

The streets of Ecotopia's capital

Excerpt from *Ecotopia* section titled "The streets of Ecotopia's capital"

San Francisco, May 5. As I emerged from the train terminal into the streets, I had little idea what to expect from this city—which had once proudly boasted of rising from its own ashes after a terrible earthquake and fire. San Francisco was once known as "America's favorite city" and had an immense appeal to tourists. Its dramatic hills and bridges, its picturesque cable cars, and its sophisticated yet relaxed people had drawn visitors who returned again and again. Would I find that it still deserves its reputation as an elegant and civilized place?

I checked my bag and set out to explore a bit. The first shock hit me at the moment I stepped onto the street. There was a strange hush over everything. I expected to encounter something at least a little like the exciting bustle of our cities—cars honking, taxis swooping, clots of people pushing about in the hurry of urban life. What I found, when I had gotten over my surprise at the quiet, was that Market Street, once a mighty boulevard striking through the city down to the waterfront, has become a mall planted with thousands of trees. The "street" itself, on which electric taxis, minibuses, and delivery carts purr along, has shrunk to a two-lane affair. The remaining space, which is huge, is occupied by bicycle lanes, fountains, sculptures, kiosks, and absurd little gardens surrounded by benches. Over it all hangs the almost sinister quiet, punctuated by the whirr of bicycles and cries of children. There is even the occasional song of a bird, unbelievable as that may seem on a capital city's crowded main street.

Scattered here and there are large conical-roofed pavilions, with a kiosk in the center selling papers, comic books, magazines, fruit juices, and snacks. (Also cigarettes—the Ecotopians have *not* managed to stamp out smoking!) The pavilions turn out to be stops on the minibus system, and people wait there out of the rain. These buses are comical battery-driven contraptions, resembling the antique cable cars that San Franciscans were once so fond of. They are driverless, and are steered and stopped by an electronic gadget that follows wires buried in the street. (A safety bumper stops them in case someone fails to get out of the way.) To enable people to get on and off quickly, during the 15 seconds the bus stops, the floor is only a few inches above ground level; the wheels are at the extreme ends of the vehicle. Rows of seats face outward, so on a short trip you simply sit down momentarily, or stand and hang onto one of the hand grips. In bad weather fringed fabric roofs can be extended

The streets of Ecotopia's capital

outward to provide more shelter.

These buses creep along at about ten miles an hour, but they come every five minutes or so. They charge *no* fare. When I took an experimental ride on one, I asked a fellow passenger about this, and he said the minibuses are paid for in the same way as streets—out of general tax funds. Smiling, he added that to have a driver on board to collect fares would cost more than the fares could produce. Like many Ecotopians, he tended to babble, and spelled out the entire economic rationale for the minibus system, almost as if he was trying to sell it to me. I thanked him, and after a few blocks jumped off.

The bucolic atmosphere of the new San Francisco can perhaps best be seen in the fact that, down Market Street and some other streets, creeks now run. These had earlier, at great expense, been put into huge culverts underground, as is usual in cities. The Ecotopians spent even more to bring them up to ground level again. So now on this major boulevard you may see a charming series of little falls, with water gurgling and splashing, and channels lined with rocks, trees, bamboos, ferns. There even seem to be minnows in the water—though how they are kept safe from marauding children and cats, I cannot guess.

Despite the quiet, the streets are full of people, though not in Manhattan densities. (Some foot traffic has been displaced to lacy bridges which connect one skyscraper to another, sometimes 15 or 20 stories up.) Since practically the whole street area is “sidewalk,” nobody worries about obstructions—or about the potholes which, as they develop in the pavement, are planted with flowers. I came across a group of street musicians playing Bach, with a harpsichord and a half dozen other instruments. There are vendors of food pushing gaily colored carts that offer hot snacks, chestnuts, ice cream. Once I even saw a juggler and magician team, working a crowd of children—it reminded me of some medieval movie. And there are many strollers, gawkers, and loiterers—people without visible business who simply take the street for granted as an extension of their living rooms. Yet, despite so many unoccupied people, the Ecotopian streets seem ridiculously lacking in security gates, doormen, guards, or other precautions against crime. And no one seems to feel our need for automobiles to provide protection in moving from place to place.

I had noticed on the train that Ecotopian clothes tend to be very loose, with bright colors striving to make up for what is lacking in style and cut. This

The streets of Ecotopia's capital

impression is confirmed now that I have observed thousands of San Franciscans. The typical Ecotopian man wears nondescript trousers (even denim is common—perhaps from nostalgia for American fashions of the pre-secession decades?) topped with an often hideous shirt, sweater, poncho, or jacket. Despite the usually chilly weather, sandals are common among both sexes. The women often wear pants also, but loose-flowing [...] skirts are more usual. A few people wear outlandish skin-tight garments which look like diving wet suits, but are woven of some fabric unknown to me. They may be members of some special group, as their attire is so unusual. Leather and furs seem to be favorite materials—they are used for purses and pouches, pants and jackets. Children wear miniature versions of adult clothing; there seem to be no special outfits for them.

Ecotopians setting out to go more than a block or two usually pick up one of the sturdy white-painted bicycles that lie about the streets by the hundreds and are available free to all. Dispersed by the movements of citizens during the day and evening, they are returned by night crews to the places where they will be needed the next day. When I remarked to a friendly pedestrian that this system must be a joy to thieves and vandals, he denied it heatedly. He then put a case, which may not be totally far-fetched, that it is cheaper to lose a few bicycles than to provide more taxis or minibuses...

- *Ecotopia* by Ernest Callenbach (digital pages 43-47)