

Spiraling in San Francisco's Doom Loop

What it's like to live in a city that no longer believes its problems can be fixed.

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Photo: David Paul Morris/Bloomberg/Getty Images

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In the spring of 2019, Marc Benioff surveyed his kingdom and it looked good. He stood on the top floor of the Salesforce Tower, the tallest building in San Francisco, named after his company, then the largest employer in San

Francisco. You could see every part of the city and out across the bay. The UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital and the Benioff Children's Hospital in Oakland (to which Benioff had donated \$250 million). The site of a 200-bed Navigation Center for the homeless (which Benioff had defended in the face of other rich — but less rich — San Franciscans who tried to fight it off). The city looked sun-kissed and thriving from this view: the elegant Golden Gate Bridge, Twin Peaks, the surreal green of the Marin Headlands.

“It's cool up here, right?” said Benioff. “And the vibe. Are you getting the vibe, too? There's, like, a vibe.”

There was indeed a vibe.

That Friday afternoon, like every Friday afternoon in those days, Salesforce employees and their families promenaded on the top, or *ohana*, floor of the building — *ohana* means “extended family” in Hawaiian; appropriating Hawaiian culture was still considered corporate okay — drinking the free espresso drinks, marveling at the tremendous view.

Benioff's PR team brought him water and Diet Coke and made sure the big man's chair was not in the sun. “You can see that helicopter is about to land with a child going to the NICU?” he said, pointing south toward the UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital. “Can you see it? It's just about to land on top of the medical center ... There's only one helicopter landing pad in the entire city, and it's on the top of the Children's Hospital for kids who have to get to the NICU, which is the neonatal-intensive-care unit ... So that's what just happened.”

But that was a lifetime ago, before the pandemic, when we were still debating if you could have good billionaires. Since that time, Salesforce has laid off 9,000 employees and ditched nearly a million feet of office space. Meta has laid off 21,000 employees and ditched 435,000 feet of office space in San Francisco. Now, late one morning this dark spring, next to the Salesforce Tower, the Salesforce Transit Center — designed by César Pelli's firm and opened in August 2018 to serve as the city's main bus hub — was empty, as in truly vacant, save for a security guard in black Dickies and a yellow-and-black jacket walking in circles on the poppy-tiled floor.

Aweek earlier, the San Francisco *Chronicle* ran an article: “Cities Are Struggling. San Francisco Could Be in the Biggest 'Doom Loop' of All.” The phrase “doom loop” was recently repopularized by Arpit Gupta, a finance professor at NYU, in a paper he wrote last year with two Columbia B-school

professors called “Work From Home and the Office Real Estate Apocalypse,” about the consequences for American downtowns of workers remaining remote.

The doom-loopy vision laid out for downtown SF was not pretty: Workers don't return, offices remain empty, restaurants shutter, transit agencies go bankrupt, tax bases plummet, public services disappear. According to research from the University of Toronto, cell-phone activity in downtown SF is 32 percent of pre-pandemic levels. That number is 75 percent in New York.

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The night the *Chronicle* published its doom-loop article, Manny's, an event space in the Mission, hosted a public discussion on what to do about the death spiral. The panelists tried to sound optimistic. “We just need to fix San Francisco's dysfunctional permitting system!” “We can find an affordable way to turn some of the office space into housing.” “We should fund artists to repopulate downtown!”

Five days later, Cash App founder Bob Lee was killed. Immediately people invested in the doom-loop narrative started mouthing off. “You know, where he was killed used to be a good part of San Francisco,” Lee's friend Jake Shields told me, as he told anybody who would listen in those first few days. Shields, an MMA fighter, had moved to Las Vegas. Lee had moved to Miami. Everyone with brains had left. Never mind the fact that violent crime rates in San Francisco were pretty low, lower than in most American cities of comparable size, lower than in San Francisco in years past. SF was a cesspool! — that was the doomers' argument. City leaders, along with the rest of the populace, were “too compassionate, like so compassionate that they do not care.”

The result, according to Shields, was not just an office apocalypse. It was unmitigated, spiraling, homicidal doom. “You can do whatever you want. You can shit in the streets,” Shields said. “The logical next step is to start killing people.”

A woman with smart eyes and a dirty sweatshirt, 50-ish, drunk, approached me near the corner of Market and 4th Streets. We shared the sidewalk with Urban Alchemy crews made of formerly incarcerated people now dedicated to

bringing peace and compassion to the streets, stunned tourists, official San Francisco Welcome Ambassadors in their orange jackets, and young Evangelists with microphones and a taste for filibustering — “We can die tonight, and if we die in our sin, and if you die in your sin ...”

“You seem like an intelligent woman,” the drunk woman with smart eyes said.

I said, “You too.”

Our whole conversation was a series of understatements.

“How does it feel to live in San Francisco?”

“You have to deal with people, and people have their own personalities.”

“What’s difficult about life in this city?”

“There’s a lot of temptation. You have to deal with yourself.”

“How did you end up here?”

“My mother died — she had a stroke. And my father, he had a temper. He said, ‘Yeah, I don’t like you.’”

On Market, near 6th, a security guard stood in front of Blick art supply. He’d just ejected a man who had been smoking fentanyl inside the store, a man his bosses suggested he should refer to as “an unhoused guest.”

The guard, who described himself to me as “a cis white male who stands six feet tall,” had previously worked security one block east at the Anthropologie. But that, he said, was just for show. He wasn’t even supposed to try to stop shoplifters who, at other stores on Market Street, filled up bags, or sometimes even suitcases, with food they needed to feed themselves or their families or merchandise to sell on the black market on Mission Street. But here, the guard told me, his co-workers’ pay depended on sales. His job was to make it tolerable for customers to shop.

Elsewhere in San Francisco, wisteria was blooming, crazy fragrant blooms, like lilac on MDMA. At Ocean Beach, runners stopped to marvel at an osprey hovering over the surfers. In Hayes Valley, recently rebranded Cerebral Valley, 20-somethings filled the AI hacker houses, eager to have the classic SF experience: getting rich while thinking they were saving the world. But none of

that beauty, none of that wealth, was the guard's reality. This stretch of Market Street was this three-block zone, four lanes wide, where he stood, alone, from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., five days a week. The job was taking a toll.

A note to my fellow San Franciscians: I'm sorry. *I know*. There's always some story in the East Coast press about how our city is dying. San Franciscians hate—HATE—these pieces. You're a stooge and a traitor for writing one. When I set out reporting, I wanted to write a debunking-the-doom piece myself. Yet to live in San Francisco right now, to watch its streets, is to realize that no one will catch you if you fall. In the first three months of 2023, 200 San Franciscans OD'd, up 41 percent from last year. "It's like a wasteland," the guard said when I asked how San Francisco looked to him. "It's like the only way to describe it. It's like a video game — like made-up shit. Have you ever played *Fallout*?"

I shook my head.

"There's this thing in the game called feral ghouls, and they're like rotted. They're like zombies." There's only so much pain a person can take before you disintegrate, grow paranoid, or turn numb. "I go home and play with my wife, and we're like, 'Ah, hahahaha, this is S.F.'"

The next day, I drove over to talk to Michael Lezak, a rabbi who works at Glide, a church and social-justice organization in the heart of the Tenderloin, a block from the Nextdoor office.

When I arrived, Glide was running a harm-reduction clinic in front of the sanctuary, connecting people to same-day Suboxone prescriptions. Lezak said, as rabbis often do, "I'm going to tell you a story." Before Glide, he led a congregation in wealthy suburban Marin. Then he started here. "I open the door of my Sienna minivan. I'm 48 at the time. I see human feces all over. I see people face down on the pavement. My rabbi self does not know if that dude is alive or dead, right?"

After three weeks, he walked into the executive director's office. "And I'm like, 'Rita, I have to quit, man. I'm out. Why are my tax dollars not paying for that guy to get help?' And she's like, 'Yeah, I know. Sometimes I gotta take a walk. Sometimes I gotta get a drink. Sometimes I gotta leave the Tenderloin.'" Often we mistake our own discomfort for threat. "Then she flipped it on me. She's like, 'How do you know you're not looking at the face of God?'"

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On Sunday, Easter, April 9, the city seemed to get ahold of itself. The biblical rains that had flooded San Francisco this winter finally ended. It was the first gorgeous day of spring.

Thousands of people gathered in Dolores Park, where the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence put on their annual Hunky Jesus and Foxy Mary contests. The Sisters, a blessedly campy order of activists, first sprang to life in 1979. Its mission: to use drag plus religious tropes to satirize fake notions of morality and brotherly love. One of the 50-plus Hunky Jesus contestants happened to be a guy who worked out at my gym. I'd see him pressing up from seated splits into handstands while the rest of us grimaced through plank. Now here he was, carrying a large wooden cross up a wide green lawn and pole dancing on it. "This is Ron DeSantis's worst nightmare," State Senator Scott Wiener said to the assembled. This was the most exuberant thing I'd seen in the city in three years. San Francisco when it still believed in itself. San Francisco before it marinated, then soured, in performative politics and neoliberal greed. Everyone here, hooting at the hunky Jesus, felt lucky.

Nine days after Bob Lee's death, the police arrested Nima Momeni, a 38-year-old tech consultant. The two men knew each other. The charging document alleged that Lee died in a drama involving Momeni's sister, who "was married but the relationship had possibly been in jeopardy." Honor, family, infidelity: the oldest story in the world.

The autopsy made a farce of the San Francisco-is-dangerous-because-of-poor-people-and-their-street-drugs narrative. Lee died with a pharmacopeia in his system: cocaine, ketamine, alcohol.

The city continued looping. The Whole Foods on Mid-Market closed a year after it had opened. People kept threatening employees, melting down in aisles, OD'ing in the bathroom. What could you do?

On April 19, Governor Gavin Newsom took a "surprise" walk around the Tenderloin. "Hey, Gavin, tell me what you're going to do about the fentanyl epidemic!" a man from the neighborhood shouted. "I want to know what you're going to do about the fentanyl epidemic."

Newsom kept walking and said, “You tell me what we need to do.”

Two days later, he called in the National Guard.

Almost certainly it was a political stunt. But did it even matter? Something needed to change. A poll from the controller’s office found that San Franciscans felt less safe in the city than we had in 27 years. And of course we did. Everywhere you looked, you saw it billboarded: The social contract had ruptured, and we’d ceased to believe we could fix it. The city often seemed to operate like an incompetent parent, confusing compassion and permissiveness, unable to maintain boundaries, producing the exact opposite result of what it claimed to want.

“We just need to make people go back to those offices,” a silver-haired man at a cocktail party in Pacific Heights told me, as if those with power could make it 2019 again. That man, like every adult there, had a high-school student in formal attire in the garden on their way to prom. All those kids’ lives were turning as they were meant to turn: up and away. What were the rest of us doing here?

I sat downtown and talked to Simon Bertrang, executive director of SF New Deal, about his idea for Vacant to Vibrant, a new program in partnership with the mayor’s office. His group was giving grants for people to pop up bookstores and art galleries and dance clubs and restaurants downtown, and they’d be clustered “to create a boom loop,” Bertrang joked, knowing the pun was cheesy. Permanent renewal was a long way off. Nobody wanted to sign a long-term lease. But the idea of the bookstore and the pop-up restaurant and people enjoying something novel in the city I loved and ached for filled me with relief. It filled everyone with relief. Urban planners know that relief is a mirage. There’s a 30 percent vacancy rate now. That number is going to go up — up a lot. We’re going to need major work, maybe even on the scale of the commission that revitalized downtown Manhattan after 9/11. We need museums, a university, people, community. We need a shared project. We don’t have that now.

Meanwhile, the Blick security guard kept texting me videos. He needed someone to see what he was seeing out there, on his patch of Market Street, between Fifth and Sixth. Did I know how the black markets worked? Had I walked down Market Street at night? Did I know that some of the street addicts were rotting, literally: their decomposing flesh attracting flies. The Anthropologie, where he used to work, announced it would close. “What it really feels like living in San Francisco is that you’re lying to yourself,” he said.

“Oh, I live in San Francisco. It’s so nice. When you walk by the junkies you’re like, They don’t exist. they don’t exist. You’re lying to yourself.”

A week later, a security guard, working at a Walgreens a block from Blick, shot and killed a 24-year-old. He would tell Jonah Owen Lamb at the San Francisco Standard, “It’s a lot to deal with. It’s a lot of pressure. A person can only take so much ... When you are limited to certain options, something will happen ... Who has my back? Nobody?”

I thought back to Benioff, before the pandemic, when we believed tech could save us. In addition to sitting with him in his tower, I sat with him in his house — or, I should say, one of the five houses he owns in Sea Cliff, the fanciest neighborhood in San Francisco. We did not meet in the house where he actually lived. He’d taken the past three months off. He’d invited 500 executives and their families to Hawaii, as he does every summer. He was getting ready to announce that Salesforce again, that year, was giving \$8.5 million to San Francisco Unified School District and \$8.7 million to Oakland Unified School District, bringing the total he’d given to the schools in the past six years to \$67.4 million. At that point, Salesforce had donated more than a quarter of a billion dollars since Benioff co-founded it. It was a lot of largesse. And yet life in San Francisco was still not going well. Despite all his giving, it was not enough. It would never be enough.

People emailed Benioff, trying to get him to help — dozens and dozens a day. “It’s a constant stream,” he told me. Citizens stopped him at the zoo. Citizens accosted him in elevators. People had started asking Benioff if he was going to run for mayor. He found the naïveté of the idea funny. “I’m like, *Why would I ever do such a thing?*” he said. “I have far more power doing what I’m doing.”

Now, it was clear tech wouldn’t save us. Tech wouldn’t even stay in town. I rode the bus around the city, scribbling in my notebook: *face of god, face of GOD*, trying to keep myself open to the world as it fell apart. Less than a mile from my house, a woman got on the 24, screaming, “FUUUUUCK you.” Fifteen seconds later, “FUUUUUUCK you,” again. Everybody sitting near her moved away. Eventually an older guy boarded — mid-60s, watch cap, maybe Jewish, maybe Irish. He opened a beer in a brown paper bag. She screamed, “FUUUUUUUCK you!” He nodded in solidarity.

“All day, every day,” he said, raising his beer to toast.

A small gesture of common humanity. She stopped screaming.