

# Protest of Gentrification and Eviction Technologies in San Francisco

*Manissa McCleave Maharawal*

ON THE CORNER of Market and 8TH streets in San Francisco, a group of protesters stepped in front of a private coach bus and unfurled a hand painted blue banner that read, “Eviction Free San Francisco.” It was just after 9:00 am and the bus was picking up employees to shuttle them to Facebook’s headquarters in Menlo Park, about 45 minutes south of the city. A few seconds after the blue banner was unfurled, more protesters appeared with striped orange and white wooden barricades that read, “Warning: Rents and Evictions Up Near Private Shuttle Stops,” and yellow traffic hazard signs that read, “Stop Displacement Now.” They surrounded the sleek, white double-decker luxury bus, preventing it from continuing on its way.

A few minutes later, from around the corner, the Brass Liberation Orchestra appeared, followed by a crowd of people chanting, “What do we want? Stop the evictions! When do we want it? NOW!” As another tech industry bus – this time a Google shuttle – made its way down Hyde Street, someone yelled out, “Lets get that bus too!” By the time the bus driver realized the situation he was entering, it was too late to do anything about it. The driver tried to pass the protest, but a group of people ran over and stopped the bus with more signs and banners. Three demonstrators taped a large white banner to the side of the Google bus that read, “Gentrification and Eviction Technologies” in Google’s familiar rainbow font.



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*Photos by the author.*

With a Facebook bus stopped on one side of the street and a Google bus on the other, the police officers who arrived on the scene focused first on directing traffic between the two buses, while the protesters held a speak-out about the impact of the shuttle buses on evictions, displacement and inequality in the city.

## “Public Money for Private Gains”

The protests in January of this year were aimed at the Board of Directors of the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, which was voting that day on an 18-month pilot program to regulate the use of public bus stops by private shuttle companies. Under the program, the city would charge \$1 every time a private shuttle bus used a public bus stop, to cover the cost of bus stop maintenance. While many approved of this move to regulate the private shuttle industry, the \$1 fee remained a sticking point. Activists claimed the city should be asking wealthy technology companies such as Google, Apple and Facebook to pay more for their use of public infrastructure, as one small way to account for the gentrification and displacement that their presence is causing. On the other side, city officials claimed that state law limited their ability to charge more than “cost recovery” for use of the stops.

The tensions over private tech buses, public infrastructure and a hyper-inflated land market in the Bay Area have been heating up for a long time. This particular pilot program had been in the works for a while, but its launch in January was likely a response to multiple Google bus blockades in December of last year. In those protests, demonstrators focused on the ways that the tech industry was using “public money



Blocked Google Bus with attached banner

for private gains.” According to the protesters’ calculations, if the buses were charged the same \$271 mandated fine that car drivers face for stopping in a bus lane, they would owe the city around \$1 billion.

The protesters did not actually believe that the city intended to enforce these regulations. But by highlighting the illegal use of the bus stops, as well as the city’s unwillingness to issue fines to tech buses, demonstrators called attention to San Francisco’s two-tiered infrastructure system, with one set of rules for the technology industry and another for everyone else, a situation that mirrors San Francisco’s widening inequality and highlights the city’s role in its rapid gentrification.

### **Technology, Real Estate and City Hall**

After stopping the Facebook and Google buses for half an hour, the protesters marched to the San Francisco Association of Realtors office, and then continued on

to the steps of City Hall. At each point, they stopped and spoke about the crisis of affordability in San Francisco and the massive wave of gentrification that has hit the city. In highlighting these three targets, the protesters aimed to connect the technology industry, the real estate industry and City Hall as the three main forces causing and benefiting from this displacement.

The ties between technology, real estate and the city run deep. A number of the city’s most powerful politicians are bankrolled by the tech industry. City Supervisor Scott Weiner, for example, represents the Castro, an area plagued by displacements after a wave of condominium conversions in formerly rent regulated apartments. Weiner supports the pilot shuttle bus plan; perhaps unsurprisingly, he also received over half of his campaign money from real estate and tech interests. San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee is a former housing rights lawyer and advocate, but these days he is heavily criticized by housing activists for making the city even more unequal. He is notoriously friendly with the tech

industry, engineering tax breaks for tech companies and receiving generous help in his last mayoral campaign from “San Franciscans for Jobs and Good Government,” an independent committee funded by tech startup investors and financiers Ron Conway and Sean Parker.

The tech industry’s investment in city politics paid off. In 2013 Twitter received up to \$55 million in tax breaks from the city for locating its offices in the Mid-Market area of the city. This move spurred the area’s “hyper-gentrification,”

especially after Twitter’s first public offering in November 2013 instantly created 1,600 new millionaires.

### Connecting the Issues

Later in the day, before the public was given a chance to comment on the city’s shuttle bus pilot program, the chair of the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency’s Board of Directors made it clear that he was not interested in hearing about gentrification. “We recognize that there are a lot of afford-

ability issues,” he said, “and these buses have fallen in the sights of this, but what we are proposing today is *just about the buses*, it is not about affordability issues.”

This sentiment has been repeated again and again, both in the city’s rhetoric about the pilot program and in press and popular discourses around the Google bus protests. The housing activists and protesters are often categorized as misguided and confused. The argument goes something like this: it isn’t the tech industry’s fault that rents are so high; the people on the shuttle buses are just employees trying to get to work; the tech companies are being environmentally friendly by reducing commuters’ carbon footprints; they shouldn’t be targeted for the city’s housing woes. At the hearing, city officials attempted to shut down the debate with statements like, “ultimately this is a transit issue,” and “if you have an issue with housing please attend the forums for that.” They claimed that the plan for regulating the shuttle buses could not address inequality, and was merely a technical regulation.

The activists were simply stating what every planning student is taught in their first semester: that housing, land use and transportation are inexorably bound by public policy, and that the economic mix of the city’s residents has everything to do with its housing market.

According to a study by UC Berkeley City Planning graduate student Alexandra Goldman, the price of rental units within walking distance of shuttle bus stops has



Blocked Facebook bus

risen up to 20% higher than units beyond walking distance from the stops. The Mission district in San Francisco is considered ground zero for gentrification and displacement in the city. It also boasts the highest volume of tech shuttle buses and the most stops, with Apple, eBay, Facebook, Google and Yahoo all picking up passengers at eight separate points in the neighborhood.

Supporters of the private buses often claim that by providing these

services, tech companies are keeping thousands of cars off the streets and therefore reducing San Francisco's carbon footprint. In this version of environmentalism, wealthy tech employees are able to ride their bikes around San Francisco and take shuttles to work, while working class and middle income residents are forced far outside the city, and must increase their carbon footprint just to get to work in the city where they can no longer afford to live. This greenwashing makes environmental consciousness into

a lifestyle amenity for those who can afford to live in the city, while displacing the carbon impacts and costs of commuting onto poorer areas and poorer people.

### Prepared Testimonies

The public forum on the shuttle bus program was packed. The main chamber was filled to capacity, and a nearby overflow room was standing-room only. In testimony after testimony, San Francisco residents



Eviction Free San Francisco Rally at San Francisco Association of Realtors office

passionately opposed the plan. One commenter spoke of seeing an old lady trapped on a broken MUNI (public transit) wheelchair lift, while tech buses swerved in and out of the bus stop around her. Another said that the use of the bus stops by tech buses slows down MUNI service for everyone, leaving many children in the Mission late to school. They called on the city to oppose the creation of a transportation system that created “two worlds divided by economic conditions.” They told board members to “make the tech companies pay the money they have” and they called attention to the “privatization of public infrastructure.”

On the other side, a number of technology workers spoke in support of the plan. They told the Board how much they loved living in San Francisco, how the shuttle buses kept them from driving to and from work, and how they spend money at local businesses in their neighborhoods. Several of these testimonies

sounded stiff, as they reiterated talking points from a leaked internal Google memo advising employees on what to say if they attended the public hearing. In this memo Google urged employees who used the shuttle buses to attend the public hearing in order to highlight the ways that they “contribute to the local economy,” and to talk about their volunteer work in the community.

These talking point presentations were interspersed with San Francisco residents who made a clearer case: as one impassioned commenter put it “this is class warfare.”

### Mind the Gap

After two hours of comments, the Board of Directors voted on the issue, unanimously and unceremoniously approving the pilot program. San Francisco residents will continue to pay \$2 to ride the MUNI,

while the world’s biggest tech companies will pay \$1 to use public bus stops in gentrifying neighborhoods.

The vote was done, but the protests continue. At a February panel titled “Three Steps to Build Corporate Mindfulness the Google Way” at the Wisdom 2.0 conference on “corporate mindfulness,” activists took the stage, unfurled their blue “Eviction Free San Francisco” banner and began chanting “Stop the evictions!” to a startled group of conference goers. A citywide tenant convention has proposed a number of legislative ways to slow evictions and displacement in the city, including an eviction moratorium and a windfall tax on speculators who buy and sell houses within a six-year period. Four weeks after the Municipal Transportation Agency vote, activists filed an appeal against the \$1 shuttle bus decision claiming “significant environmental impacts.” These impacts include the harm caused to low-income communities and people of color, and the environmental justice and air quality concerns that accompany their displacement.

Activists in San Francisco are not going to let the city’s recent and rapid transformation continue without a fight. As long as the city keeps subsidizing gentrification, promoting neoliberal housing policies and privatizing public infrastructure, it is likely to see more and more unrest. Already, the discourse around affordability, gentrification and tech is shifting in San Francisco from one of inevitability to something more critical. With every stop, the tech buses seem to be attracting passengers and protesters in equal measures. **P<sup>2</sup>**



Eviction Free San Francisco March to City Hall