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ALEX STEFFEN

The *Boom* Interview

What use is the future?

Editor's Note: Alex Steffen is a futurist and a self-described optimist. A native Californian, Steffen is keen on the future of the Golden State. So much so that he moved back to the San Francisco Bay Area from Seattle after taking futurism by storm with his influential blog and book *Worldchanging*, an eye-opening encyclopedia of the people, technologies, trends, and forces of the future at work in the world today to create a bright, green tomorrow. Steffen wanted to be closer to the future, in the state that has made the future a core part of its identity—the California dream.

But Steffen is now deeply worried about the inertia he has found in his home state. The power of the past—which, it turns out, has much to do with the California dream, too—weighs on the present, preventing the changes needed to ensure the California dream continues to evolve. The irony is that how we think about the future is a big part of the problem. Steffen sat down with *Boom* to explore the conundrum we're in.

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Boom: How do you imagine California in relation to the Pacific world in 2115?

Alex Steffen: A lot depends on much broader global questions. What will the *world* will be like in 2115? That's an open question. We know that the range of possibility is pretty dramatic, including some pretty catastrophic outcomes, potentially. And when we look at California, in the context of the Pacific Rim, in the context of the planet as a whole, I think we really have to ask ourselves this question: Will there be another California?

Because it has been so successful for so long, some people want to believe that California is a category of place, a formula that can be replicated elsewhere, that the next Silicon Valley, for example, is just a matter of arranging inputs. And I think that really mistakes what California is.

California is a set of circumstances that I don't think can happen again: this weird thing, a place, sort of without history—and “without history” in air quotes here, because our history was erased; it was ripped out by the roots—a place without history, made vastly wealthy then suddenly landed right in the middle of the global cultural discussion and the global economic future, and it has been there for eighty years, arguably more. That, I don't think, is a thing that can happen again, because there's nowhere left without history. There's nowhere left where there's a fresh start, with “fresh start,” again, in air quotes.

California is, by its very nature, the end of one kind of possibility. We got to the coast and we ran out of frontier. That means that California has stayed the frontier for a very, very, very long time. In fact, the frontier is a thing of our past, everywhere on Earth. You won't find it in the Arctic or Antarctica or the deepest Amazon or the Sahara. They're not landscapes of human possibility. They're simply the most remote places left.

Boom: If this California will no longer exist here or anywhere else, what are the processes and events that are changing that possibility?

Steffen: There are two parts to that question. One part is what's happening on the planet. By the middle of this next century, we'll be living on a planet with very little in common with the twentieth century. To begin with, we are in this moment of ecological inflection, where we are coming to grips with planetary boundaries in a way that we simply

haven't ever before. Limits are a major pressing concern for the very future of civilization itself, whether we're talking about climate change or species loss or the death of the oceans or soil and water depletion. All of these things are tied together in a way that is now an active determinant of what humans can do, and will become more and more so. So we have that global problem of wrestling with the reality of earthly constraints and our obligations to future generations. The implications of needing to live for a very long time on a planet of tight limits are so huge that our minds are unprepared to meet them. But meet them we will over the next few decades.

We are also midway through the process of raising all of humanity out of poverty. The follow-on consequences of globalization and development are similarly huge, not the least of which is a demand for planetary equity. People all over the world are saying, “We deserve our share.” It's simple geopolitical realism that whatever we in the developed world wind up doing, we'll have to accommodate international fairness.

After the last American century, I think we'll find a planet of distributed prosperity disorienting. By the middle of this century, we will be looking at as many as nine billion people on this planet, with perhaps five billion people having risen out of poverty, and perhaps as many as one billion living lives as prosperous as those of the American middle class. And essentially everyone will be living in or around globally connected cities. We'll all be tied together.

That is going to change absolutely everything about what it means to be “developed,” quote-unquote, and what it means to be a person who is an active part of the global economy. There are things running through our society now that we can already see, like the de-skilling of professions, the automation of things that we used to take for granted could not be automated, off-shoring of manufacturing—all of these things are just reality, and they're nowhere near close to finished. So any future that we have is going to be a future that takes place in that context. I don't think it's necessarily grim at all, but it's very different.

And then there's this ongoing, deeper process of technological and cultural change. And I say those two things together because I think we really underestimate the degree to which technological change is primarily cultural change. Especially here in California, we're surrounded by lots of people who have made a lot of money off of “technology,”

quote-unquote, so we think technology itself is the driver. But without a doubt, it is people's willingness to engage on a cultural level with technologies and do new things that is actually creating the value there. I'm of the opinion that our cultures shape the technologies they need and desire, more than the other way around.

All three of those forces demand that we have a different vision of what we do, as a species, but I think even more so, a different vision of what we do here in California.

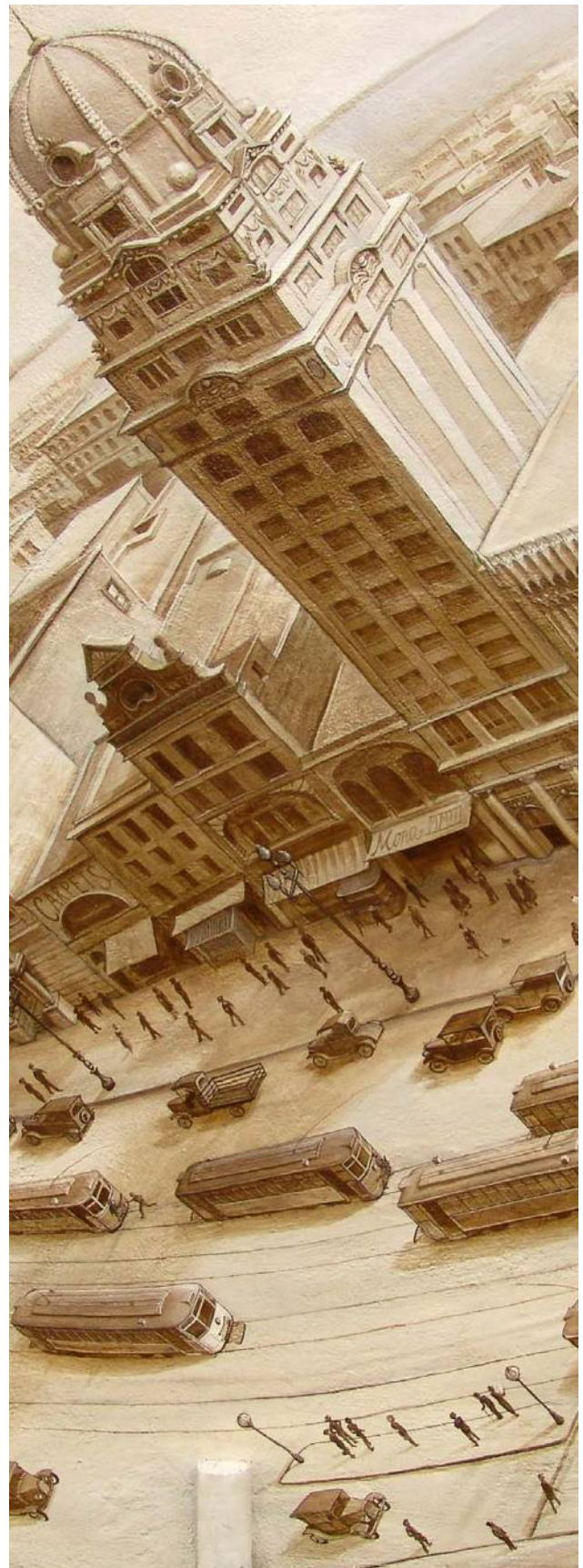
Because California is a stance toward the future, and the future is not what we thought it would be, the most important question here is: Can California become its next iteration of itself, or is it stuck somehow? I get a sense out there across the state that a lot of people feel we're stuck, like we've sunk into stasis at a really inopportune time.

Boom: But we like the California we had.

Steffen: But which California did we like? California is this really strange place, and we are constantly being overrun and reinvented, often against our will, but also often with our active participation. Losing the version of California we like is perhaps the most common cultural experience of being a Californian. I have some ancestors who were here before it was California, and I guess they liked that one pretty well. I grew up on nostalgic stories of that California, when people worked on ranches and grizzly bears could still be found somewhere other than on the state flag. There are other people here who like the New Deal suburbs California, others who like the sixties California, and there are other people who like the nineties California.

Boom: And some of us even like the early twenty-first century California.

Steffen: Exactly. There are some people who really like what's happening right now and don't want it to change. And there is this constant sort of eating of itself that California does. At the very same time, that's the source of this kind of constant tension, where California never quite knows if it's having a boom or a revolution or both at any given moment. I think one of the things that's really deeply unstable about this moment right now is that people believe that we're having a boom when we may, in fact, be having another revolution.



Boom: You have said, “I’m particularly keen on the future of California.” What do you mean by “keen,” that you feel good about it or that you’re keenly interested in it?

Steffen: Well, you know, I’m a native. I love this place. But more what I meant then was that I think there’s probably nowhere more interesting right now to be thinking about the future than California. In fact, I moved back to California in part because this seems to me to be the place in America where the really difficult questions about our future are being worked out.

In much of the world, the solutions are actually pretty easy to find. They’re just damned hard to implement. If you have a city of ten million people, three million of whom do not have water, there’s a lot of hard work to do there, but we know that it can be done. It’s not a matter of can this place find its future. There are all sorts of questions about equity and how it can happen, the practicalities of it, but that’s not where the future is being worked out. That’s where the nineteenth century is being worked out.

California, on the other hand, has an extreme version of the problem that so much of the world has, which is that it has this landscape of wealth, which has ceased to be a form of wealth and has become a liability. Sunk costs. That is the primary problem for the developed world. We essentially have a Ponzi scheme on our hands. We have a form of wealth that was incredibly expensive to create—ecologically, but also financially—for which we are massively indebted, for which we run giant deficits, at all levels of government, and for which individuals have borrowed enormous amounts of money. And the way of life we bought with that money has a very uncertain future, if it has a future at all. What I mean by that is not just that a lot of our wealth is unsustainable, but, also, that a lot of our wealth has ceased to actually be productive. It’s based on hiding the costs and extracting economic rents from the people who are living here. And that is not a future. Unsustainability and lack of productivity are not what a future is made of.

But the idea that we change, the idea that we open up the future of the places we built and the economy we built to new possibilities is terrifying to a lot of people, especially a lot of older people. And I think that it’s not much of a stretch to divide a lot of California politics into that issue—the issue of are we going to reinvent ourselves so that we have a more prosperous future or do those who are

currently benefitting have the right to keep it playing out for a little while longer, no matter what? I actually think that conflict—between those who see their interest in preservation of the status quo, and those who see their only hope in change—may well define our politics for the next decade or two.

Boom: How can we imagine a way out of that? Can you imagine that either we fail to reinvent ourselves? Or we succeed in doing that? What do those alternatives look like?

Steffen: Unfortunately, the failure scenario is really easy. The failure scenario is we do exactly what we’re doing. We believe that some magic force—whether it’s venture-funded technology, or the next boom, or the inherent vitality of multiculturalism, or whatever—that these forces will just show up and everything will be fine. People joke about business plans that claim, “I do this, and then I do that. Then the magic happens, and we make a lot of money.” California’s default plan is, essentially, “then the magic happens.”

The predictable outcome there is that we bankrupt ourselves. And we bankrupt ourselves at precisely the time when the bill is coming due in other ways, for what we’ve done—ecological, social, and fiscal. We sink into the mire precisely when we most need to move quickly.

But failure is not our only future. We might, instead, choose to reinvent ourselves again, to become the people who can reconcile prosperity, sustainability, and dynamism. We could raise our vision to take in the whole state and imagine for it and ourselves new ways of life that fit its realities and our own. Because failing exurbs and potholed freeways, government bankruptcies and climate chaos, eroding clear-cuts, dwindling salmon runs and drought-ravaged crops, a permanent underclass and a massive housing crisis—these aren’t the only way to live. We know enough to know that remaking all of that is at least possible. We could rebuild our cities with lots of new green housing and new transit and infrastructure, run our state on clean energy, remake forestry and farming, and look at water in a more sane way. We might even find a future for the suburbs, because if the twenty-first century has a frontier, it will be, as Bruce Sterling says, in the ruins of the unsustainable. All of these things would make us richer, and done properly they would actually become an export industry, because the whole wealthy world needs to figure out all this stuff, too. So those who figure it out can sell it, and should. We need the

scale and speed of change that comes with a boom, and the self-transformation you see unleashed in democratic revolutions.

The practicalities of how we build a bright green state are tough, but even tougher is the cultural question: Who are “we” when we talk about ourselves as a group? The questions of who we are together are thorny and deep-rooted here in California, and we need a new and better answer.

Boom: How do you define success a century out, which is, essentially, success for those who are not yet born?

Steffen: Well, actually, some of the people who will be here in a century have been born.

Boom: Yeah, that’s true. But they’re very, very young, at this point.

Steffen: Our landscape of the future has foreshortened as the baby boomers have gotten older. People treat 2050 as this distant, unknowable world.

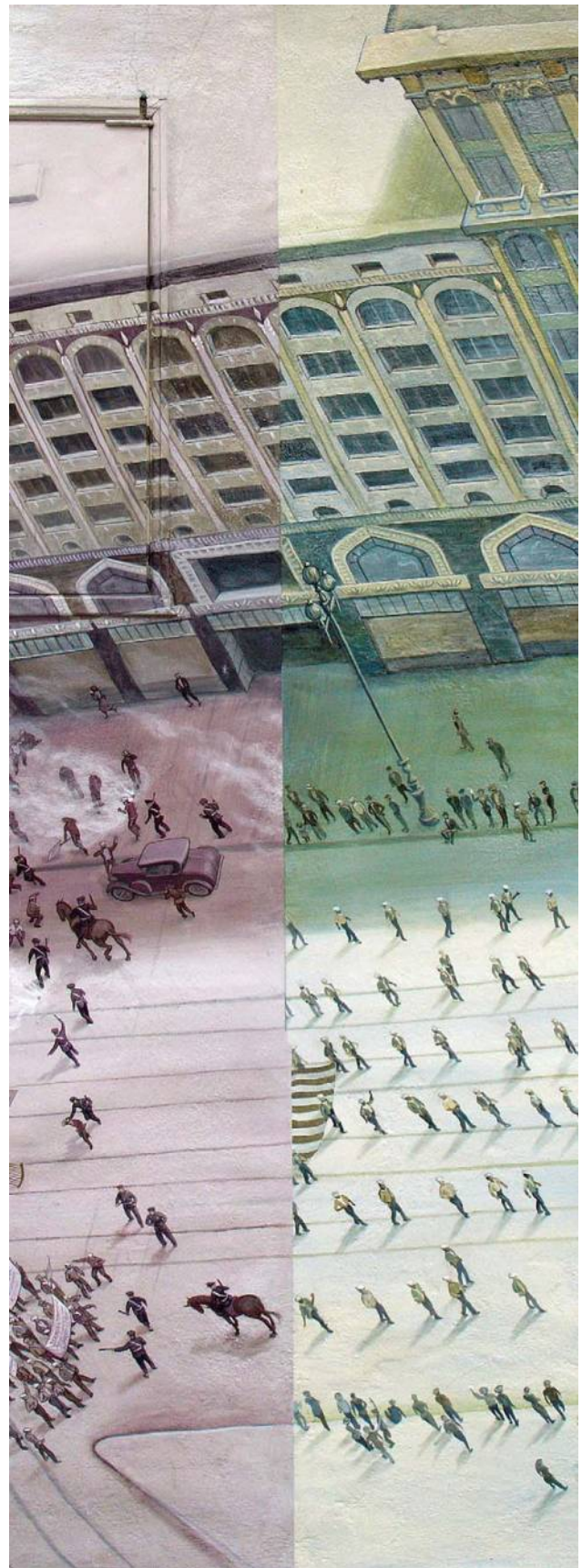
Boom: But many people who are forty today will be alive then.

Steffen: Absolutely. In fact, 1970 is farther away than 2050, and 1970 is like right around the corner for a lot of people in California.

Boom: I remember it well.

Steffen: I don’t. I think I was teething.

I believe that we are in the process of reclaiming our kinship to the future. I mean that in the most literal sense. The people who are going to be alive in the near future and in the distant future are us. They’re our descendants. They’re the people we love and their descendants. The future isn’t some make-believe land where weird things happen. That is a very strange conception of how time actually works and has far more to do with marketing things than it does with actual human experience. In 2115, a whole lot of people, who are the children of people now alive, will still be alive. So we’re not talking about a distant them. And I think that’s really important to recognize, because there’s a tendency to believe that because the future is some distant, crazy place, we can leave the future to the future. In fact, there’s a very explicit ideology about not trying to fix our problems now, but wait until nanotechnology, or intelligent



robots, or visitors from Mars, or whatever the hell comes along and fixes it for us.

There's this idea that transcendence is right around the corner, so don't get bogged down. That is, of course, now a rusty, ancient ideology, despite the fact that we keep putting new coats of paint on it. The idea that we're going to become immortal in machines was invented by the Bolsheviks, when they were trying to find a communist replacement for heaven. Maxim Gorky led a commission that literally invented the idea of uploading brains and having an online culture of digital beings. Basically, it was a way of being like, "Yeah, you don't have to worry about dying!" The idea of individual transcendence, that we're going to biologically engineer ourselves into super beings? That's eugenics. That's the nightmare that came out of reaction to Darwin when people were like, "But if nobody put us here, then where are we supposed to be going? We must command our own genetic destiny!"

Space, which is deeply tied into the Californian identity, is a dead end. We're not going anywhere, for a very long time. I mean, we might go to Mars, but that's a stunt. That's not an expression of human destiny. All of these things are part of this idea that the future is a place where we'll transcend the suffering and fear of the human condition and of living on a single Earth and that it's just around the curve.

And part of what planetary futurism—a description I made up for the work I do—is about is trying to acknowledge that almost all of the conditions that will be present in the future are things we can sniff out now. The outlines of the future can already be made out in the fog, precisely because we won't be transcending anything. Demographics are slow and inexorable, human nature changes gradually if at all, technology can do amazing things but is very unlikely to rewrite the laws of physics.

Our confusion on what is and is not within our powers is astonishing. Take, for instance, the very telling muddle around the word "Anthropocene." In its scientific usage, it describes simply an era when humanity's impacts on the planet will be recognizable in the geological record. But in popular use, it has come to mean the time when we took control of the planet. That, unfortunately, is absurd. We're nowhere near fully understanding our world, much less running the show. All of our powers are those of disruption: we know how to fill the sky with pollution and heat the planet, for instance, but that very definitely does not mean

we have some sort of global thermostat at our disposal. We know how to destroy ecosystems, but not how to re-create them. We know how to increase entropy, but very little about how to restore dynamic stability. We're like monkeys breaking china cups and thinking that means we're master potters. The best way we know to have more cups in the future is to stop breaking them and fix the ones we've smashed, if we can.

So we know that in 2115, the problems we're creating now will be playing out in their full form. And I think that when we look at that, the real obligation that comes down to us—if we want to be good ancestors in that situation—is to leave open options.

And the options that we should most leave open are the options that are the most impossible to replace. So, right now, we don't have any idea how to resurrect a dead species, despite press to the contrary. The best we can do is kind of play with a species that's like it, that will produce results that are somewhat akin to what we had. That's like making a model of an extinct species. That's not making the species. We are, at the moment, around the world, driving into extinction species we don't even know exist. So there's definitely no coming back for those.

Extinction is the permanent closing of an option for the future, and that's part of why it's such a terrible idea. Similarly, because of the physics of climate change and ocean acidification and ecosystem loss, it is far, far more expensive, in money and energy terms, to try to alter the impacts than to try to prevent them. Once we put a ton of CO₂ up in the air, it's going to cost us much, much, much more money to deal with the consequences of that, and try to change it, than it costs us to not put a ton of CO₂ in the air. Every ton of CO₂ we release, then, forecloses options for the future and commits people in the future to more disasters and disaster management.

Where it gets interesting is, what are the things that are hard for us to see as options that people in the future might really want? One of these, for example, might be oil. We might want to leave a lot of oil in the ground for future generations to do things with, because it turns out those hydrocarbons can do a lot of interesting things and probably can do things that we can't yet quite figure out. So it might be that leaving a bunch of oil in the ground for them is something that they will wish we did. There's a similar ethos in archaeology now, where there's a policy of leaving parts of

many sites undug, recognizing that our grandchildren and their grandchildren may have techniques and understandings that reveal different things that we can't even see now and might destroy using existing techniques. Leaving the option open for the future, to explore part of Troy or whatever in a new way, is a very sensible example of this idea.

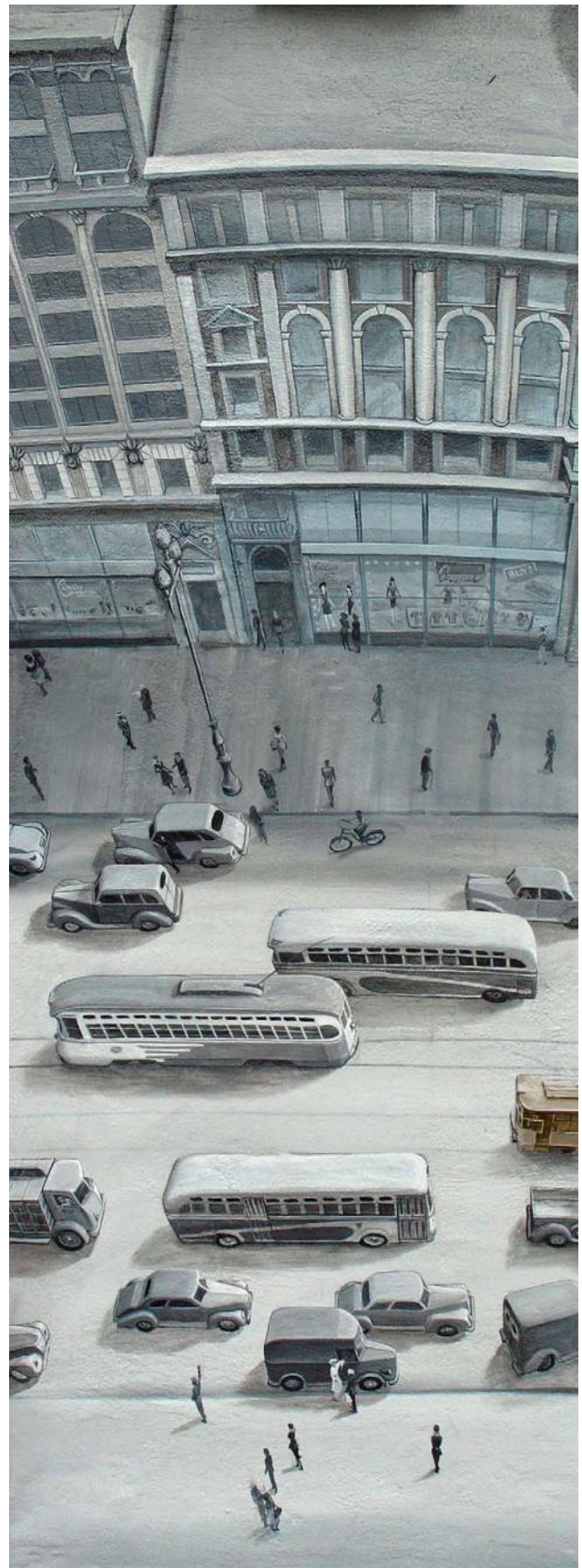
But there are even weirder things that we don't really know about, like our own microbiomes, our own bodies, and what we're doing to our bodies, and what we're doing to our descendants' bodies in the process, and what things they might wish we had done or not done. I'm pretty sure, for that reason, that trying to engineer humans, in terms of the genome, is probably a bad idea, precisely because it's so hard to figure out what the ongoing effects are going to be, beyond very specific genes that we understand very well. We're starting to understand our genes aren't computer code, that they are part of the far squishier system of our bodies.

I think that being a good ancestor is largely about leaving the playing field as open as possible for the people who come after us, giving them as many moves as you can.

Boom: So there's a lot we can know about 2115. Does it matter if there are things that we can't know about 2115?

Steffen: It does matter. Futurism is a deeply confused industry. It's confused about its own job. In part, this comes from the conflict that we have in English of having the future mean a whole bunch of different things. The future means any time after now—so the time where you will do something. It also means a mythical place in which we put things that aren't now, ranging from science fiction stories to predictions of market share. And it also, in American society, means the idea of things changing. The future is an ideology as well as a time in America. And all of these things make it really hard to talk about the future.

I once read an explanation of the Norns, who are the three sisters who weave the cloth of fate in Norse mythology. And it really rang true to me. I fear that it may not actually be true, but it's one of those things that's too good to fact-check. Anyway, the names of the three Norns supposedly mean that which was, that which is becoming, and that which may be. And that is actually a really interesting way to think about things, because, first of all, we are so enmeshed in history as humans. The past didn't go anywhere, as Utah Phillips said.



We're living in the past, still. And that's a part of the human condition—to live surrounded by the past.

And, a lot of what we talk about as the future is, in fact, what's already unfolding around us. Much of what we're trying to do when we're doing futurism is just to see what's already here with fresh eyes. Because we're so surrounded by the past, it's sometimes hard to see something that has shifted, that's really important, that's already true. I think the best futurists almost all see the core of the work as predicting the present.

But there's also what may be. And I think that's where it gets really hard to say useful things, because clearly there are events and processes that change us and that change the range of possibility. We're really obsessed about gadgets and fleeting technologies, but that doesn't mean that our discoveries aren't widening the range of things that could happen, in ways that are very hard to anticipate. For instance, things are happening with cognitive science, with brain interfaces, with data extrapolation and modeling, and so forth that could change our experience of thinking. What we're often blind to, though, is something much more radical, which is social innovation and social evolution.

The fundamental fact about people is not that we are individually smart. It's that we do crazy things together. We take for granted, especially in the Anglophone world, that the institutions and mores that we got from the nineteenth century are reflections of human nature. So we take for granted that capitalism, in a certain form, is the end of history. We take for granted that the aspiration of people is to be consumers in a middle class way. We take for granted the idea that politics is notionally democratic, but in practice is about competing elites. There's a whole series of assumptions that we make that go right back into Victorian England. And I think that those assumptions are far more open to disruption than the way our brains interface with technology.

One of the things that is really potent about California is that this is a place that has had social, cultural upheavals, regularly, one after another, for decades on end. There is this idea now that that might be over. If that's true, I think California has the bleakest future imaginable. But I don't think it's true. I think California might well be a place where we see civic and institutional innovation on a popular scale in the near future. The fact that institutional innovation sounds like an oxymoron just demonstrates how much there is to change though.

Boom: Has thinking about the future changed from 1915 to now? And how do you think it will change between now and 2115?

Steffen: To an extent that makes some people very uncomfortable to acknowledge, we are still living in a 1915 sense of the future. Almost all of the tropes of futurism, of science fiction, et cetera, are things that come out of the late 1800s and the very early years of the 1900s. And our reactions to a combination of the displacement of God by evolution, and the ability to tell the age of the planet, and the inability to find a physical soul, all of these things, and this overwhelming force that was raw industrialization, seemed to suggest that everything was malleable . . . “All that is solid melts into air,” as Marx said. In fact, any trope I have been able to find about the future, you can find somebody saying it in 1915 or, if not 1915, at least by 1925.

We don't like to acknowledge that. We like to think that advocates of space travel, like Elon Musk, or the Singularity, like Ray Kurzweil, are the cutting edge. But Musk is just following in the tracks of the Russian Cosmists, as Kurzweil follows Gorky and his Immortalization Commission. We like to think that the transhumanists are blazing a new frontier, but they're really like H.G. Wells, who was talking about a lot of that stuff, just in a much more racist context. Our movies are packed with the fiery futuristic visions of people who were mostly dead before anyone we know was born.

None of those ideas about the future are real anymore. And I think one of the things that's really emotionally difficult for a lot of people is recognizing that not only did that future not come true, it was never going to. We were never going to get flying cars, and even if we did, they wouldn't mean what we thought they'd mean. People cling to the idea that, “Oh, look, the classic sci fi future is coming true!” But that future is almost a definition of what's not happening, it's where we aren't.

So, when we look at how people looked at the world in 1915, there are some things that are different—at least I hope they are, social Darwinism, for example, and imperialism—but we have never had a reckoning with that outdated idea of the future. One of the trends that I find hopeful is that this new generation of futurists is fully aware of that situation, and is simply uninterested in the rusty technological sublime.

But right now we still tend to talk about the future—especially older futurists—in terms of what is Apple going to make? So, for example, as we’re talking, the iWatch just came out.

Boom: Yeah, and we’ve been waiting for it for sixty years.

Steffen: Right. Exactly. When your big move is something that cartoons from the prewar era featured, that’s a problem. That’s not an achievement. That’s a problem. And there’s still this sense that the future is being made in Cupertino and Mountain View. And I think the future of technology is being made in much weirder ways and is much more about things like questioning models of intellectual property, reclaiming and restoring privacy, creating widely sharable innovations. These are things that you wouldn’t get a sense are happening in the mainstream tech world.

That said, I’m starting to see this quote everywhere: “If you don’t know what the product is, the product is you.” The idea being that if you’re signed up to a free service that tracks your actions and harvests your data, then you’re actually being exploited, not helped. Or those little anti-Google Glass stickers, which I’ve started to see more and more places: “Don’t wear Google Glass into this business.” There’s a not-so-subtle backlash to that idea of technology, which is really interesting, because in the technology press, it’s portrayed as Luddism. But all the people I know who are most feisty about those things are far more technologically sophisticated than most of the people who write the business press. They’re more immersed in it. It’s a very youthful, techie thing to be skeptical about technology and the way it’s marketed to us.

I suspect that I’m probably too old already to figure this one out as a futurist, but one of the things I feel is this undercurrent that the next technological shift has nothing to do with Silicon Valley’s definitions of what innovation looks like. It might be huge and world changing, without being something that we can recognizably call a technological industry.

Boom: You’ve said that you are particularly interested in our cultural understandings of our built and natural systems, and that the connection is blurring between them. Do you think that the notion of a difference or divide between these two things, the built and the natural environment, will go away?



Steffen: Well, at its most fundamental level, that notion of a divide is false. We are wholly within the natural world. We live within the planet, not on it. And every single thing around us is a piece of nature. We haven't actually left the natural world, because even when we shoot people into space, we take Earth minerals, make them into a shell, fill them with Earth gases, Earth water, and Earth food. We detach that for a little while from Earth and then bring it back. So this idea that there's some artificial world that exists outside of the context of the natural is just not true.

There was once a useful distinction between the systems that we have dominated and built into designs of our own making, or unintentionally created, and systems that have evolved on their own. But we have an influence on everything now. There's no place that's not warming because of our fossil fuel use, for example. This demands thinking in new ways. Aldo Leopold said, "To be an ecologist is to live alone in a world of wounds." Culturally, we do not have a path to understanding the interaction of the systems we have heavily engineered with those that we are not in control of, other than this sense of loss. Environmentalism gave us this amazing gift of understanding, actually, that we live entirely within the planet. But it also created a narrative of decline. Even now, some of the most eminent elder environmental thinkers spend their time musing over whether it's too late for civilization or whether we can still retreat back into the past. How far back into the past is a matter of disagreement. Wendell Berry believes we just need to retreat to horse-drawn plows. And you have others who are like, "No, no, no. We need to undo industrial civilization as a whole." These are all back-to-the-garden fantasies, and again quite old ones, dating back to the very dawn of the industrial era. They have nothing to do with our actual set of options. These dreams of retreat to a simpler time, I believe, are attempts to retain psychological integrity in the face of an overwhelming reality, which is everything is not quite as we've been trained to see it.

But I also think that there's something happening where we are beginning—and California is actually very much in the epicenter of this—to understand that the systems we influence and the systems we have changed, we have built, don't have to be disastrous breaks with nature, that there can be a harmony across the landscape, which is not natural and not human, because there is no separation of those

things, so we seek the health of both. It is us trying to live within the patterns of the planet we're on while meeting our needs. And there's a way to do that which is very different than what we have, but better.

Right now, we're sitting here in Berkeley, and I can see out the window, past you. There's a busy street with asphalt, and cars zooming down it. I can see air conditioning units and power poles. And it's very difficult to come to grips with the reality that none of that is sustainable, even over a very short period of time. If ecologists and environmentalist have largely retreated into the past, a lot of people who work on the built world dwell with a comforting illusion that we're going to somehow make our unsustainable cities work without reimagining them from the ground up.

The most potent question of all, I think, is how might a bright green—both prosperous and sustainable—future outcompete the present? Because this is America. Futures don't get built because they're better. They get built because they outcompete. That, I think, is a really interesting question.

Boom: I'm looking over your shoulder and there's a backyard orchard and garden and trees. Some of that probably is sustainable.

Steffen: It might be. Yet one of the big changes that has happened in the last ten years is people understanding that you have to think in systems. You have to think about consumption footprints and supply chains. One of the really big problems with 1970s environmentalism was this whole idea that you could do things on a local scale and become sustainable. But even looking back across the yard, at the house there, even that vision of urban sustainability is dependent on oil and huge industrial systems, on things that are manufactured in China—it's likely that even that food there in the garden is being grown in topsoil mined elsewhere and dumped into urban yards, et cetera, et cetera. We are all of us enmeshed in these global systems, and there is no escape from it. One of the really big problems we have is this sense that urban sustainability means making cities like rural areas. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Urban sustainability has to be about making cities so much like cities that their footprints shrink to that which can be met sustainably. And that way of thinking is like a whole new thing. And it's another source of big conflict in California.



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Boom: I was going to ask what might California’s vision of itself be in 2115. But it sounds like California’s vision of itself as some place distinct goes away. Or does it?

Steffen: Well, who knows? See, I think there’s a challenge there, because there is this mindset that if you aren’t local, you must be just globalized in some way that destroys everything. But that mindset, I think, is, frankly, not very different from the mindset that fueled harsh xenophobia and racism—that we’re going to become mongrelized or something if we interact with people who are not like us. I think that what we will do is come to more fully understand our places, more fully inhabit them, because the story that we tell about them being distinct was never true, or it was never the whole truth, at the very least. And I suspect that just as you go to Europe now, and seventy years ago Europeans were killing each other by the tens of millions, but you go to Europe now, and you go to a place like Berlin, and there are people from all over Europe, hanging out together,

marrying each other, starting businesses together, living in a shared future. But they’re still people from different places. They still speak different languages. They still have different cultures. They have different dialects within their languages, et cetera. That doesn’t go away.

So I don’t think the sense of California will disappear just because we think in planetary terms. If anything, it may sharpen, in a weird way. We may understand that there is something very special and unique about the West Coast and about California, and we may come to see those things as sources of real pride rather than just tourist attractions. **B**

Notes

Market Street Railway mural and photographs by Mona Caron.

Boom editor Jon Christensen spoke with Alex Steffen at length in person. The transcript of their conversation was then edited and revised by both Steffen and Christensen.