36 people. We lamented the deaths, but it was easier to criticize the warehouse owner and operator than face the desperation that drove so many to live there.

San Francisco's homeless population, it bears mentioning, increased less than 7 percent over the last 10 years. Tent camps are nothing new. According to Jeff Kositsky, the director of San Francisco's Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing, what has changed is their visibility. Tech-boom construction has filled empty lots where people "experiencing homelessness" — that's the preferred term — formerly slept in seclusion.

"We also had one individual purchase and give away \$15,000 worth of camping tents," Mr. Kositsky told me. "Other organizations were giving them out as well, and now we've got 80 encampments in the city." The individual in question turned out to be a graphic designer named Shaun Osburn who told me that, with help from a former taxi driver named Tara Spalty, he gave away more than 350 tents.

There are now tents on sidewalks above which people pay \$4,500 a month for one-bedroom apartments. The construction this year of a "Super Bowl City" for football fans in downtown San Francisco in advance of the big game sent even more homeless people looking for new turf. Some formed an immense village of colorful domes between a food-truck court where my daughters like the triple-bacon hamburgers and a vegetarian grocery co-op that sells tofu in bulk.

This camp reportedly had 350 residents at one point, including a slumlord (tentlord?) who rented his spare tents for a few bucks a week. Conventional wisdom holds that such places are populated by drug addicts and the mentally ill, and elements of that camp supported this, from piles of garbage to apparent meth heads toiling over piles of disassembled bicycles. There was something so sane, however, about the tidy rows into which all these tents were arranged that it brought to mind a national-park campground.

This resonance was not lost on the tent dwellers. Crystal Erickson, a 36-year-old who had been homeless for three years, told me, ruefully, "We call it the urban camping experience."

Nearby, on Seventh Street, another group built wooden shanties along a narrow strip of concrete between a street that clogs with rush-hour traffic and a railway that roars with commuter trains in the shadow of a sprawling new biotech center. Germaine Spann, a member of this crew, told me that he scavenged materials from

the Dumpsters at the immense luxury-condo construction site that loomed overhead. He scaled his boxlike home for legal parking spaces, built it on wheels for easy relocation, installed a lockable door and a glass window, and painted a sign that said: “Box City 7th Street. They may look like boxes to you, but to us they are home.”

“They’re ships,” said Jason Albertson, a member of the San Francisco Homeless Outreach Team. “Everybody’s building a lifeboat and living in it.”

Similar outbreaks of ad hoc shelter appeared elsewhere around California and, indeed, all over the West Coast and even Hawaii. In Los Angeles, where the total homeless population grew 11 percent from 2015 to 2016 — to an astonishing 28,464 people — the number of makeshift dwellings grew 85 percent. In San Diego, the homeless population declined while those in handmade shelters grew 69 percent. Sacramento was so overwhelmed by tent dwellers that the city is contemplating creating a “safe ground” zone, while Santa Barbara has designated “safe parking” lots for people who occupy vehicles.

Activists soon gathered signatures for ballot initiatives like Proposition HHH in Los Angeles, which aimed to create a \$1.2 billion bond for new supportive and affordable housing as well as facilities, and Measure A in Santa Clara County, which authorized a \$950 million bond for affordable housing.

In San Francisco, a city government hotline that typically got two or three daily complaints about homeless encampments — 898 total for the year 2013, for example — started getting more than 50 a day, 6,982 by mid-May.

Public outcry included disbelief that our wealthy progressive city allows people to suffer so; assertions that our homeless come from elsewhere because of the warm weather and San Francisco’s generous public services; and the notorious “Tech Bro” letter of Feb. 15, addressed to the mayor and police chief by an entrepreneur named Justin Keller. Mr. Keller announced that he had been living in San Francisco “for over three years,” declared homelessness “the worst it has ever been,” and shrugged off culpability as an agent of gentrification.

“The reality is, we live in a free-market society,” he wrote. “The wealthy working people have earned their right to live in the city.” To support his case that city

officials ought to do something, Mr. Keller added the argument that won him a starring role as the face of technology-industry heartlessness: “I shouldn’t have to see the pain, struggle and despair of homeless people to and from my way to work every day.”

Mr. Kositsky, the city official, did not entirely disagree. “It’s important not to demonize people who complain, who want their kids safe and don’t want to step on needles and feces and be kept up all night by loud music,” he told me.

Patrick Kennedy, a developer, proposed solving the problem with micro-apartments that look like shipping containers (fabrication to be outsourced to China, of course), stacked into supportive communities, and rented to the city at \$1,000 a month. Meanwhile, with the financial backing of wealthy investors, Supervisor Mark Farrell, a moderate who represents affluent neighborhoods, placed Proposition Q on the ballot.

Mr. Keller seems like a smart fellow. He has doubtless learned by now that homelessness is decidedly not the worst it has ever been in San Francisco and also that it ranks up there with sunshine among California’s defining phenomena. As The San Francisco Chronicle reported in October, the South of Market district favored by tech firms like Mr. Keller’s has been a gathering place for the homeless since at least 1872, when an observer noted the concentration of “blanket men” who seemed to be mostly “runaway sailors,” “old soldiers” and “bankrupt German scene painters.” The city’s homeless population peaked at 8,640 in 2002.

Californian outrage over homelessness is likewise evergreen, as documented by the journalist Caleb Pershan, who found examples that ranged from a 1986 Chronicle columnist’s comment that “the annual homeless crisis came to San Francisco early this year” to a 2001 article mocking Mayor Willie Brown’s belated acknowledgment that homelessness harmed the city’s image — “stunning the many merchants and residents who have been sounding that theme since the beginning of the mayor’s first term six years ago.”

Mr. Keller is less an outlier rube, in other words, than a genuine Californian, struggling to reconcile the Golden State of our shared dreams with unsettling evidence. Grumbings that our homeless come from elsewhere for services express

that denial by insisting that we are too compassionate — not inadequately so — and therefore bear no responsibility for losers who wash up on our sidewalks. It is not immaterial that newcomers really do keep showing up in droves, in California, and that people who got here yesterday have a long history of feeling unnerved by those who arrived 10 minutes ago. Dust Bowl migrants, for example, were so resented that legislators passed a 1937 “anti-Okie” law that criminalized the bringing of “any indigent person” into California.

San Francisco city statistics, meanwhile, suggest that most of our homeless are as Californian as anyone with a roof over their heads. A one-night census of the homeless in January 2015 found that 71 percent had lived here at the time they became homeless, and half of those had lived in San Francisco for 10 or more years.

I recently heard a tech-industry veteran — a friend, born on the East Coast — suggest that proposals to build low-income housing here were misguided because of the high cost of California real estate. A more efficient alternative, he explained, would be to construct homeless shelters somewhere cheap, like Nevada. Aside from the unpleasant specter of the police forcing desperate mothers and children onto buses bound for desert concentration camps (and how long would you have to be homeless to get exiled?), my friend’s remark helped me see what lurks beneath Mr. Keller’s contention that wealthy people have a right to be here because they “got an education, work hard, and earned it.”

Americans have been coming to California to make it big for so long — on wagons bound for the Gold Rush, via Route 66 for 1950s aerospace jobs — that a tacit understanding flourishes in certain quarters by which California is less a homeland full of locals like anywhere else than a reality show with a self-deportation approach to voting contestants off the island. As soon as you can’t pay the bills, and regardless of whether your great-grandparents were born here, you’re expected to get lost, or at least move to Seattle.

Discussion of causes, along with the noise about weather and drug addiction, typically includes Ronald Reagan’s evisceration of federal funding for subsidized housing and public mental health hospitals. Conventional homeless shelters get blamed, too, because of their tendency to separate romantic partners and forbid both

pets and the storage of belongings — such that a few nights indoors might cost a person love, companionship and all their survival gear.

Frigid New York City, however, has more homeless per capita than San Francisco or Los Angeles, while only 7 percent of Los Angeles homeless arrived less than a year ago, fewer than the 8.5 percent of all Los Angeles County residents to have done so, suggesting that sunshine is no more of an inducement to the destitute than to anyone else. National surveys also find that 20 percent to 25 percent of the homeless have serious mental health problems and an estimated 26 percent abuse drugs. San Francisco has also pioneered a new model of homeless shelter, known as a Navigation Center, that invites entire encampments — pets included — to come in from the cold together.

The economic factors that correlate most strongly with homelessness, furthermore, according to research published in 2001 by the Public Policy Institute of California, are precisely those that bedevil every aspect of California life: extreme income inequality combined with upward-spiraling housing costs. For decades, even as employment booms have led to population booms, California voters — myself among them — have fought to freeze the good life in amber by resisting increases in housing density and mass transit.

Between 2012 and 2015, for example, the Silicon Valley town of Mountain View gained 17,921 jobs but only 779 units of housing. A report by the McKinsey Global Institute recently ranked California 49th out of the 50 states in per capita housing units. With income gains going mostly to the elite, rents skyrocket, the middle class competes for the cheapest places on the market, and the very poorest end up on the street.

Viewed in this light, sidewalk tents are merely a rational response to an incoherent society.

Californians came together for public works in the mid-20th century — freeways, public housing, the finest public schools and universities in the nation. Caring for the least among us, however, has never been a hallmark of California liberalism, and our most notable innovations of the past 50 years have been more about environmental conservation, tolerance and technology — sustainable agriculture, gay marriage,

Snapchat — than formation of mutual aid societies, except for communes and cults that end with industrial-scale marijuana cultivation or mass suicide. The technology industry takes this to a millennial extreme by celebrating the moral neutrality enshrined in Google’s corporate motto, “Don’t Be Evil.”

On the upside, our political leaders — Gov. Jerry Brown chief among them — see with clarity that our only defensible path forward involves the end of Nimby resistance to change and the mass construction of denser housing and public transit guided by enlightened city planning to create a more livable and sustainable future. Voters all over California did pass big bond measures in support of new housing for the homeless, and Marc Benioff, the chief executive of Salesforce, recently made a \$10 million gift meant to eliminate family homelessness in San Francisco. Facebook has likewise announced plans to create 1,500 units of housing near its Menlo Park headquarters — a colossal political breakthrough, in our stunted moral climate — with 15 percent designated affordable and \$20 million dedicated to the development of still more affordable housing and tenants’ rights services.

In the meantime, San Francisco city employees can start giving all those tent dwellers 24 hours notice to clear out, backed by offers of, well, pretty much nothing at all.

Daniel Duane is writing a book about the Sierra Nevada.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on December 18, 2016, on Page SR1 of the New York edition with the headline: The Tent Cities of San Francisco.