

Hollow City: the Seige of San Francisco and the Crisis of American Urbanism

Rebecca Solnit and Susan Schwartzberg

(London and New York: Verso Press, 2000)

A Review by Elizabeth W. Morris, PhD

Why should we care if painters and poets are displaced from their homes? *Hollow City* joins a literary genre of artists telling their own stories of urban change. Writer Rebecca Solnit and photographer Susan Schwartzberg provide a critical commentary and ironic counterpoint to books such as *E-topia* by William Mitchell. They interpret the themes of community, the digital revolution, and urban progress through the lens of San Francisco's bohemian subcultures. The book shares shelf-space with fictional works such as Ed Sanders' *Fame and Love in New York* (Berkeley: Turtle Island Foundation, 1980).

Solnit and Schwartzberg chronicle the real Y2k problem in San Francisco: a fin de siècle real estate boom and accelerated crisis of housing displacement, as experienced by the City's artists and cultural activists. It's the direct result of the World Wide Web, the propulsive growth of the internet economy, and a more long-standing spillover of unmet housing demand from the fabled Silicon Valley, south of San Francisco. Class conflict is front and center as developers and 'dot-com-mers,' fueled by incomes inflated with venture capital, threaten the homes and haunts of a particularly vital arts community. Over the course of several generations, San Francisco artists have turned voluntary poverty and "marginality" into an industry of culture—an economic force in a global city fed by tourism, corporate headquarters, and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

The project grew from correspondence between Solnit and radical political economist Mike Davis, author of *City of Quartz*. Davis admired Solnit's earlier environmental journalism (*Wanderlust: a History of Walking and Savage Dreams: a Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West*). Davis' own award-winning book focused on urban design and technologies to control and limit the poor, the young, and communities of color in Los Angeles through the 1980s. *Hollow City* takes a similarly aggressive tack on the class dimensions of urban development

in San Francisco but with its primary focus on the artist community.

To Solnit, artists in places like San Francisco, New York, and Paris, create their city's living culture. Losing artists means the loss of civic memory. Though the artists may move on and make new lives, Solnit is unabashedly concerned with the consequences of disruption and loss.

The two collaborators use narrative and visual images to tell true stories from both sides of the digital/real estate divide. In words and pictures, Solnit and Schwartzberg show us changing urban forms. They relay the words of artists and other residents faced with displacement, as well as architects and construction workers benefiting from the boom. The latter are keenly aware that they cannot afford to live in the city they are rebuilding.

While each of the chapters can more or less stand alone, as urban research some are more successful than others. "A Real Estate History of the Avant Garde" discusses the movement of San Francisco bohemians and artists moving into different parts of the city, shaping neighborhoods in their effort to find the space for their work. Other writers may be more "objective" about the role of artists and gays in urban gentrification. Solnit asks what happens when the people who create the image of the place - and give it soul - move out? In her interview with a displaced New York artist now working in San Francisco we get her answer most clearly. Years of experience in the East Village were translated into art and culture inspired by that place. This is memory and talent now lost to that community. Nor is it clear that the artist is fully at home in San Francisco, in terms of the content of work and his sense of identity.

Solnit conveys the idea that places *belong* to the people who make and do things there. This is advocacy writing of the highest order, and with personal significance to the authors. Solnit speculates that she and her colleagues may be the last generation of San Franciscans to have the time and space to explore who they are while creating their own life's work, given the relentless economic forces impacting the City. She acknowledges that her rent-controlled apartment provides both the economic and geographic base to pursue her writing career.

We also see pictures of Schwartzberg's new studio apartment, where limited space has pushed her into "going digital" with her art. A larger series of shots show the effects of the real estate boom on other artists with shots of old and new homes, studios, and studio/homes. The small abodes and their residents, and the shots of demolished buildings, evoke the images of war-torn cities, the near-homeless in today's single-room

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occupancy hotels, and photographs of the Depression. This reader found it somewhat unsettling to consider the plight of artists in San Francisco in the same terms as these other catastrophes.

Hollow City is a work of art in the service of advocacy. Toward the end lies a particularly powerful photo collection from among the 60 Starbucks coffee houses now dotting San Francisco's commercial streets. The photos are by one of Solnit's and Schwartzberg's colleagues. The captions tell us what used to be on each site: a hardware store, a restaurant, an auto shop, a grocery. Each caption suggests the color and fabric of what were once distinctive neighborhoods.

As with any good piece of art, this photo-essay provokes without providing all the answers. It draws the reader/viewer to think and feel, to interpret what is happening in the world critically and politically, and to draw parallels with history. The photo-essay effectively uses images and a few words to convey a cumulative sense of loss, or even outrage.

Ultimately, San Francisco artists are not presented as passive victims of the clash of economic values and cultural values. Housing activists and "slow-growth" urban reformers have a long history of working the system to reprioritize the city's planning and development policies. Artists have learned about general plans, regional economics, housing policies, and eviction laws, and we've seen an explosion of art as a planning medium and vice versa. They use performance and visual art to convey elemental concepts and themes familiar to city planners and political economists. Using their own tools of the trade, they are collaborating with previously established cultural and neighborhood preservationist groups in what is conveyed dramatically as a fight for survival.

With its montage style, *Hollow City* feels occasionally fractured (perhaps an apt reflection of San Francisco itself!). This is not a seamless flow of research and conclusions. It is more of a scrapbook, conveying a depth of feeling and experience through a selection of views onto a rapidly changing urban landscape. *Hollow City* is a unique window on a way of life that may be endangered, yet is still very much a part of one city's identity.