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AFTERSHOCK IN SAN FRANCISCO

LLOYD FRANCIS JR./THE FRESNO BEE/SYGMA

A Marina District building after the quake.

Life on the fault line is fine if you forget it. In the Bay Area, forgetting has been honed to a fine art.

BY FENTON JOHNSON

IN MY PUBLIC-TRANSIT YOUTH, I CALLED IT THE 22 Fellini, the crosstown bus that begins at the edge of San Francisco Bay, in the industrial flatlands that surround China Basin. From there the bus travels west on 16th Street and north on Fillmore, cutting a sociological cross-section of one of the world's more ethnically diverse populations. It rolls first through neighborhoods of Salvadoran, Guatemalan and Honduran refugees (legal and otherwise); catches a corner of the city's gay neighborhood; then crosses Market Street, the wide diagonal that divides the city and operates as the main thoroughfare for its burgeoning population of homeless.

From there it travels through the remnants of the Western Addition, once largely black, now increasingly gentrified. When it reaches the back side of Pacific Heights, the black and Latina maids descend and elderly white widows board for the precipitous drop to the upscale shopping districts of Union and Chestnut Streets. In the Marina District, the route describes a wide turn on a stretch of Fillmore Street, ending, as it began, on landfill created from the rubble of the 1906 earthquake.

At a certain point after the October 1989 quake, some of the homeless who ride the bus for shelter or distraction and the women from the projects did not get off on the back side of Pacific Heights. Instead, they rode down to the flats of the Marina, where they dined on food contributed for earthquake victims by the gourmet delicatessens and restaurants of Union and Chestnut Streets. They stocked up on clothes — *nice* clothes — that residents of the Marina and Cow Hollow and Pacific Heights had pulled from closets and hung on the storm fences erected around the Marina Middle School Disaster Relief Center. Laden with clothes and filled with some of the better food this side of the world has to offer, they boarded the 22 Fillmore for the journey over the hill to the poorer parts of town.

Before long, questions arose: Who was taking these clothes? Why were we feeding people who could have lost nothing in the quake because, in fact, they had nothing to lose? First the donated food disappeared, then the clothes, then the hot meals provided by the Red Cross; then, finally, the homeless and the poor. But their memory remains in the Marina, as vivid as the vacant lots and cracked walls: a reminder of life on the edge, in this most precariously poised of American cities; a testimonial to the fragility of the social contract and technological infrastructure that bind modern cities to-

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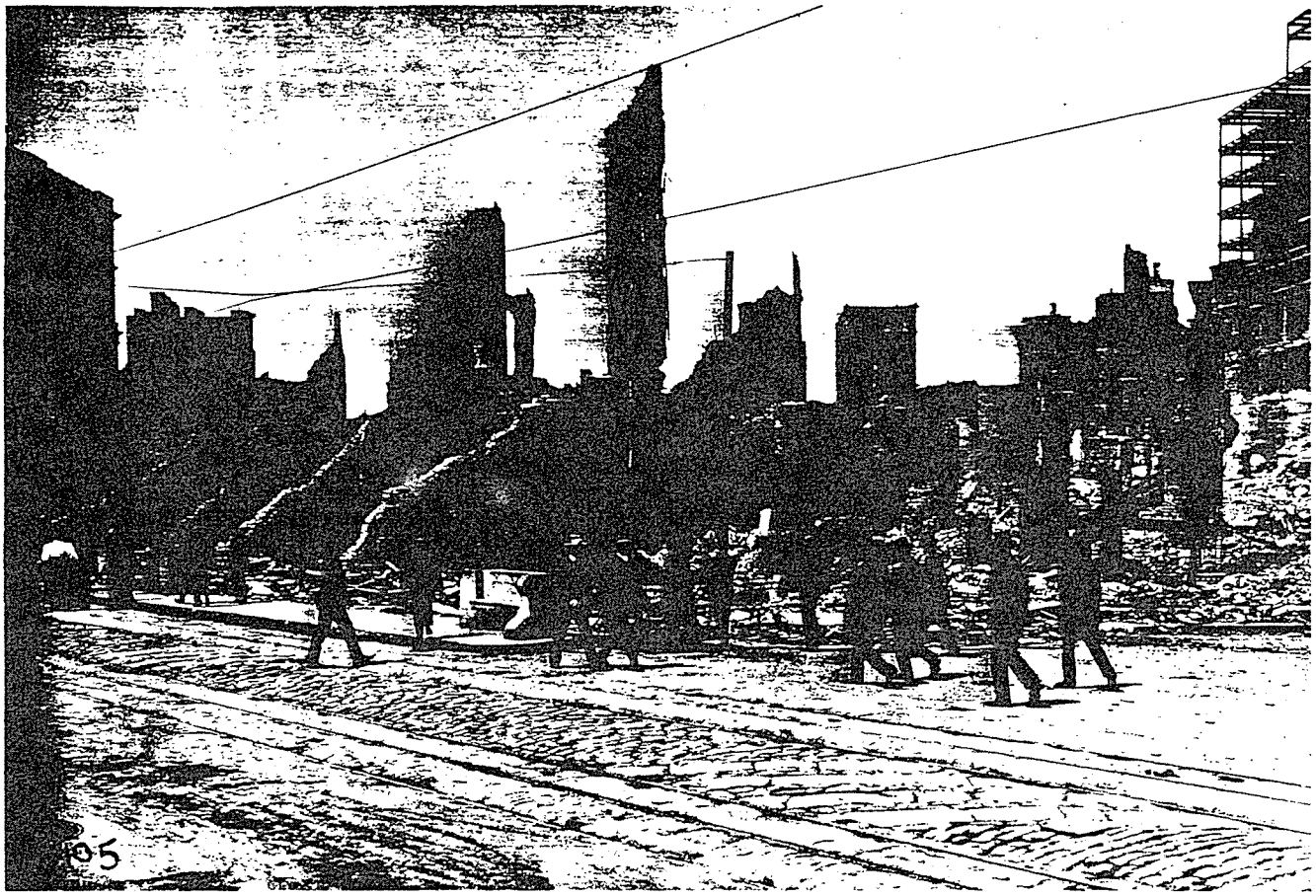


CULVER PICTURES

Above: Little was left standing after the earthquake. Below: The view from Russian Hill. Gas and water-main breaks made it impossible to deal with fires.

1906

gether, and the ways in which, in San Francisco, at least, the forces of nature are working to stretch that contract beyond its limits.

SINCE THE POPULATION EXPLOSION ATTENdant on the Gold Rush, San Franciscans have had a problem that the relatively mild-mannered quake of October 1989 only served to underscore: there are too many of us crammed into a site that should never have been occupied in the first place. Built in the mid-19th century virtually overnight at the height of America's self-assurance, San Francisco is among our most outstanding, ongoing case studies of the long-term implications of Western man's confidence in his ability to triumph over nature.

BETTMANN ARCHIVE

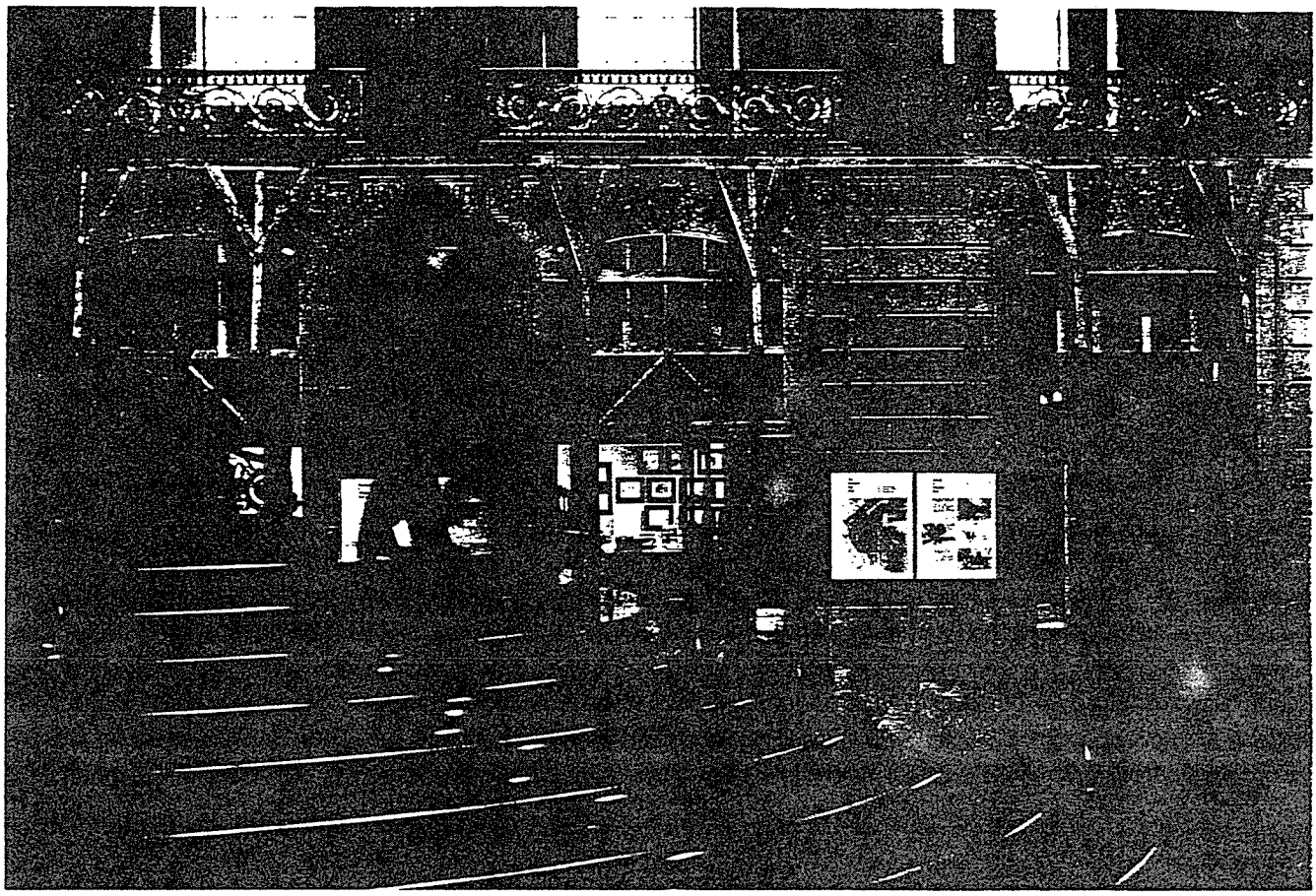
New York took two centuries to reach a population of 150,000; San Francisco took 25 years, and shows it. At every spectacular view it presents evidence of its builders' disregard of geography, geology, topography: the grid of narrow streets, the jumble of fire-prone houses, the fragility of the water supply, piped 200 miles from Yosemite National Park and stored in a reservoir created by a dam thrown across the nearest valley — conveniently created by the San Andreas fault. "Shocking in its obstinate abstraction," Simone de Beauvoir wrote of the city. "The blueprint seems to have been put on paper without the architect ever having seen the site."

The city sits at the tip of a peninsula squeezed between two of the world's most active earthquake faults. To the west, the San Andreas fault dives into the Pacific just south of the city limits. To the east, the Hayward fault forms, more or less, the base of the thickly populated Berkeley Hills. In 1836 and 1838, San Francisco experienced earthquakes similar in magnitude to the October 1989 quake, and again in 1865 and 1868. Then, in 1906, there came "The Big One," which released so much energy geologists generally credit it with "de-stressing" northern California faults for more than 70 years. During those years, the city rebuilt and its suburbs expanded over the fault lines themselves.

All evidence indicates that this period of quiescence has ended. In the last 10 years alone, northern California has experienced four quakes of 5.5 magnitude or greater on the Richter scale, with the October 1989 quake only the most severe. "If you believe in physical history repeating itself, we are entering a period of time in the next few decades where we see more and more quakes building up," said Joe Litehiser, seismologist at Bechtel Corporation and member of the city's seismic advisory committee. "We are chugging merrily along toward some very serious quakes."

On top of these cheerful predictions, one must bear in mind another of the ironies of life in this lovely place that sets it apart from other earthquake-prone cities: the sources of its particular beauty and charm are the same characteristics that abet its periodic destruction. From its inception, San Francisco has been built to burn.

"In Western cities, houses are by and large detached, except in San Francisco," points out Gray Brechin, an architectural historian. "It's the only city in the West built largely with row houses, which is what gives it its urbane feel."



Cover that wood with paint — more reflective and with a far greater range of colors than brick or masonry — and the result is a pastel stage-set of a city, which to a fire looks like one vast lot of cheek-by-jowl kindling, nicely aged, with fireproofing the exception rather than the rule. The city burned six times between 1849-52 and again, most disastrously, after the quake of 1906. By then, downtown had been constructed in fire-resistant brick, masonry and steel, but that proved meaningless in the face of broken water mains, broken gas lines and the flames encroaching from the wood-frame structures that (then as now) surrounded the financial district.

The calendar pages flip by: it's 5:04 P.M., Oct. 17, 1989. Moderate by the standards of 1906 and centered much farther from the city limits, this quake caused astonishing disruption: The city's emergency hotline went down. Confounding engineers' predictions, a section of the Bay Bridge collapsed. In neighborhoods built on landfill, gas and water mains broke — the same combination that led to the 1906 fire and that will recur in every sizable quake. Meanwhile, many small fires went unattended as the city's fire-fighting force concentrated on a single Marina District blaze.

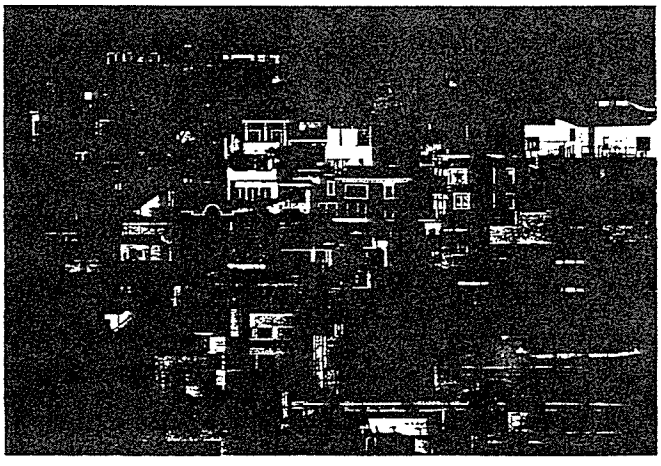
All San Franciscans are aware of some of this; some are aware of all of it, and a good deal more. The cumulative effect of this knowledge, exacerbated by the unnerving, ongoing aftershocks from the 1989 quake, is a state that one observer compared to the combination of bright chatter and tight-lipped nonchalance that fills airplanes shortly before takeoff. We all know the odds, and the odds on this particular flight on this particular day are pretty good; but they are odds, after all, and in San Francisco, in northern California, there are plenty of knowledgeable people publicly questioning just how good they are.

That generalized nervousness is matched by an obdurate refusal on the part of public officials to acknowledge that anything is amiss. Talking about earthquakes, Mayor Art Agnos of San Francisco said recently on ABC's "Nightline," "If you're going to tell me I'm going to have something in the next 25 years, save the information. I don't need it."

This schizophrenic conflict between knowledge and denial — the certainty of the inevitable, and the need, after all, to go on — is characteristic of contemporary life, and not just here. But in San Francisco we are playing out that conflict with impressive particularity, in our struggle to deal, or not to deal, with life on the fault line.

AFTER THE DESTRUCTION OF 1906, WITH THE city a virtual tabula rasa, a "Citizens' Committee" undertook to impose on the devastated site a street

1990 Above: After the quake, braces were temporarily installed to shore up facades in City Hall. Below: The North Beach residential area. "In Western cities, houses are by and large detached, except in San Francisco," writes an architectural historian. This type of layout makes it easier for fires to spread.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL FUSCO/MAGNUM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

RON HAVIV/SABA

To relieve postquake stress, San Franciscans received holistic massages in the Marina District.

plan adapted from a design completed a year earlier by Daniel H. Burnham, an architect and a prime mover behind the "City Beautiful" movement. Wider streets would not only improve the city's esthetics, the plan's supporters argued; they would aid in combatting fire. "If we trust to individual effort, we will, of course, have an accidental growth, a dangerous growth, so far as fire is concerned," wrote Francis Newlands, a Nevada Senator, in his argument for Federal support for the plan.

But reconforming the city to take its geology and topography into account would have required time and money from a financially strapped city interested in resuming the appearance of normalcy as quickly as possible, so as to avoid the impression that investment here entailed greater than usual risks. In that November's election, the Citizens' Committee plan lost resoundingly; San Francisco was rebuilt on virtually the same lines as before.

On April 16, 1990, a crowd of orderly Chinese-Americans descended on the ornate chamber of the San Francisco board of supervisors. They sat quietly in rows, the women with their hands folded neatly in their laps, the men in identical pale gray suits slightly brighter and considerably better cut than those of their American counterparts. They filled the chamber to overflowing, lined the broad marble steps that descend from the chamber doors, stood under the massive wooden braces installed after this most recent quake to shore up the building's corridors. They had closed their shops, locked doors on tourists and natives alike, to attend the board of supervisors hearing on whether to tear down or repair ("retrofit," in earthquake terminology) the Embarcadero Freeway, heavily damaged in the 1989 quake, and critical, in their view, to the tourist traffic that provides Chinatown with its economic lifeblood.

The issues were the same as in 1906: a speedy return to "normalcy" versus a major expenditure of limited resources on a distant future.

At the supervisors' hearing, a California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) representative, Burch Bachtold, acknowledged that the department was proceeding with retrofit plans before any on-site reviews of underlying soil conditions, and even before its own review committees had given the Embarcadero plans their final approval. "We view this damage as a very large pothole that we're obligated to fill so as to get traffic under way," he said.

The supervisors exhibited an acute awareness of the sea of voters and, for the most part, an equally impressive ignorance of the technical issues surrounding construction on unstable land. In the end, they decided not to decide, voting 6-5 for a compromise that allows the Mayor until Aug. 1 to investigate financing sources and conduct soil studies for his alternative Embarcadero. Meanwhile, Caltrans is well under way retrofitting the city's other double-deck freeways — all damaged in the quake, all currently shored up with wooden braces — even as a governor's panel found that those efforts may be inadequate or pointless.

CARL KOON, THE PLANNING COORDINATOR of the San Francisco Office of Emergency Services, works out of a windowless room on the ground floor of the city's fire department headquarters — "a broom closet," he calls it, and it's hard to escape the comparison: two surplus issue desks, two computers, two telephones, three filing cabinets and enough room for the door to swing open, if the person at the front desk stands up.

Koon, an affable, quake-prepared suburbanite (he pops open his briefcase to display his pocket flashlight), opens his comments on a brave note: "We're better prepared today than we've ever been." But this conflict between political fantasy and the reality of his surroundings is too great to sustain, especially as he is being shuffled out the door as part of the political shake-ups that in California follow on the heels of large quakes and mass murders. "On July 1, I'm gone," he says. "If there's no one here, I'll lock the door and walk out."

The Office of Emergency Services experience offers an instructive lesson in California post-Proposition 13. With the passage of the Jarvis-Gann tax-cutting initiative, the O.E.S. was cut from 13 employees to 6. At the end of Mayor Dianne Feinstein's administration, with the city facing the largest budget deficit in its history, the staff was cut to two, where it stood at the time of the 1989 quake. Mayor Agnos has committed himself to restoring it to six, but the city is so short on funds that it has to wait until the next fiscal year to find the money to hire those six (assuming that it can find the money; estimates place the current fiscal-year deficit at $42 million). Meanwhile, Koon's boss jumped ship following the quake, leaving Koon alone to answer the phone, empty the garbage, type letters, mail fliers and, incidentally, coordinate emergency planning efforts for a city of 749,000 people located between two active earthquake faults.

These are circumstances that drive a man to the consolations of philosophy. "It's not just the quake — it's everything else," Koon says. "We don't consult nature or think about it. In my area, they destroyed fruit orchards to build houses. Then the heavy rains came and the water had to go somewhere, so it went onto the freeway and closed it for two days.... If we thought before we built, San Francisco probably wouldn't be here."

Malcolm Clark, a United States Geological Survey research geologist, echoes Koon's thoughts. "The East was settled by Europeans who lived off the land," Clark says. "The landscape determined what kind of work they did and the different kinds of communities they built. . . .The social fabric here is composed of people who arrived so recently that there's no connection between the people and the land."

In California, in the West, housing patterns reflect our refusal to submit to nature's dictates. Developers build on fault lines, on cliffs, on landfill — until the quake, or fire, or landslide, enters to remind us who's really boss in the wild, wild West.

Gradually, this is sinking in among us Eastern transplants. "Quake-proof" quietly passed out of California engineers' parlance sometime after the 1971 San Fernando Valley quake; now it's "quake-resistant." We have thrust our deciduous roots into the soil and struck rock, even as the bay sparkles like mica, the fog rolls over Twin Peaks and gulls and pelicans wheel and turn under the sheer cliffs at Land's End. A continent is not so much meeting the ocean as throwing itself headlong into the sea, and we are permitted the privilege of witnessing the act.

This would be fine, except that in San Francisco, to witness is also to participate. The question San Franciscans, Californians, Westerners are facing, that has been there all along, that is brought to the forefront by quakes, droughts, landslides, fires, is: Are we willing to accommodate our lives to the limits that the landscape imposes on our presence?

"EARTHQUAKE LOVE," THEY CALLED IT AFter the quake of 1906 — a phenomenon described by William James, who was teaching at Stanford that spring, as a euphoria among survivors, "a kind of uplift in the sense of a 'common lot' that (takes) away the sense of loneliness that gives the sharpest edge to the more usual kind of misfortune that may befall a man." After the 1989 quake, there was an unparalleled outpouring of earthquake love, by no means limited to those who experienced the quake. Donations poured in from around the country and the world.

In part, these arose out of the national fascination with San Francisco. America's most popular vacation city, it exists in two dimensions: the city in fact — once first, then second, then third, now fourth in size among California cities, locked in a struggle to maintain its viability as a cultural and economic hub; and the city in memory and imagination, constructed piecemeal from postcards and vacationers' snapshots, but no less a factor in its image of itself than its real-life counterpart.

But earthquake love arises as well from the fear — by no means limited to San Francisco — that our industrialized, technocratic house of cards might someday collapse. To acknowledge that something as apparently *(Continued on Page 38)*

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solid as terra firma itself can move, violently and without warning, is to call into question the illusion of security and certainty at the heart of our national aspirations. The quake's greatest damage, after all, was not in San Francisco but in the communities — Santa Cruz, Watsonville — located closer to the epicenter. But no one, least of all the television crews, could resist the contrast between the Marina's flawlessly topiaried streets and the flaming houses themselves, while in the distance the twin deco sculptures of the Golden Gate Bridge towers floated serenely against a brilliant sky.

"Earthquakes are about uncertainty and how unwilling we are to live with that," said Bill Barich, a San Francisco writer. The composer Paul Dresher, whose studio is one block away from Oakland's Cypress freeway, was working on a piece entitled "Power Failure" when the 1989 quake struck. The power failed, the freeway collapsed, and Dresher and his company ran outside to face a pile of mangled concrete and crushed automobiles. But he's not given a thought to leaving either the Bay Area or his low-rent space. "As an artist I take risks," he said. "That's my goal, and what I do best. Given that, I can't see that I'd leave the area because of risk."

Chicken or egg: Do people live in San Francisco because they live for the moment, or does the city itself impose that way of living on its residents? A bit of trivia relevant to the question: The city has one of the highest percentage of renters of any American city — more than 65 percent. Partly this is a function of exorbitant housing costs, but partly it's because this is a city of people who choose to concern themselves with today's concert or meal or view instead of tomorrow's mortgage payment, or earthquake. "I was watching the fog roll in one day and thinking, 'I'm one of the luckiest people in the world to live and work in a city with this kind of view,' " said Michael J. Yaki, director of the San Francisco office of Representative Nancy Pelosi. "But then you walk away and say, 'Yeah, get real.' .... Living here you know you've made the trade-off and that someday it will all come tumbling down."

In her essay "Notes of a Native Daughter," Joan Didion wrote: "California is a place where a boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension; in which the mind is troubled by some buried but ineradicable suspicion that things had better work here, because here, beneath that immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent." The 20-plus years since Didion's essay have revealed what we ought, perhaps, to have known all along but were too busy exploiting a continent to heed: Under this immense bleached sky, things work about as well as several thousand years of recorded history might have led us to expect of human nature; and that, if San Francisco's preparation for and response to its earthquake-laden history is any indication, is not very well at all.

This is not to say that nothing can be done. A great deal might be done; engineers and politicians and geologists and those who refer to themselves as "the earthquake perparedness community" all agree on this point, offering by way of example the Japanese, who have expended a great deal of money and effort on the problem.

And there is some evidence that the lessons of the 1989 quake have been taken to heart, especially by businesses and private agencies with greater resources and flexibility than government. "Everyone is looking very closely at their preparedness plans," said Marion Richie, who headed medical efforts at the Marina Middle School Disaster Relief Center on the night of the quake. In the June 5 election, voters in the city and the state approved several ballot initiatives that will finance repairs or retrofitting of some public buildings, including schools. In recent years, seismic standards for construction have been tightened, so that modern buildings — including the skyscrapers of the city's financial district — have been built to improve the likelihood that their occupants will survive a severe quake, even if the buildings themselves are damaged.

But the state-bonded debt load has become an issue itself, and in any event the funds approved are a fraction of those required for a statewide retrofitting campaign for seismically unsound structures. And seismic building codes, first imposed in the late 1940's, apply only to new construction. More than 90 percent of San Francisco's building stock predates those standards, including the unreinforced masonry buildings that perform worst in earthquakes even as they provide a roof for the city's poorest residents. "If we fix these buildings up to a standard comparable to those the city of Los Angeles has had in place since 1980, and allow landlords to pass on the costs of that strengthening, we'd see a 50 to 100 percent increase in rents," said the city Seismic Safety Program manager, Franklin Lew. "We have to ask ourselves: Do these people live in seismically hazardous buildings, or do they live in Golden Gate Park?"

Lew hastens to point out that the city's building department is not responsible for this situation — "We only enforce the policies set by elected officials and policy makers." This, of course, is exactly the point. Constrained by voters' reluctance to accept taxes, government cannot afford to take the lead on these expensive issues, no matter how critical they may be to public safety.

The question is not what we can do to prepare for the future but what we are willing to do; and this is not a question that Americans in general and Californians in particular have ever been especially interested in asking. "This is a problem with American psychology," said Raymond J. Brady, director of research for the Association of Bay Area Governments. "We wait until we're torpedoed, then ask how big the hole is.... That's a cultural trait of a society that's been relatively affluent and without space limitations. We could always move to somewhere else. Why worry about next year?" Why indeed, except that this is San Francisco, where there is no more space and where, so far as the earthquake is concerned, next year was last year but with more to come.

AT 5:12 A.M. ON APRIL 18, TWO DAYS AFTER the Embarcadero Freeway hearings, a band of some 200 gathers in the city's financial district for the annual commemoration of the anniversary of the 1906 quake. It's all so very small-town, in this city with imperial aspirations: The St. Francis Hook and Ladder Society serves Bloody Marys, certificates are handed out to some 10 or 15 survivors of 1906, we bow our heads to pray, the emcee muffs his lines, the guest of honor never appears, a woman dressed in vaguely Victorian costume steps to the mike to lead us, off-key, in singing "San Francisco." The survivors tell their stories, in age-tremulous voices. After the stories we file into a nearby bank where pastries and coffee are being served amid enlarged photographs of the city after the quake and fire.

> 'Shocking in its obstinate abstraction,' Simone de Beauvoir wrote of San Francisco. 'The blueprint seems to have been put on paper without the architect ever having seen the site.'

So we're standing around wishing we were still in bed, when there's a rumble and jolt. The light fixtures sway, a bank guard dives under the nearest teller's desk. Lacking desks, the rest of us freeze — for one, two, three seconds; then it's over, for this time. "Really, this is too much," someone mutters, heading for the door, but the rest of us do what you have to do: we laugh and turn, with a sense of purpose now, to our Bloody Marys.

People are always in danger of being done in by their own myths, but nowhere is that more true than in California, the American myth factory. For better and worse, we are convinced of our ability to outwit nature, or, barring that, of our particular ability to survive, and to improve ourselves in the process. "My first reaction was bitterness," one Marina survivor said. "If we did our civic duty we'd bulldoze the neighborhood into the bay. But now I'm glad because it changed my life . . .it made me understand the transiency of things."

If this sounds like a bad California joke, stop a moment to consider: Is there, finally, a choice, here or anywhere else? There is a great deal to be learned from an earthquake, after all. This will sound crazy to Easterners — it sounds crazy to many Californians. But there's an experience of force, of power, on a scale vaster than the imagination can comprehend: The infinitesimally short pause beforehand, that split moment (far too short to do anything about it) when the quake veteran knows that the earth is about to roll over in its sleep; the first chatterings of pots and pans and glass, followed by the roll and toss, as waves of pure energy move through the fluid earth; that unearthly rumble, that incomparable growl, which provides a bass drone to the high-pitched clatter of the pots and the tumble and crash of breaking glass; the rush of adrenalin, as for 10 seconds or 20 or (God forbid!) 30 and more, time suspends itself and you clutch uselessly at doorways and pray. Life is reduced to a question of survival, no less, no more.

This is a revelatory state, not so easily induced among middle-class Americans, and (writing as one of the fortunate) not so unfortunately come by. "You were lucky," a friend insists, repeating a refrain heard throughout the days after the quake and into the present: "I was lucky," "We were lucky," "San Francisco was lucky." No doubt about it; but then most of us were, most of us are, most of the time.

"The earthquake was beautiful in a perverse way," Paul Dresher says. "No, not perverse — it was great to be humbled, to see that a structure as solid as the Cypress Freeway can fall in a few seconds. My friends call me arrogant, but we need to be aware constantly that things are that fragile — that the structures of our lives that we think of as permanent are temporary."

In Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," The Misfit says of the grandmother, "She would of been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." Dresher is an artist, The Misfit a philosopher, but together they explain the phenomenon of this city, which has made it at once the butt of too many jokes, the nation's favorite escape, and — perhaps — a metaphor for the rest of the planet: We're all artists and philosophers here, living with the gun that we ourselves have loaded, and making it up as we go. ■