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# Come See California's Future

In beautiful Fresno

**Y**ou might find it hard to picture Fresno. Many Californians, not to mention people elsewhere, have no idea what our city looks like or what goes on here. You might imagine things of an agricultural nature on a big scale. But that's probably it.

When you live in a state with cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, Newport Beach, and Napa, Fresno barely registers. Very few people come here to get away from anywhere else, although plenty pass through on their way to Yosemite and Sequoia national parks.

For the longest time, Fresno has barely even registered to itself. Even today, with so much going on here—yes, there is a lot going on here—most well-off Fresnoans ditch the city on weekends for second homes on the coast or in the Sierra. The press Fresno gets is mostly just bad: bad air, bad crime, bad poverty—all true.

Now tracks for a high-speed rail are being laid in Fresno to connect us to the rest of the California in a way that some believe could transform our city. But into what? One of many new bedroom communities serving Los Angeles and San Francisco from even farther out? The hub of a new Central Valley megalopolis that will connect all of the small cities along Highway 99 from Bakersfield to Stockton?

It makes sense to start building the bullet train line in the dead center of the state, where dirt happens to be relatively cheap, good jobs are hard to come by, and there are no real topographical challenges to contend with. Fresno is a place “so nearly level,” John McPhee once wrote, “that you have no sense of contour.” And since nobody is keeping an eye on Fresno, starting here may also be a way to gain momentum for a project hammered by controversy. For a city of half a million, the fifth biggest city in the state, Fresno has remained generally off the radar.

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Photograph by Craig Kohlruss.

But Fresno doesn't need the bullet train to get on anybody's radar or to transform the city. That's already happening. Fresno is being transformed from the inside out, taking strands from its past, present, and future to build a new kind of California urbanism, dare I say, a more appealing urbanism than anywhere else in the state, and people are starting to notice.

Fresno's first code was purely agricultural. In the 1870s, a Midwesterner named Thomas Kearney envisioned Fresno as a Jeffersonian yeoman farmer's paradise. His great plan to shape Fresno into a powerhouse of agriculture, and himself into a kind of Carnegie of farming, began when he purchased 6,800 acres, nearly five miles square, and fashioned a master plan that included a 240-acre park. In the middle of this park, he built a home modeled after the Loire Valley's Château de Chenonceau, with a footprint of 12,000 square feet. He divided the land surrounding this castle complex into twenty-acre parcels and advertised them at \$1,000 apiece.

Accountants, haberdashers, former gold rushers flush with money, retired attorneys, and four ex-schoolteachers from San Francisco were among the first to sign up. They arrived in Fresno intending to fashion a life from the land,

and because of that land's amazing productiveness, it was no idle dream. In 1920, Mary Bartlett wrote of her father, who farmed next door to Kearney: "He started with pumpkins, watermelon, squash, corn, and tomatoes and by the time the young vineyard was at the bearing stage he also had several varieties of peaches, apricots, plums, oranges, lemons, tangerines, kumquats, loquats, quince, crabapples, almonds, pomegranates, walnuts, cherries, artichokes and his great pride and joy . . . a whole row of olive trees which in no time at all were more fruitful than the ancient branches of Tuscany."

"California's Central Valley is one of the seven most fertile valleys in the world," the Fresno Historical Society's website claims, "fifteen million acres of land some 450 miles in length and typically 40 to 60 miles wide. Fresno County is located in the heart of this Valley and is the most productive agricultural county in the nation." But its greatest gift, as Mary Bartlett's letters reveal, isn't so much the volume but the variety of crops grown here, some of which, like almonds, pistachios, and walnuts, grow well in only a few places around the world.

This Fresno was still evident when I was growing up here. Back in the days when I walked its alleyways home

from school, you could pick enough different kinds of fruit from the trees that hung over fences to start your own stand. This is thanks to the Mediterranean climate, extraordinarily rich and textured soil, the result of millions of years of wind and rain scraping and scrubbing the Sierra on one side and the Coast Range on the other, and water both underground and flowing down from the Sierra—but in truth, the reason things grow here unlike anywhere else in the world is impossible to say.

When I was a kid, the country with all its fertile glory was never more than a stone's throw away from wherever you lived. It made a terrific place to escape, especially during the winters when the fog was almost as thick as yogurt, providing a kind of natural cover from parents or the law. But beginning in the 1980s, and continuing to this day, the orchard and vineyards that once surrounded the city were handed over to developers who built a never-ending series of neighborhoods with preposterous names such as Liberty Square and Barcelona.

Fresno today feels and acts like a real city, not just a series of misfit bedroom communities, partly because these neighborhoods are tied together by four pretty efficient freeways. Fresno raised itself up around its downtown, where city government is still housed. Skirting the “Frog,” Fresno's futurist, amphibian-shaped City Hall, is an eclectic mix of buildings that house various city functions, some new but most mid-century variations of the so-called International Style. These structures edge up to Fulton Mall, a three-block outdoor promenade and one of the great urban landscape experiments in America, with playful fountains and geometric sculptures, including a Rodin, and sitting areas under mature trees. Adjacent to the Fulton are some architectural gems like the old Fresno Bee and Guarantee Savings buildings, the extraordinarily beautiful art deco Warner Theater that would rival any of the grand movie palaces in Los Angeles, and many former industrial spaces now tastefully restored as art galleries, boutique clothing stores, and coffee houses.

The city, like so many others, suffered a version of white flight when the well-to-do moved east toward the mountains. But downtown, there are now blocks and blocks of new apartments, put up by a longtime local developer betting on Fresno's renaissance. His strategy, executed with the city's cooperation, was to preserve the more handsome older structures that remained and replace the dilapidated

ones with mixed-use buildings—retail below and living spaces above—made of glass and steel but painted in playful colors, like three-dimensional Mondrians. The area is called the Arts District, or the Mural District, and up until a few years ago it was moribund, given up for prematurely dead. Now it is turning into an ambitious example of the new urbanism at work. It is also the starting point for the most culturally and architecturally interesting part of the city, one that continues unfolding for five miles up Van Ness Avenue, through the humming Tower district and the Fresno High School and City College neighborhoods, ending in the area called Fig Garden, arguably the most beautiful neighborhood in Fresno, which every year hosts the longest “Christmas tree lane” in America.

Fresno has the bones upon which to construct an appealingly Californian city, but more importantly, it has the conditions that make living here an attractive proposition. It's become axiomatic that only the wealthiest or those grandfathered in can afford to live in many of our most coveted California cities today, whereas the vast horde of commuters is relegated to a kind of daily guest-worker status. This is not the case in Fresno. A typical commute is fifteen minutes; monthly rent for a large one-bedroom apartment is about \$800 a month; the price per square foot for a home around \$120. For several years, Fresno, with an average cost per square foot of retail space around \$1.50, has actively supported live-work spaces, relaxing the rules about where one can conduct business, which cuts commuting time to nothing.

In a series of pieces on Fresno, James Fallows of *The Atlantic* took notice of the city's vibrant art scene, going so far as to agree with many Fresnoans' sense of their city as California's new Bohemia, which, I think, gets the tone of artistic production here just right. Though there are quite a few orchestrated cultural events in Fresno, the vast majority have a bit of a ramshackle character, including The Rogue Festival, a ten-day artistic free-for-all that features a mindboggling number of events from juggling acts to one-act plays. When I moved to Los Angeles in the eighties, I lived up the street from Tom Solomon's Garage, a two-car garage where the art dealer showed work by many artists who later became famous. You can find a lot of this same DIY culture incubating in Fresno today.

Every first Thursday of the month, around a hundred artists open their studios to the public for what the city calls





Photograph by Craig Kohlruss.

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“Art Hop.” If the weather is good, several thousand people show up. Though nobody has counted, that I know of, yet, I would guess that the stretch from downtown to the Tower District has more artists’ studios (as opposed to art galleries) per capita than anywhere in California. A good number of fine musicians also use Fresno as a live-cheap-eat-well basecamp where, in a matter of hours, they can be in California’s bigger cities for gigs. On any given night you can walk the Tower District and hear them making beautiful fools of themselves on the streets, in tiny rooms in the back vinyl stores or in private garages with the door flung open.

In Fresno, you are allowed a certain privacy, even solitude, to acquaint yourself with your torments and dreams. Perfect for artists. For years I’ve felt that this reality, along with the energy of the soil, the intensity of the sun and immensity of the fog, explains the remarkable number of

writers, and especially poets such as recent American poet laureate Phillip Levine and current poet laureate, Juan Phillip Herrera, who were either born here or came here from elsewhere to live their lives and hone their craft.

On the other end of the spectrum is third-generation restaurateur Jimmy Pardini, who worked with Nancy Silverton of Mozza and La Brea Bakery fame for five years before moving back to Fresno and into a space adjacent to his father’s restaurant to start his own place, The Annex. Despite being surrounded by a mindboggling array of produce, Fresno has been woefully short of restaurants where the food is fresh and tastes are bold, and so Pardini saw an opening—and found success that has so far beaten his expectations. The Annex also features an extraordinarily tasty olive oil produced by Vincent Ricutti, a childhood friend whose family has grown and crushed olives locally for generations.

Even with all this going for it, it is probably “boomerangers”—that is, native Fresnoans who fled the city for San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other metropolises, but eventually returned—who will jump-start the city into a new phase of growth and vigor. A good example is Jake Soboral, cofounder of Bitwise Industries, which was featured in Fallows’ reporting on Fresno. Capitalizing on local talent and the fact that Fresno is way more affordable than San Francisco or San Jose, Soboral and his cofounders started a high-tech incubator, which they characterize as Fresno’s “motherhood of education, collaboration, and innovation.” Their first campus, a playfully rehabilitated building just off the Fulton Mall, aims to attract the best and brightest minds in the Central Valley with the aim of building another Silicon Valley.

Fresno’s mayor might not put it this way, but cities need holes in their fences. They need to be a bit desperate and welcoming, with ordinances, codes, rules, and regulations loose enough that the average person can get a foot in the door. Fresno is doing this right.

But for this new Fresno to fully encode itself in the Central Valley, the city needs to be more central in the consciousness of old-school Fresnoans, too, particularly farmers, who still represent the city’s first agricultural code. Rather than turning their backs on the city, as they tend to do, we need them to join the Bohemians in celebrating the city, to invest in marketing and technologies that add value to their raw products, and in other new businesses that will

generate jobs to diversify opportunities in the area. Farmers who call Fresno home might want to ask themselves why it took an Angeleno, Stewart Resnick, to turn clementines, pomegranates, and pistachios, crops all sourced from the valley and grown here for decades, into “Cuties,” “Pom,” and “Wonderful.” And the Bohemians need to figure out how to bring the farmers into town.

Any honest observer must admit that agriculture is among the things that make California the most robust state in the union. In this part of the state, how we treat farmers, how we negotiate water and environmental concerns, has an enormous impact. Fresno County adds nearly \$6 billion to the California economy. In the future, that number could grow. Seventy-five-year-old vineyards are being yanked out to make room for almonds that fetch \$3 a pound. And farmers have seen their land value quadruple in recent years. The market for hardy, high-protein foods such as nuts is increasing worldwide. And it is becoming harder and harder to wring more productivity out of agriculture around the world. But farmers around here are good at that. And in the not-too-distant future, they may be celebrated the way Silicon Valley executives are today.

Meanwhile, the Bohemians and farmers will keep the wheels spinning in Fresno, for the time being, perhaps until the day when Fresno, too, becomes a prohibitively expensive place to live and work. Then, I suppose, people will move to Modesto just up the road—or maybe just up the tracks on the bullet train. **B**

Photograph by Craig Kohlross.





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show

