



David Grayson

Essayist and poet who writes about anything that grabs his attention.

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Parkmerced: A City within San Francisco

And why I miss calling it home



Photo courtesy of Yelp/Parkmerced

When I tell people that I'm a native San Franciscan, the first question I'm usually asked is what neighborhood I grew up in. When I answer "Parkmerced," I often get a blank stare. If they're familiar with the neighborhood, I'm often greeted with comments like, "Parkmerced is not the 'real' San Francisco; it's the Queens of San Francisco." Or "It's too damn foggy and cold." For a time, I preempted these aspersions by prefacing my answer with the qualification that I grew up in "the most boring part of the city."

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Parkmerced was built in the 1940s as part of the postwar housing boom for returning service members and their families. It is one of the largest neighborhoods of apartment blocks west of the Mississippi, containing 3,221 units with several thousand residents. I was born in Noe Valley, but my parents moved the family to Parkmerced in 1974, when I was

five years old. My parents couldn't afford to buy a house, and they viewed the affordable three-bedroom town homes and quiet streets as a satisfactory compromise.

It's understandable how to the casual observer, Parkmerced seems to be the antithesis of San Francisco. The town houses and high-rises are cookie-cutter, and the area was designed to be car-centric. One of my school friends, who grew up in nearby West Portal, used to joke that only the doors were painted different colors. I recall more than one taxi driver pulling over to ask for directions.

Parkmerced possesses the rare distinction of being created by an insurance company, Metropolitan Life. MetLife developed rental housing across the country to create a reliable revenue stream (there were sister projects in other cities like New York City and Los Angeles). San Francisco historian Woody LaBounty writes, "From the beginning, Parkmerced was meant to be self-contained, a 'city in a city,' with its own courts, play fields and shopping." This partly accounts for why the development seems so incongruous—as if plunked down from the sky.

Besides architecture, Parkmerced differs from other city neighborhoods in the layout of its streets. The center is Juan Bautista Circle, a grassy field from which streets radiate outward like the spokes of a wheel. This produces various oddly shaped blocks, even when compared with older neighborhoods like North Beach. Interspersed with these blocks are grassy medians and traffic circles. Parkmerced is also physically isolated. It's separated from its northwestern neighbor, the Outer Sunset, by Lake Merced. It's split from the Ingleside, to the east, by Interstate 280. Although a few Muni lines graze the boundaries, only one penetrates into the labyrinth: the 57-Parkmerced. Indeed, it takes diligence to get to this distant corner of the city.

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Each block is divided into courtyards, usually three or four. While I was growing up, the families in our courtyard were diverse and on the lower end of middle class. Our next-door neighbors on one side were a Vietnamese immigrant family, the father a former officer in the South Vietnamese Army. The middle daughter was my sister's best friend. My sister jokes that she spent more time at her friend's home than at our house, especially at meal times. Our neighbors on the other side were a

multigenerational African American household, headed by the grandfather, who was a longtime Muni driver (I never knew which route).

Our block seemed to specialize in chefs. Across the courtyard, my friend's father was an Austrian chef who worked at one of the Hyatt hotels. One summer, his family hosted a barbecue in the communal courtyard for his mother's Tongan relatives. As part of the festivities, a live pig ran loose and ended up on a spit for everyone to enjoy. When I was a teenager, a friend's family, who had recently arrived from Sicily, ran an unofficial takeout pizza business from their apartment down the street. It was there that I had my first taste of exotic fare, like octopus.

Although this diversity is characteristic of the city in general, it was new for Parkmerced. From the neighborhood's inception, MetLife restricted the development to whites. This practice was continued until 1972, when a lawsuit from a white resident and political activist, Paul Trafficante, went to the US Supreme Court. Trafficante (along with other residents) successfully argued that Parkmerced was a "white ghetto" and that the absence of diversity hurt whites as well.

It's surprising in today's San Francisco, where the number of children has dwindled, but Parkmerced was filled with kids. At one point, in my courtyard alone, there were 19 kids. I imagine it made for a cacophonous environment for the adults.

Unlike that of other neighborhoods, Parkmerced's shopping area is a strip mall. Today, it caters to SF State students; there's a U-Haul dealer, a smoke shop, a bar and cheap eateries. In my day, while it was rundown (the Stonestown mall siphoned off many customers), it drew the locals. It functioned almost as a town square, where you ran into neighbors. I remember getting haircuts by the old Sephardic Jewish barber and listening to the talk from his other customers.

We kids had another town square of sorts, one on wheels: the now-defunct 17- Parkmerced bus. It's route covered more than the present-day 57 line. Most of the neighborhood kids rode every day—to Aptos Middle School, Lincoln High, Stonestown and beyond. It wasn't simply a means of transportation but almost a moving social club in which to hang out with friends.

Of course, there were downsides to living in a rental community. The neighborhood was a transitional space. Disparate families lived side by side, some moving up the ladder and others struggling. Before high school, two close friends moved to the outer reaches of the East Bay—one to Danville and the other to Pinole. Both were towns I had only vaguely heard of and imagined as somewhere “over there.” Our next-door neighbors returned to the Ingleside. Before they moved, I remember my friend’s grandfather lamenting, “That’s the place I’ve been trying to get out of.” My parents, too, moved away—to Santa Rosa, where they could finally afford to buy.

Just as the residents have changed, so has the development itself. In the 1970s, MetLife sold Parkmerced to Leona Helmsley, the notorious New York City landlord known as the “Queen of Mean.” During her ownership, maintenance was reduced, and the complex suffered. In 2005, a more benign transaction took place when San Francisco State purchased a 66-unit parcel. Today Parkmerced has much more of the flavor of campus housing and is not simply a place for students to park their cars.

The future is murkier. Maximus Real Estate Partners, which owns Parkmerced, has garnered approval to wholly rebuild the neighborhood. According to San Francisco Heritage, the project “would raze the entire site except for the 11 existing towers.” Nearly 5,700 new units would be built. The new Parkmerced is envisioned as “a vibrant, sustainable, pedestrian-friendly community.” Maximus declares that it “will be a model for generations to come”—just as MetLife originally promised in the 1940s. In this new version, an organic farm is featured, as are bicycle paths and “neighborhood commons.” Company literature promises a new kind of urban living and revives the slogan of old: “a city within a city.” Will this reimagined community bring Parkmerced into line with the rest of San Francisco? Or will it remain a distant outpost “in” the city but not “of” the city? The answer will have to wait.

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