

Introduction

“There is no there there,” Gertrude Stein’s notorious statement about Oakland, appeared in her 1937 memoir, *Everybody’s Autobiography*. Stein lived in Oakland from age 6 to 17. In 1891, she moved with her family to Baltimore, and in 1935, now a noted author and socialite, returned for a lecture tour. Speaking at the English club at Mills College, she grudgingly agreed to visit her former stomping grounds around 13th Avenue and E. 25th Street. In the intervening 44 years, the landscape had been recast from an occasional farmhouse, surrounded by rose bushes and peach and eucalyptus trees, to corridors of single-family dwellings. The Steins’ family house and expansive grounds were gone. Gertrude was disoriented and later penned the famous remark. Regardless of the fact that she was expressing the kind of disappointment that most people would feel upon revisiting a home long departed and witnessing that everything had changed, her words have since underpinned a false impression that Oakland is lacking in something, in someplace.¹

It is worth recalling that in 1935 what may have distressed Stein had uplifted the builders of the district as well as its residents and businesses. Starting in the 1890s, Oaklanders experienced a profound increase in their personal mobility through the aegis of electric streetcars, which turned the walking city into a radial metropolis. After the 1906 Earthquake, which



Figure 1. Stein's old neighborhood. In the vicinity of 13th Avenue and E. 25th Street. Photo by Mitchell Schwarzer, 2020.

destroyed San Francisco, Oakland's growth accelerated. New industries capitalized on California's growth. Housing construction ramped up, and macadamized roads were laid for the latest mass phenomenon—automobiles. At the time of Stein's visit, the Great Depression had dampened investment, but it resumed with a vengeance during the Second World War.

Had Stein been able to come back 44 years after her lecture tour visit, in 1979, she would have experienced a city transformed once more. Scattered apartment buildings broke up single-family house rows, many of whose windows were now secured by metal bars. Buses ran where streetcars had. Upslope, an eight-lane freeway coursed across the base of the hills, and higher still, on what had been cascading carpets of wildflowers, the latest subdivisions were being erected. Down by the waterfront, the manufacturing belt was emptying. Once-vibrant commercial arteries were marred by unoccupied storefronts and vacant lots. Another process of city change was taking place: disinvestment yielding deterioration.

When Stein visited her former neighborhood, she had recently returned to America after having spent over 30 years in Paris. Approaching a city like Oakland with European preconceptions of stability, hierarchy, and monumentality invariably leads to disappointment. Place in California is better understood as a verb and not a noun, a process of moving and making and remaking. If Oakland appears faceless at times, that is less a flaw on its part and more an inability of an observer to appreciate the fits and starts of urbanization in a California city. Instead of a grand canvas showing finished pieces in flawless order, cities like Oakland, Sacramento, Los Angeles, and even the European-seeming San Francisco expose snapshots of city formation and deformation, driven by economics, technology, and politics: one where the Civil War jump-started cotton production in California farmlands, leading to cotton manufacturing alongside the waterfront; another where an innovation in transportation, the electric traction streetcar, cast commercial strips across the flatlands and lower hills; and another still where the racist approach to guaranteeing mortgage loans on the part of a federal agency, the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, brought deprivation to minority neighborhoods.

Land-use and building patterns are a puzzle that can only be deciphered by going back in time, following the patchy moments when plans get realized, or not, when the variable trajectories of real estate acts become apparent, and when the changing priorities of governmental and business entities make themselves felt. After progressing northward from the waterfront, Oakland coalesced a retail district on lower Washington Street and an office center around 14th and Broadway. While a new office district arose along Lake Merritt's western end, the retail district continued to move north along Broadway, and then disintegrated. Numerous plans were hatched for a civic center on the lake's southern side; Oakland ended up with three dispersed collections of governmental buildings, and only one by the lake. When land was available, Oakland leaders failed to set aside a large central park in the vicinity of Lake Merritt. Park acquisitions took place primarily in the upper hills, far from where most of the population lived.

It is from those lofty heights where we can get a comprehensive visual picture of Oakland's land-use and building patterns: the waters claimed from the bay for manufacturing and the Port of Oakland; the transporta-

tion-industrial corridors paralleling the waterfront; the high-rise offices and residences downtown and by the lake; the sea of low-rise housing stretching from those districts across the flatlands, lower hills, and upper hills, punctuated here and there by hospitals, church spires, and a tall office or apartment block. Equally, we can construe the city's natural geography: a sweep of terrain fronting an estuary of San Francisco Bay and shielded by the San Francisco peninsula from the direct winds and fog of the Pacific Ocean; a landscape canvas ascending from the bay's salt marshes to alluvial plains to undulating hillsides and finally steep canyons and peaks topping out at 1,760 feet.

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Hella Town: Oakland's History of Development and Disruption examines Oakland's built environment from the 1890s to the early twenty-first century, from the time when population growth, industrialization, and mechanized transportation unleashed the conditions for the modern city, to the contemporary moment when the region's galloping information-age economy has produced a dire housing shortage amid lopsided privatization of urban development. Over this span of more than 125 years, I track the uneven pace of development, the booms and busts, the buildups and breakdowns of a great American city. I analyze how transportation improvements charted its growth, how built functions—housing, workplace, shopping, and civic culture/recreation—were realized, and how those functions were subject to elite control and inequities tied to race.² Development, the act of adding to (and/or subtracting from) the physical makeup of a city, invariably brings forth disruption. How development proceeds, gradually or rapidly, thoughtfully or recklessly, openly or behind closed doors, determines the severity of the disruption as well as who comes out ahead and who gets left behind.

The title, *Hella Town*, draws from two local memes. Most Bay Area residents call San Francisco “the City”; by contrast, many Oaklanders refer to their home as “the Town,” Oaktown, an acknowledgment of its smaller size and status, and its gritty, down-to-earth vibe. The term “hella” popped up within East Bay youth culture after the 1970s, a shortened version of

helluva or *hellacious*, signifying “very” or “extremely,” an adverb like the Southern California “totally” that gives an adjective or noun both emphasis and a distinct regional flavor. Together, the words *hella* and *town*, *Hella Town*, describe an Oakland that has struggled to measure up to its adjacent metropolitan center but, at the same time, an Oakland prideful in its upstart status, an Oakland not only warmer in weather but warmer in personality, an Oakland as an exceptional convergence of religions, ethnicities, races, social classes, and sexual orientations. Back in 1987, hip-hop artist Too \$hort rapped on the song “Oakland”: “Oakland, Oaktown, Oakland, Oaktown, straight from the west, Oakland is the best, baby it’s so fresh . . .”

To know why Oakland can be *hella* fresh or “*hella* disrespectful,” another song by Too \$hort, we need to start with the economic geography that underlies the town’s advent. From colonial through contemporary times, land development has been central to the formation of an American society. Once surveyed, recorded, and put up for sale, land is developed and disrupted, recast into a more valuable resource and more intensive activity. An acre occupied by forest becomes, say, a farmstead. It might give way later to residences and, afterward, storefronts or office buildings. Each change cements the land to rules of law, political machinations, and a marketplace of expectation, exchange, and exploitation. Access is crucial: in both senses of the word. First, people benefit by being able to get to a particular location with increasing ease and speed—a plot of land links into a network that ramps up connections to other people and places. Second, people purchase, occupy, or benefit from the connected plot of land—control is taken by certain individuals or segments of society while others are kept out.

In *Hella Town*, I give special emphasis to how emergent transportation technologies and systemic racism configured access to urbanized land. Circulatory infrastructures, from public mass transit to private automobiles, and long-standing biases against people of color, were perpetuated at individual and societal levels, and operated as synergistic factors in the growth of the built environment and its patterns of neighborhood change and succession.

On one side, how people got around—walking, horse-drawn omnibuses, electric traction streetcars, automobiles, buses, freeways, BART, bicycles—regulated physical access to the town’s acreage, determining the

distance that could be covered on a daily basis and the disposition of the trip undertaken: fast or slow; relaxed or tiresome; isolated or in closer contact to both the cityscape and other people. Each type of transportation infrastructure influenced where development took place, what kind was favored, and how it was built with respect to density and lot coverage.³ These networks were never fully public or private: managed by private companies in the railroad and streetcar era of communal travel, and later under the jurisdiction of governmental entities, while enabling privatized freedom of movement in automobiles. Circulatory vessels between the vital urban organs, the corridors were themselves contested as to their function, sometimes accommodating a range of users and uses, other times limiting their purview to rapid vehicular passage. Entire districts could be targeted or bypassed, given help to build up or purposely disempowered: a branching of the town, as symbolized by the coast live oak, into limbs of growth, stasis, regeneration, and decay.

Transportation has long been central to Oakland's identity. In 1852, it was founded as a sailing and trading port. Over the course of the late nineteenth century, it grew into a commercial and industrial center on the basis of its interface between shipping and railroads. In the twentieth century, that interface was extended by highways, rapid rail transit, and a pioneering container seaport as well as a jet airport. Over and over, Oakland was wired to faraway destinations, other parts of California, the Bay Region, and its internal geography. It has remained a destination for migrants, both national and international. Yet in a place that has of late counted as one of the nation's most ethnically and racially varied populations, barriers to land access have persisted. On the other side of the coin, then, the story of access was more complicated than being able to take BART or own an automobile. Technological innovation, in and of itself, did not inherently lead to a level playing field in the urban scene. It often-times reconfigured enduring societal pecking orders.

In American cities, residential property values were customarily set according to a scale ranging from undesirable to exclusive that corresponded to use, class, and race.⁴ Was a particular plot distant from industrial plants, commercial strips, and poor neighborhoods? Could legal contracts or, when they could not be enforced, social sanctions or brute force, keep white residents apart from Asians, Latinos, or African

Americans? High home values in all-white neighborhoods—one of the key markers of wealth and status, and a sign that one had attained the dream of substantial property—depended upon a contrast with lower values in poorer, mixed, and majority-minority districts, much as the idea of whiteness itself depended upon other, subordinate racial categories. Building upon earlier transportation technologies like the streetcar, the automobile accentuated these tendencies; cars contributed to an enhanced sense of individual freedom and potency expressed through socio-spatial sequestration. From the 1920s onward, most new automotive routes led to (and catalyzed the settlement of) the hills or suburbs, areas that would long be off-limits to people of color, who were left with the older flatlands—that were separate but not equal.

Such inequities were endemic to California before the twentieth century. Oakland was founded on land that had been occupied for millennia by Native Californians: Chochenyo-speaking Ohlone peoples subsisting as hunter-gatherers and small-scale agriculturists. Starting in the late eighteenth century, their villages were pushed aside by Spanish colonialists who drew the Ohlone to newly established Christian missions, causing a demographic and cultural collapse. During the 1840s and afterward, the Mexican inheritors of the Spanish Mission Era found themselves dispossessed of the land by Anglo settlers. The lands they had taken from the Ohlone and used primarily for cattle ranching were divvied up by speculators for profits in farming and urban activities. Earlier genocidal practices against the Ohlone continued, including the almost complete eradication of their villages and burial mounds. Their survivors, alongside Mexican Californios, were consigned to low-paying jobs, segregated residence in barrios, and negligible opportunities for advancement. East Asian Californians from China, Japan, the Philippines, and elsewhere, who came during the Gold Rush and afterward, found themselves similarly oppressed and segregated, their competitive actions within the marketplace thwarted by legal statutes and outright violence. Chinese immigrants occupied a social stratum in California somewhat comparable to blacks in the Jim Crow South, forced to pay extra taxes, denied the right to testify in court, and after 1882, subject to the harsh provisions of the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Ideologies of white supremacy saw this imperium as just and rational.

Peoples from lands outside Europe were products of less advanced or even primitive cultures and, accordingly, best subordinated to white leadership and example. Whites were insiders. Others were outsiders. A racialized blueprint to land settlement was in place before the urban development of modern Oakland, and operational thereafter.

Black migrants arrived to California from the South in large numbers only during the military buildup leading to the Second World War. From that point on, demographic change was swift. By 1980, Oakland had become almost majority black and one of the centers of black culture and politics in the United States. Due to their numbers, blacks represented a threat to white hegemony. Throughout much of the century, the town was torn asunder by its white political establishment into two parts: one white and one black and minority; one wealthier and one poorer; one whose communities were restricted and one whose were nonrestricted; one, blue- and green-lined, endowed with finance and improvements, and one, redlined, deprived of those advantages. Racist practices colored all aspects of housing, employment, criminal justice, and education, as blacks were prevented from attaining the kinds of safety, jobs, neighborhoods, and routes of upward mobility that whites took for granted. Black residents had the unenviable distinction of police harassment and recurrent housing dispossession, worsened by government programs like highway building and urban renewal. The disappointment upon finding out that Oakland, that California, wasn't altogether different from the South, that urbanization instigated by business growth and new transportation networks wasn't breaking down ghetto walls, accounts for the town's gestation of political radicalism and community activism.

In theory, expanding transportation infrastructures should have opened up more of Oakland for all Oaklanders. In practice, those technological advances repositioned segregationist real estate practices across dispersed geographies. As streetcars gave way to automobiles and buses and later freeways and BART, the geographical lines between white and nonwhite, established and newcomer, changed in turn. Over the twentieth century's first half, the town's relatively small (under 10 percent) minority populations lived mostly in the nineteenth-century city alongside poorer whites, while more affluent whites settled in new, racially restricted, streetcar subdivisions along the lower hills. From the 1940s through the 1970s, amid

an automotive-enabled exodus of whites to suburban locales within and without the town, and in an era of negligible immigration, blacks were able to leave the West Oakland ghetto and settle across the North and East Oakland flatlands. From the 1980s through the early twenty-first century, immigrants from East Asia, Latin America, and East Africa established themselves across those flatlands while white migrants (most called gentrifiers on the basis of their higher incomes and education levels) found their way to practically all parts of the town.

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While my methodology for assessing city-making in Oakland stresses the relationship, with respect to land access and urban development, between transportation innovations and racist practices, several other parameters of analysis are crucial to understanding the unique path Oakland took during these times. To start off, the proximity of the town to the city worked to both the former's favor and disservice. Oakland's stretches of flat land on the continental side of the bay across from peninsular San Francisco led to it becoming a transportation hub. From 1869, when the nation's first transcontinental railroad reached its western terminus at Oakland Point, the town was a center of networks enabling economic development for the region. About a century later, the Bay Area's freeways and rapid transit corridors met in Oakland; BART's four lines cross downtown; several interstate and state highways merge and diverge just east of the Bay Bridge. Because of the considerable amount of land devoted to right-of-ways, though, these passageways did not always benefit Oakland's citizens: rather, they often cleaved and debased the neighborhoods they passed through. Their evolution underscores Oakland's variable status within a rapidly growing, sprawling, and polycentric region, contending with its closest neighbors, the far-flung suburbs and, most of all, San Francisco.

"The smoke of Oakland filled the western sky with haze and murk, while beyond, across the bay, they could see the first winking lights of San Francisco," wrote Jack London in *The Valley of the Moon* (1913). Here the Oakland-bred writer described a journey westward down from the Contra Costa hills into the checkerboard of fields and towns that made

up Oakland, coming upon a view of the manufacturing waterfront just short of the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the flatlands in sight of the Golden Gate but anchored on the continent and overshadowed by its glamorous neighbor. Oakland's smoky skies, proof of its bustling factories, showed that it was not a satisfied second city but a relentless competitor, convinced that its expanses of flat land and transportation connections would lead to eventual preeminence. Its leaders equated progress with equaling or overtaking the far larger and wealthier city across the bay. They took immeasurable satisfaction in becoming the dominant Bay Area container port and in sporting, for decades, more major league teams than San Francisco.

If Oakland never counted many more than 400,000 residents, it consistently punched above its weight. Because it became the center of the populous East Bay, no city of its size in the United States attained as big a reputation: in politics, business, and sports. But as time went on, Oakland's rivalry with San Francisco could lead it to unrealistic goals. Fisherman's Wharf became a tourist mecca in the city; the town's retort, Jack London Square, never coalesced. The BART rail system catalyzed a boom of office construction in downtown San Francisco; Oakland's attempts to mirror that success fell short.

Part of the reason lay in the fact that the town was thwarted in its efforts to grow larger, unable to annex nearby East Bay cities and forge a greater Oakland. Its relationship with those adjacent places nonetheless proved pivotal. A small swath of the lower hills, Piedmont, incorporated as an independent municipality entirely surrounded by Oakland. Many of the town's business elite resided in the well-off enclave, gaining from its excellent services while not contributing nearly enough to Oakland's civic improvement. Berkeley, the university city to Oakland's north, cultivated a vibrant cultural and political scene that profoundly influenced its neighbor: the Arts and Crafts and Modern movements in architecture; environmentalism with respect to parks, creeks, and the bay; the creation of regional agencies targeted to functions like water supply; the student-led Free Speech and anti-Vietnam War protest movements; lifestyle and gastronomic trends, from Zen Buddhism to California cuisine. After midcentury, the suburbs of Alameda and Contra Costa Counties drew Oakland's residents, industries, and stores; over the final decades, tiny once-indus-