How San Francisco lost its color

In the Mission District and across San Francisco, once-vibrant street blocks have been receding into a puzzling state of aesthetic neutrality. Why are so many San Francisco homes going gray?

By Annie Vainshtein | Oct. 11, 2019

Sergio De La Torre still remembers the moment when gray took over his neighborhood.

The artist and professor had developed a cache of familiar sights during his 12 years living in the Mission District at the intersection of Treat and 25th streets. One of them was a halfway house situated right behind his home.

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hear one of them singing songs as she strung up her wet clothes by the back staircase. They became fixtures of his everyday world, permanent staples of his mental metropolis.

But one day in 2014, it all seemed to disappear. The residents, the singing, the cigarettes and the pajamas were gone. He didn't see anyone walking around anymore. Then the scaffolding went up. All he could see was that the house, once light-blue, had been repainted gray.

Millennials moved in — the employees, De La Torre said, of a Silicon Valley company that bought the house. Each floor allegedly went for $9,000. They had parties but didn't talk to their neighbors.

Soon, newly gray buildings seemed to follow him like a shadow. Especially in the Mission District, once-vibrant street blocks with ornate Victorians and Edwardians were receding into a puzzling state of aesthetic neutrality, dotted by FOR SALE signs, then moving trucks. People he knew were getting evicted, rental rates soared. There were fires, shootings, struggles with the police. An artisan paint store, painted gray itself, had recently opened nearby but was always closed.

It might have been easy to dismiss the gray as an emblem of the city's increasingly modern aesthetic — with its glassy robot-run cafes, proliferation of luxury condos, and slatwall panel horizontal fences — after all, color psychology characterizes gray as a detached color, one manufactured not to offend. But De La Torre, a professor of fine arts at the University of San Francisco whose projects have focused on immigration and transnational identities, felt strongly that the drab colors were anything but silent. In a city with as loud an identity as San Francisco, they were visual signifiers of gentrification.
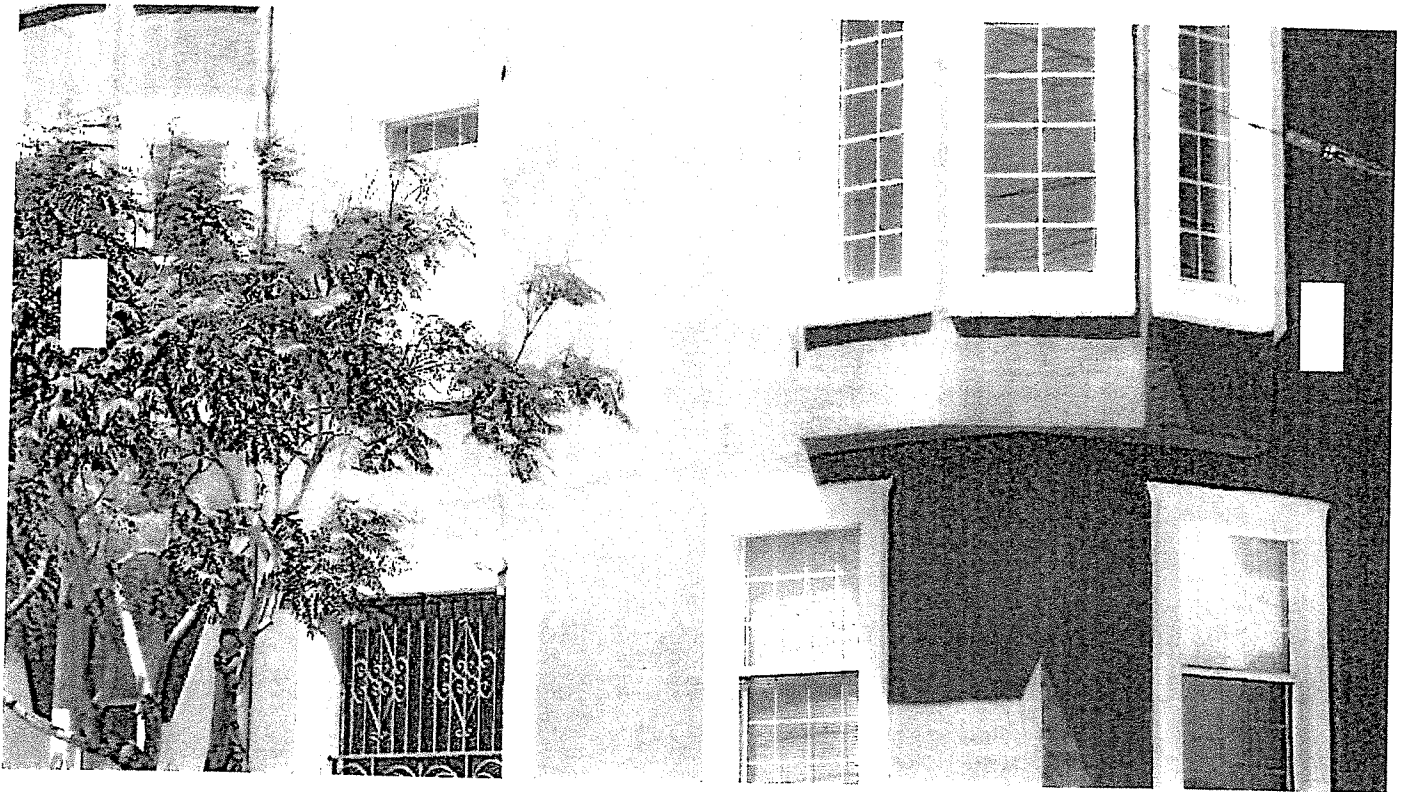
They started to feel like an omen.

Photo: Kate Munsch / Special To The Chronicle

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Houses in the Mission District showing the new trend of gray-painted houses in the Mission District of San Francisco, Calif., on August 26, 2019.

Over the past year, De La Torre has been investigating what he calls the "gray-washing" of the Mission District, teaching a class and working on a project titled "After the Ashes: The Curious Case of Gray Houses in the Mission." He's in the early stages of research, which involves photographing gray houses and approaching people in the neighborhood to talk. Some of them ignore him and walk away.

"Some people say it's a neutral color, a non-color," De La Torre said. "These words around the Mission, they mean a lot. You can't be mute. You cannot be non-color. You have to see color. It's a neighborhood of immigrants."

Both in the Mission and across San Francisco, one thing is certain: Gray is in vogue. The question, though, is what this new aesthetic uniformity says about San Francisco's

Dirk Kinkley, a real estate broker associate for Compass, noticed the gray trend crop up five to seven years ago.

"It's a quick way to class up a house," Kinkley said during a recent open house for one of his listings, a gray four-bedroom apartment on Folsom Street. "It feels sophisticated. It's almost like wearing a tuxedo or a nice evening dress. It's the little black dress of the house."

The trend is not limited to San Francisco. Gray-painted houses are found from coast to coast. And there's a clear reason why. In 2017, a Zillow analysis found that homes painted gray, especially "greige," sold for $3,496 more than comparable homes painted other colors. In 2015, the Washington City Paper reported on a trend of gray-painted and newly renovated brick row houses in D.C., where "houses are bought and sold like day trader shares."

Jill Pilaroscia, an architectural color consultant and the founder of Colour Studio, a color consultation company in San Francisco, distinctly remembers the first gray home she was asked to work on, in 2008. It was an "impeccable, amazing home" on Webster Street. "Then they gutted the interior, and made it into a much more modern residence," she said. "This client did not want a Painted Lady in any way."

She's only seen gray increase in popularity over time.

Pilaroscia can't fathom why gray has such resonance now, but she says the cultural virtues instituted by the Painted Ladies — Victorians and Edwardians that were repainted in three or more colors to accentuate their historic details — are slipping further and further away.

Ladies generation of the 1960s and 1970s was extroverted — one that wanted to express, she said. This era of San Franciscans does not.

Bob Buckter, a legendary local color consultant who's earned the name "Dr. Color" for his almost 50 years of aesthetic service to the city's Victorians and Edwardians, estimates he's been called to do more than 17,500 jobs just in San Francisco. Recently, many of them have been gray.

He's tired of the trend — the "consumable" choice that seems to be popular among techies.

"I'm a polychromist," he said. "I can't help myself. (Gray is) a mindless, thoughtless, insensitive, trendy, zero contribution color. It's a negative contribution, I think."

This isn't the first time San Francisco has gone gray.

More than 48,000 Victorians and Edwardians were constructed in San Francisco between 1849 and 1915, according to Elizabeth Pomada and Michael Larsen, who coined the term "Painted Ladies" and authored the 1978 book, "Painted Ladies: San Francisco's Resplendent Victorians." Many of those houses were also painted in austere palettes that included gray.

Take San Francisco's Haas-Lilienthal house, a 133-year-old Queen Anne Victorian at 2007 Franklin St., which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. In 2015, the historic home got a $4.3 million renovation to maintain and improve the building. People were surprised when it was repainted gray. They'd expected a polychromatic Painted Ladies job, but San Francisco Heritage, a preservation nonprofit that has owned the house since the 1970s, wanted to restore it to its original 1886 color: an armored-steel greenish-gray.

Even in the 1880s, however, there was a growing movement toward more vibrant shades.

"Just when the present aesthetic movement began, it would be hard to determine; but it first manifested itself in a growing aversion to gray paint," read an article in The Chronicle dated June 19, 1887. "Cautiously at first, then more and more boldly, houses appeared in browns, yellows, greens and even reds — all sorts of unorthodox colors; yet one was forced to admit that the town did look better for it."

Gray became increasingly popular in San Francisco during both world wars due to an overstock of cheap Navy battleship gray paint. But shortly after WWII, a 1947 planning study set the stage for transformation on another level — urban renewal.

Victorians fell to the wayside, many carted out of the city on flatbeds. Pomada and Larsen estimate that of the 16,000 Victorian homes that survived after urban renewal, half were "smothered" of their charms by stucco, asbestos, tarpaper, brick, permastone, texcoat and aluminum siding.

Many of the remaining Victorians were also plagued by problems. As more people were pushed into renting, fewer were able to spend the money to preserve the homes.

"The facades crumpled with age," Pomada and Larsen write. "The powder cracked; the mascara ran."

Then came the sea change.

By the 1960s and 1970s, born partly out of the psychedelic ethos of self-expression and a communal interest in beautifying the dull cityscape, a legion of painters, artists and colorists began to paint the city's remaining Victorians and Edwardians. They used exuberant color patterns that turned heads — hues of incandescent limes, turquoises, yellows and blues — leading the charge in what's now called the Colorist Movement.

Butch Kardum, one of the first Colorists, began experimenting with intense blues and greens on his Italianate home in 1963. For him, painting his home was one of the only things at that time he felt was uniquely his. At first the reaction of his neighbors was negative — but after a short while, his entire block had been repainted in colors as bright and inventive as his own.

The Colorist movement, which developed spontaneously, became the signpost for what's now considered an iconic feature of San Francisco culture: individualism and self-expression. For people who'd lived many years in their muted Stick-style homes, reinventing their residences — and by proxy, themselves — in glowing coats of violet, lilac, gold and silver was a way to expand their own aesthetic self-conceptions and, in many cases, bring light and regeneration to streetscapes that were graying into the fog.

and jobs which are means not ends, painting their homes is a satisfying form of self-expression," Pomada and Larsen write. "Nothing in San Francisco has been as effective in making people take pride in their homes, streets, neighborhoods and city as paint applied with imagination."

Yet at the same time the Painted Ladies were breaking through the mainstream, the pendulum swung again, and a counterculture of darker colors began to subvert the polychrome. In 1968, Jefferson Airplane bought a mansion by Golden Gate Park and painted it black.

Corporations and downtown business interests were quick to steer away from the vibrancy, and a muted modern design followed: high-rises, the skyscraper at One Post St., construction of the Embarcadero Center throughout the 1970s. The Urban Design Plan from 1971 stated that new buildings should "avoid extreme contrasts in color," The Chronicle reported. The Downtown Plan of 1985 discouraged disharmonious colors. "Buildings should be light in color," it read.

The 1980s had its gray moment, too. According to Nita Riccardi, founder of Winning Colors and a painter who has worked on more than 400 period homes in the city, the legend goes that a number of gay men began painting their houses gray-brown with white trim and a glossy black door for a period in the 1980s, a trend that she suspects might have been a communal coping in the era of HIV panic. (Artists in the community named it the gay potato, she said.)

Light and dark toggled back and forth over the next two decades. In 2014, black paint began to blanket blocks of the city, urban design critic John King reported in The Chronicle. The black behemoths intended to stand out on the corner of a colorful block. But even then, there was the concern they might overshadow San Francisco's colorful aesthetic. "One dark building can be a bold nudge to quiet neighbors," King wrote. "When too many are too big, or in too-close proximity to one another — thud."

The deeper concern was that they threatened the city's essence.
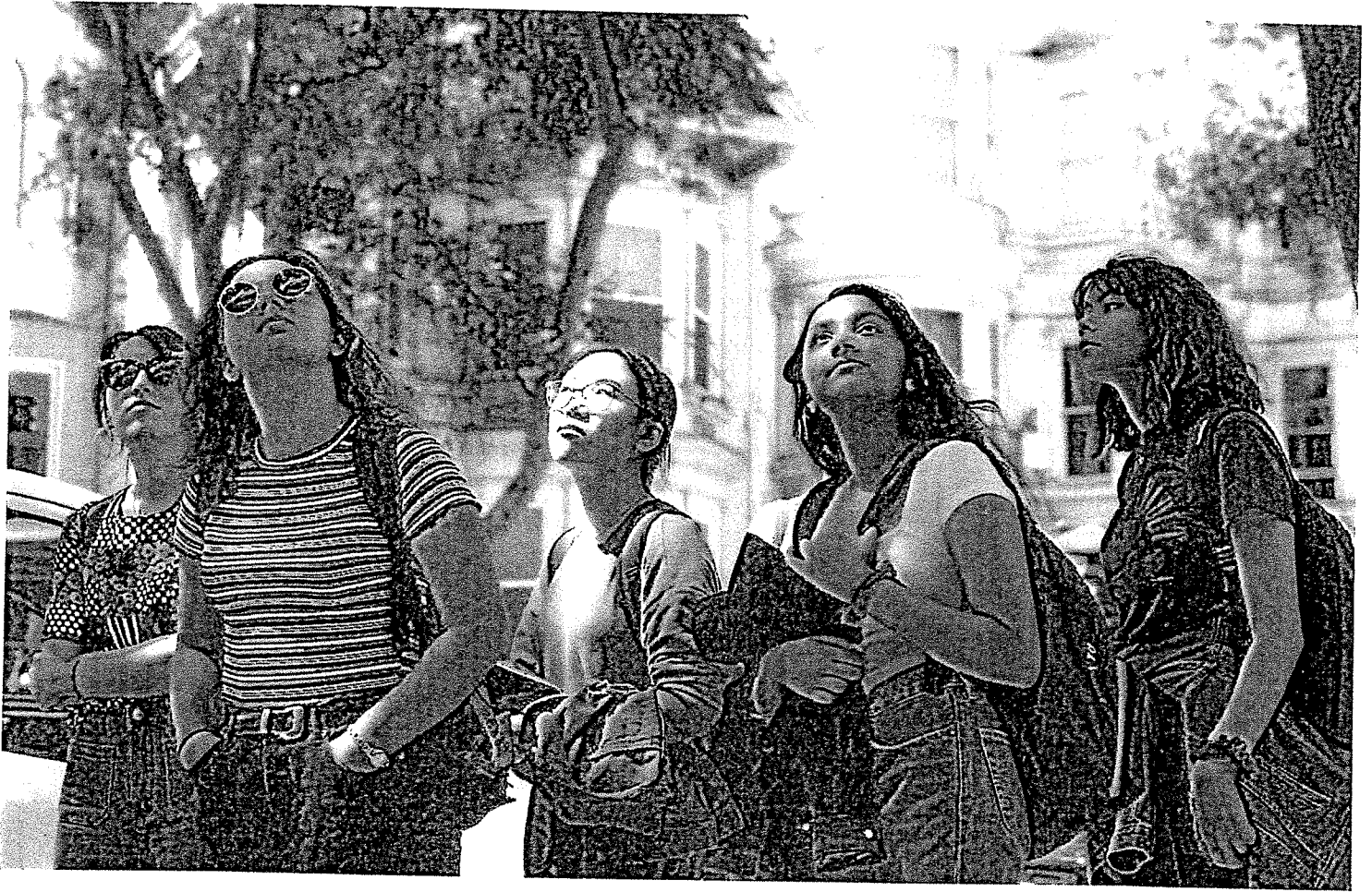
Students of USF Professor Sergio De La Torre, during a tour of a new trend of gray-painted houses in the Mission District of San Francisco, Calif., on August 26, 2019. | Kate Munsch / Special To The Chronicle

On a recent Wednesday at the Mission's Kadist gallery, which is gray, De La Torre presented some of his photos of newly coated gray houses to a capacity crowd. He wanted to hear what the community thought about gray: Had they noticed it? Did it bother them? He wanted to unravel if or how this color conformity symbolized the spirit of San Francisco. "It was basically a town hall meeting," he said. "But people didn't know that."

He led with a quotation from Gehrard Richter, a German artist who famously called gray the "ideal colour for indifference, fence-sitting, keeping quiet, despair." Then De La Torre turned it over to Tanu Sankalia, a University of San Francisco professor and urban studies program director, who began with a premise.

"Is (gray) an anxiety with the modern, or a way to disavow the Colorist movement?" Sankalia asked the audience. "Is it a sign of transformation, a way to go unnoticed? Or in the end, is the color of a house completely arbitrary?"

Hands shot up. Someone in the audience said the gray houses felt like another faux-modest badge of San Francisco's nouveau-riche trying to hide their wealth: gray Teslas, tech company T-shirts, personal scooters. "When I see a gray house, all that tells me is that the house has recently been sold," a young woman said. "It's a weird restructuring of what is a home space into an asset, a luxury good."

Another attendee suggested that painting a house gray was a way to hide as a gentrifier in a new neighborhood. A different audience member said it hurts to see her neighbors get evicted, and then their house painted gray. "It's almost like they're trying to erase their history," she said. "The family that cried on the corner … we know all these stories, and when you see the gray house — it's a gut punch."

One crucial element of the Great Gray Dispute is what's imperceptible from the outside — that the insides of these houses are also being excavated to strip away every part of their Victorian interiors. According to Richard Sucre, principal planner for San Francisco, even in historic homes, the city doesn't govern color. In this case, gray — or another nondescript color — can be one of the easiest ways to resolve the visual dissonance between a modernized interior and the facade of historic polychrome on a Victorian.

There are a number of reasons to explain the new wave of gray. But the point, perhaps, is not about justification, but about its reverb. Like any other visual or architectural phase in the city's history, the discussion is not simply about color or aesthetic but rather, a tab in the sustained debate over San Francisco's "true" identity. Now, it seems, it's not just about gray buildings, or gray houses or gray cars, but about a growing gray-ness, one that's not quite as easy to catalog.

and selling of property. Definitely that houses are changing hands and they're changing quite quickly." It also illuminates the growing desire to shed the history of the Victorian behind.

Joe Zucca, a Mission District resident of more than 30 years, is painting the house he rents out gray. "I just didn't want to go with the typical Victorian multicolor look," he said. "I just wanted to do something different."

He had no idea it was a design trend, let alone a controversy. He just liked the way gray looked as a solid color. What wasn't simple was finding the right shade. He didn't want it to be too light, or drab or overly blue. In fact, he was so obsessed with a shade of gray he'd seen painted on a recently remodeled Victorian in Bernal Heights that he rang their doorbell every day for two weeks, at different times of the day. No one ever answered.

The narrative of an apathetic gray also wasn't true for Zachary Scholz. In 2012, Scholz — an artist — and his wife decided to renovate and repaint the Mission District house in which they've lived for the last decade (it was built in the 1950s). They were the only gray house on the block for a while; now, their neighbors across the street have decided to go gray, too.

"Something about gray feels very honest," Scholz said. "It has a very solid and physical sense to it. It sort of foregrounds the building as an object rather than being a color that's a decision in its own right."

There's a beautiful kind of melancholy to it, too — its neutrality and privacy are what he likes about it. "It's not broadcasting a whole lot to the outside world," he said. "It's an introvert's choice."

Correction: A previous version of this story misstated some details of the Haas-Lilienthal house. It is 133 years old and was renovated in 2015 to maintain and improve the building.