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Sankalia, Tanu

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Tilted Upwards

Tanu Sankalia

Abstract

G.K. Chesterton's short and surreal parable, "The Angry Street: A Bad Dream," reminds us to not overlook things that surround us in everyday life, and to show them respect. Wayne Thiebaud's paintings of cityscapes, inspired by San Francisco's steep, building-lined streets, reestablish our links to the built environment with a vitality that sometimes the real—and the camera—lacks, but which drawing and painting bring to that which is represented. Chesterton and Thiebaud underscore how fictions are more evocative than truths. In this essay, accompanied by my own drawings of San Francisco's steep streets, I suggest that fantastical fiction and art, in allegorical forms, can inspire us to reconnect with the material world around us—of things, and even streets—with renewed civility and respect

Yet it was not the wrong street. The name written on it was the same; the shuttered shops were the same; the lamp-posts and the look of the whole perspective was the same; only it was tilted upwards like a lid.

– G.K. Chesterton

The English author G.K Chesterton's short story, "The Angry Street: A Bad Dream," is an allegorical tale meant to elicit respect for inanimate things that surround us in our everyday life.¹ The street, an artery of movement and a lively stage for everyday life, serves in this instance as a metaphor for inanimate things. In the story, Leadenhall Street, located in London's financial district, goes rogue on the story's main character by unexpectedly tilting upwards and impelling him not to neglect it. This surreal experience shakes the protagonist—a clerk and common man—out of his daily grind, to not take things for granted, to "wake up" and respect things, even those we call streets.

Following an enigmatic introductory paragraph, which alludes to the timelessness of the story, we find the narrator sitting in a London "quick-lunch" restaurant. In the midst of this weekday lunch-hour bustle, the narrator observes a man walk in, put his hat on the hat-stand as though bowing to it, take a seat with utmost respect to the chair that he draws out to sit on, and treat the table as though it were a sacred surface. Bemused by the man's unconventional and deliberate deference to inanimate objects, the narrator declares that the furniture was quite solid and stable. Taken aback the man asks if there was something in particular he meant by the comment. The narrator says no, and the man then states that he thought something had gone wrong, that "another street had gone wrong."

Therein begins the man's tale, his "bad dream." He tells the narrator how for forty years, two months and four days he observed the same routine: walked out of his office, bought the evening newspaper, and walked to Oldgate Station to take the train home. On the final day, when he walked out of his office, umbrella in hand, and stepped onto the street he would always use, the surface, which was once perfectly flat and comfortable to walk on, unexpectedly becomes vertical. The lampposts and the signs,

and even the general view, the man recalls, were all the same, only that the street “was tilted upwards like a lid.” In a panicked state, the man runs upward, taking on the sheer slope. Panting and out of breath, he comes across a row of grey houses where he encounters another man whom he implores to explain the madness all round him. The observer tells him that the street was going to heaven to seek justice for having been overused and neglected. The observer further admonishes:

“You have worked the street to death and yet you have never remembered its existence. If you had owned a healthy democracy, of even pagans, they would have hung this street with garlands and given it the name of a god. Then it would have gone quietly. But at last the street has grown tired of your tireless insolence; and it is bucking and rearing its head to heaven.”

The lesson was clear. The clerk had left the street he walked on for over forty years unacknowledged. Following this “bad dream,” the clerk was shaken out of his insolent ignorance to realize the value of things. “Since then I have respected things called inanimate,” he tells the narrator as he walks out of the restaurant “bowing slightly to the mustard-pot.”

“The Angry Street” is a story still deeply relevant to our times. English professor, Eric Rabkin, has called it “a beautiful corrective fantasy of our rushing through the modern world”—its philosophical intent to question how well we know things we encounter in everyday life and what it would mean if we did not pay enough attention to know them.²

A significant portion of Chesterton’s vast body of writing focused on everyday material realities, and crucially the idea of civility.³ I broach the idea of civility here not merely as the interpersonal—being civil with one another—but more as urban consciousness, or civic mindedness. We need constant reminding that all things—streets, sidewalks, plazas, trees, benches, trash cans, and the list goes on—are not personal belongings, but, rather, part of our public realm, deserving of our attention and care. Chesterton’s objective was to simply have us read and become better persons. In a related vein, Martha Nussbaum has argued that traditions of storytelling, including humor and fantasy, are valuable ways of “cultivating humanity,” and in turn, citizenship.⁴ These forms of storytelling, with their ability to see the human experience in all its diversity, are far more effective than the empty civic messages and slogans (“clean city, green city;” “act responsible, think sustainable”) that

clog our public sphere. “The Angry Street” exemplifies Chesterton’s affinity for the smaller, human-scaled ideas to spur action and build citizenship.

In her book, *Vibrant Matter, A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennet seeks to challenge a well-entrenched idea that “runs fast through our modern heads: the idea of matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert.”⁵ Bennet asserts that by questioning categories of “life” and “matter” as separate, as a “partition of the sensible” as Jacques Ranciere put it, her goal is to create a kind of estrangement in which a “vital materiality” may take shape. Bruno Latour uses the term “actant”—for an object or subject “that can do things”—in the quest of a vocabulary, both philosophical and political, that “addresses multiple modes of effectivity” and “begins to describe a more distributive agency.” To advocate for the vitality of matter is crucial, asserts Bennet, because dead or inert matter that can be instrumentalized “feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption.”⁶

Can drawing and painting streets—or other “inanimate things”—among other forms of according them recognition, ensure they do not slip into anonymity, and perhaps even tilt upwards in rage? Who knows. But Wayne Thiebaud (b. 1920) seemed to have taken heed of this warning in painting arresting images of cityscapes. Between the late 1970s and early 2000s, Thiebaud painted dozens of largescale canvases, and some smaller water colors, that equaled in images the fantastical bent of Chesterton’s words.⁷ At the center of this large body of cityscapes are the steep streets of San Francisco that Thiebaud was familiar with.⁸ The vertical bands of pure street in his paintings are framed by buildings, either looming or squat, lined with electricity poles and telephone wires. Many of the paintings are haunting, sometimes a few cars, but never any human presence. At times, however, they are enlivened by bright candy-colored buildings. The *18th Street Downgrade* (1978), in its gloomy desolation, perhaps invokes a fog-filled San Francisco day (Fig 1). In *City Downgrade* (2001), the buildings’ shadows loom over the naked gray asphalt in syncopated rhythm (Fig 2). In all the paintings though, the viewpoint is never on the street, but hovering somewhere above in space, sometimes high up on a floor of an imagined nearby building. Streets rise up, dip sharply, and ascend again, sometimes in a completely different and alien setting. And even though based very much on San Francisco’s urban morphology, these images have provoked some incredulity because people can be unfamiliar with the city’s hilly terrain.⁹



Figure 1. Wayne Thiebaud, "18th Street Downgrade", 1978, Oil on Canvas, SFO Museum.
<https://www.sfomuseum.org/public-art/public-collection/18th-street-downgrade>. Accessed, April 17, 2023.



Figure 2. Wayne Theibaud, "City Downgrade", 2001, Oil on Canvas. From Sotheby's. <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2021/american-visionary-the-collection-of-mrs-john-l-marion/city-downgrade>. Accessed, April 17, 2023.

Thiebaud's visual fictions are gripping because they bring together "a powerful sense of light, seductive color, rich surfaces, and a fusion of observation and invention."¹⁰ They have a precise sense of perspective and a command of scale that speak volumes about Thiebaud's masterful draftsmanship. But their intent, to go beyond San Francisco as a visual spectacle, is also to focus on the everyday, "ordinary landscapes" of the city so as to bring viewers into the painting and enable them to create their own interactions with place.¹¹ When Thiebaud first started on his cityscapes, he took his easel out onto the streets of San Francisco and began painting what he saw, but soon realized that that was not what he was in search of. Thereafter, he would take his sketches into the studio, rearrange city elements, exaggerate scale, distort proportions, and turn small drawings into large paintings to achieve a kind of foreboding fantasy of San Francisco.¹² The art critic Karen Wilkin writes that Thiebaud's paintings "embody the mood and affect of finding ourselves on steep urban roadways trapped amid tall buildings [...] yet the more time we spend with these works, the more aware we become of Thiebaud's departures from actuality and the potency of his inventions."¹³ The paintings etch into our minds the stark surfaces of streets, the peculiarities of our built environment, and images of cities in powerful and provocative ways. They do the work of acknowledging inanimate things, showing them respect—especially those streets, tilted up like lids.¹⁴

One wonders when contemplating Thiebaud's renditions of San Francisco's steep streets if what he was actually depicting was how his own body felt climbing the street of San Francisco—one could almost hear his panting in his paintings. The striking image of verticality in the "The Angry Street" reminded me not only of Thiebaud's paintings, but also physically transported me to San Francisco's North Beach and the nearby Telegraph Hill.¹⁵

What does it feel like to walk up a steep street in San Francisco; when the wind's blowing, pushing you backward, when it's cold, making you lean forward? I experienced this part of the windy foggy city firsthand in the early 2000s while working on Sansome Street at the base of Telegraph Hill's east side. During lunchtime, I would often frequent one of the "quick-lunch" restaurants closer to downtown, surrounded by office workers rushing through their food amidst quick conversation. But sometimes, to avoid the wait to get into one of these eateries, and the incessant bustle, I would instead bring my lunch and head up Telegraph Hill, take a seat on one of the many sets of steps that negotiated the

slope, and take in views of the bay. With colleagues, we would walk over to North Beach, grab an espresso, and pant our way up and down the steep inclines—Vallejo, Green, Montgomery, Kearny, Union, and Filbert Steps.

In San Francisco, the street grid defies topography. While most settlements built on hills traverse the slope by building streets along the angle of least resistance, zigzagging their way up the incline, San Francisco's urban form in contrast is an outcome of strange, brute force—the will of Cartesian geometry over natural features. Here, straight streets “rise and fall like rollercoasters.”¹⁶ But this odd juxtaposition of incongruent forms has also created architectural opportunities, stairways of different kinds to negotiate the slope, which French architect Florence Lipsky has marvelously documented.¹⁷ Telegraph Hill is replete with examples—Filbert Steps, Vallejo Steps, the steps at the intersection of Calhoun Terrace and Union Street, and Peter Machiarini Steps, among others—that show just how steep the streets can be because there are stairs that separate two parts of the same street. In his book of remarkable ink and watercolor drawings of San Francisco, Florentine architect Andrea Ponsi, equally struck by the opposition of grid and hills, remarks how the grid remains unchallenged, fighting “the city's steep climbs, its dangerous descents.”¹⁸ His book contains two drafted sections, partially rendered with soft watercolor, that bear witness to his words.¹⁹

Telegraph Hill, the writer Gary Kamiya tells us, is “quintessential San Francisco;” where the craggy hill, its steep streets, buildings built on sheer cliff, the New Deal Coit Tower, the amazing views in 360 degrees of city and bay, and the crisp gleaming Northern California light collide to create the “city's genius loci.”²⁰ This is where history and geography coalesce to produce the mystique and reality of San Francisco. After the U.S. Navy seized the promontory known as Yerba Buena in 1846, they built an adobe fort with an outlook on the top of the hill to warn of approaching ships, and later, in 1853 it was replaced by an electric telegraph giving the hill its name.²¹ Until the early twentieth century, the Telegraph Hill neighborhood was mostly working class. And while walking up and down the steep streets, amidst the buildings, with their profiles jaggging up and down because of the slope, I could sometimes picture a person, like the man in “The Angry Street,” making their way up and down the steep streets, north-south, between the financial district of downtown and Telegraph Hill. During the time I spent there, I often

wondered how the inhabitants of Telegraph Hill viewed the streets. Did they respect them?

In search of my own point of view, I picked up my sketchbook and pouch of pencils and pens and headed for Telegraph Hill. After surveying the area, traversing the different sides of the hill, up to Coit Tower and down Filbert Steps, I settled on three streets to study and draw: Romolo Place, Peter Machiarini Steps and Montgomery Street. Kearny and Montgomery Streets originate in downtown, from Market Street, cut north and bisect this short stretch of Broadway, marching up Telegraph Hill towards Coit Tower (Fig 3). Kearny Street becomes so steep at this point that the sidewalk has been built into steps, and therefore this section of the street was called the Kearny Steps. In 2001, the street was named after Peter Machiarini (1909 – 2001), an Italian-American modernist sculptor and jewelry designer who owned a studio on nearby Grant Street.²² In a democracy such as ours, it was reassuring to find that we do after all recognize our streets by naming them after the denizens of the city.



Figure 3. Telegraph Hill with Coit Tower, Broadway running east-west (left-right), and the steep streets, Romolo Place, Peter Machiarini Steps and Montgomery Street, going up the hill. Image: Harrison Ryker, 1948 (Courtesy David Rumsey Map Collection).

When I began to draw the streets in fall of 2019, I thought I would capture their verticality head-on, with one-point perspective. However,

unable to achieve an accurate sense of perspective at first, I began drawing sections of the street to get a clear sense of height, depth, and scale. Later, I traced over these sections, spread across the spine of the sketchbook, in freehand, depicting the facades of buildings on both sides of the street, as another way to emphasize the sheer verticality.²³ Gradually, as my awareness of the perspective grew, I was able to draw more accurately. I focused on capturing the street through quick sketching, much like the camera might work, frame after frame. But another reason for repeated drawing was also because I wanted to get the perspective right, capture correctly the details of buildings, roof profiles and bay windows. I also wanted to try different media—sketching with pencil, ballpoint pen, and felt tip pens—and achieve varied line quality to depict different aspects of light and shade. The perspective sketches were done on the street, and by no means involved taking photographs and tracing over them in the comfort of the studio (Figs. 4, 5, 6).



Figure 4. “Peter Macchiarini Steps and Montgomery Street”. San Francisco. October 4, 2019. Graphite pencil on paper. Drawings by Tanu Sankalia.



Figure 5. “Romolo Place” San Francisco, October 4 & 11, 2019. Graphite pencil, ballpoint pen, and felt-tip pen on paper. Drawings by Tanu Sankalia.



Figure 6. “Peter Macchiarini Steps”. San Francisco. October 25, 2019. Graphite pencil, ballpoint pen, and felt-tip pen on paper. Drawings by Tanu Sankalia.

The sketches and drawings in this essay are my notes of the streets. There are three panels of perspective sketches of each street in gray tone, accompanied by a section drawing of each in color (Fig 7, 8, 9). Sketching involved another, different kind of urban ethnography – of being in the field, hanging out, getting to know the streets as subjects in their own right, asserting their strength as they climb up Telegraph Hill. I observed residents go in and out of buildings, delivery trucks yanking on their handbrakes, rideshares dropping off people; and, come evening, the odd smattering of tourists who would incredulously climb up the steep streets with their cameras to take in the grand views of downtown. Evening was also the time when the residents of Telegraph Hill were returning home from work, panting up the steep incline and occasionally

pausing to catch their breath. I wondered if they'd rather be on this steep street, showing it respect, rather than find themselves chillingly caught like Chesterton's character was in his "Bad Dream."

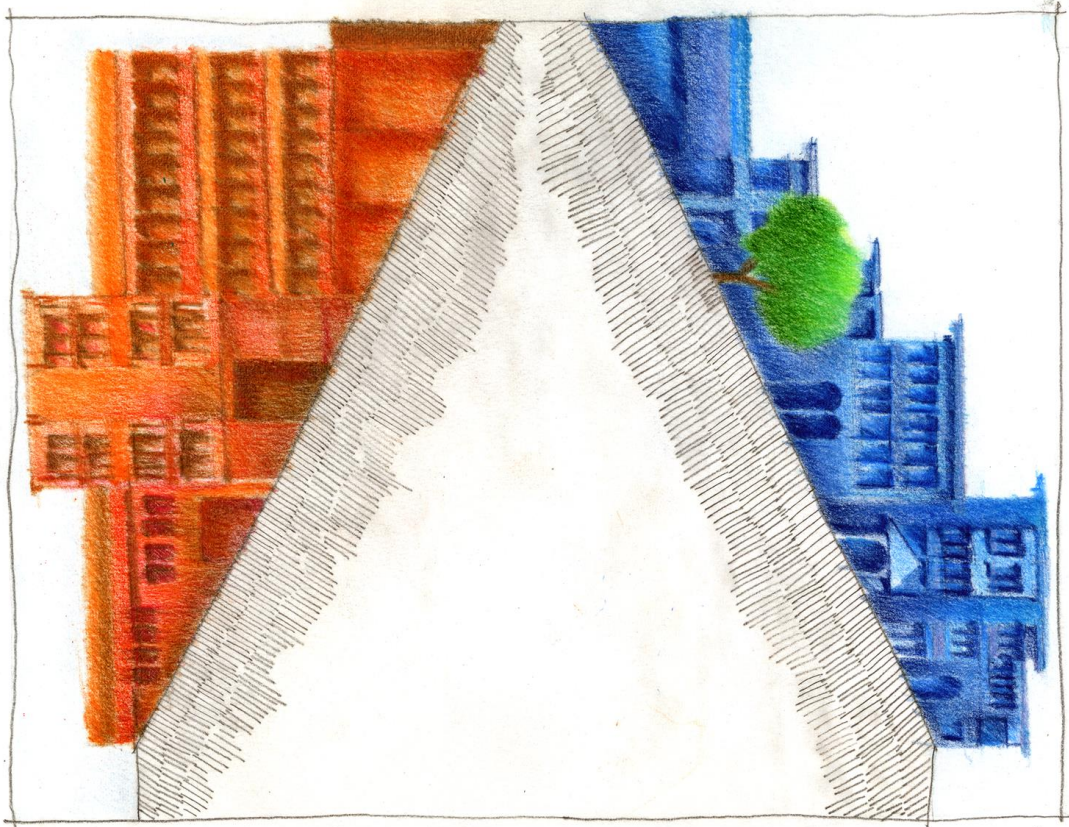


Figure 7. "Section drawing, Peter Macchiarini Steps". San Francisco. May-June 2020. Graphite pencil, and color pencil on vellum. 9 x 12 inches. Drawing by Tanu Sankalia.



Figure 8. "Section drawing, Montgomery Street". San Francisco. June-July 2020.
Graphite pencil, and color pencil on vellum. 9 x 12 inches. Drawing by Tanu Sankalia.

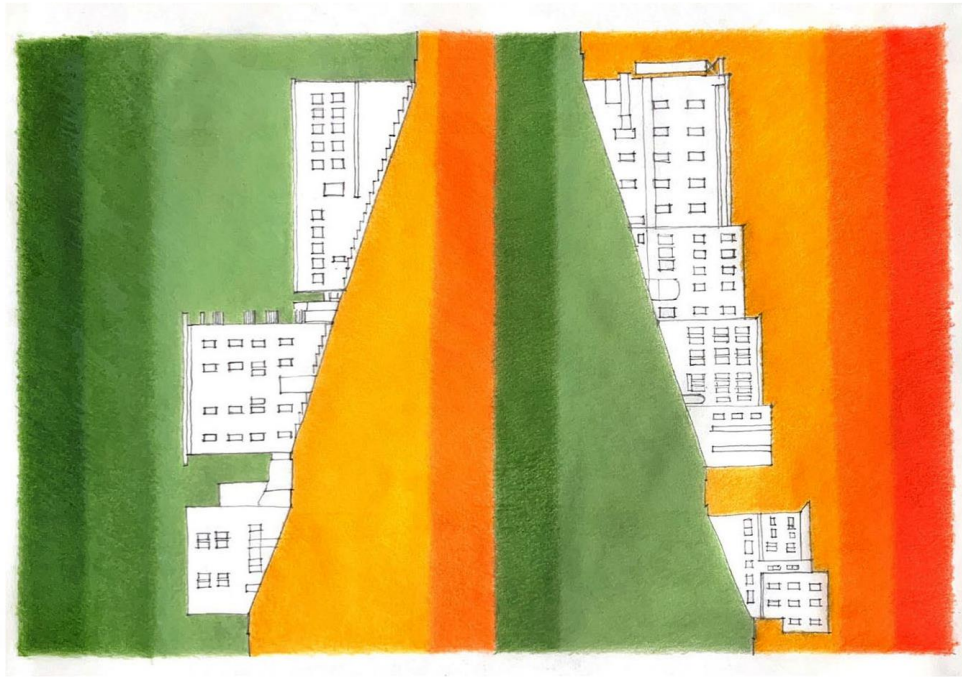


Figure. 9 "Section drawing, Romolo Place". San Francisco. August 2020. Graphite pencil, and color pencil on vellum. 9 x 12 inches. Drawing by Tanu Sankalia.

In "The Angry Street," the diners are metaphorically tied to their watches by chains. As Chesterton puts it, "the heaviest chain ever tied to a man—it is called a watch-chain." The same could be said today about the phones that chain us, simultaneously a phone, a camera and clock.²⁴ As opposed to clicking away with a phone, images that won't be seen, given that our world is burdened with billions of them in the cloud, sketching can provide us with a more deliberate alternative. Sketching is to give oneself time to be with a subject, to get to know it intimately, which is another way of according it attention, giving it due respect.

In the opening lines of "The Angry Street," the narrator claims that the story he is about to tell may not be true, that it may or may not have occurred at all, and that if he had read it through, he might conclude that the story is indeed a conjurer's fantasy. But he couldn't tell because the story had yet not been written; although the idea of it clung to him through his boyhood and that it existed, most probably, before he was

born. In other words, Chesterton's purpose is to reclaim knowledge that has existed well before him. The very act of storytelling might surely restore that knowledge for the future. Thiebaud's drawings and paintings of urban scenes, their ambiguity between verisimilitude and fantasy are also tales of the city; they are repositories of urban experience, and knowledge; they beckon us, and make us take pause on streets that cannot be taken for granted, or else they might tilt upward beneath our feet. On my part I have taken heed of their presence, in order to eschew their anger, and paid them the respect they deserve by sketching and drawing them, lovingly.

Acknowledgements

I had always wanted to connect Chesterton's short story "The Angry Street" to the built environment of cities, and therefore the call David Michalski put out for *Streetnotes* 30 got this project going. Thanks to Pedro Lange-Churión, Laszlo Muntean, and Jennifer Villarina for suggestions and comments on the paper, and Sergio De La Torre for artistic encouragement. Thanks to Ellen Rowley and Hugh Campbell of the All-Ireland Architectural Research Group (AIARG) for selecting this paper, among many, for presentation at the "Architecture and its Stories" conference held in Dublin, March 24-25, 2022. I was also invited to present nine of my colored drawings of San Francisco's steep streets at the "Art + Architecture Triennial" held at the Thacher Gallery, University of San Francisco, March 6-April 16, 2023.

About the Author

[Tanu Sankalia](#) is professor in the Department of Art + Architecture at the University of San Francisco, and serves as Co-Director for the Center for Research, Artistic, and Scholarly Excellence (CRASE).

NOTES

¹ G.K Chesterton, *The Angry Street: A Bad Dream*. (First published in 1908). From, G.K. Chesterton, *A Gleaming Cohort* (London: Methuen and Company, 1926). p. 88.

² Eric Rabkin and Jesse Willis, Reading Short and Deep #183, <https://www.sffaudio.com/reading-short-and-deep-108-the-angry-street-a-bad-dream-by-g-k-chesterton/> Accessed July 2, 2020.
Eric Rabkin and Jesse Willis do an excellent job of unpacking the story and its philosophical content.

³ Ian Boyd, "Journalism as Parable." *The Chesterton Review*. 18 (2):173-181. (1992).

⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997)

⁵ Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁶ Bennet, p. ix.

⁷ See Karen Wilkin et al. *Wayne Thiebaud*, Rizzoli. Also see, *Thiebaud Delicious Metropolis: The Desserts and Urban Scenes of Wayne Thiebaud* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2019)

⁸ Although a resident of Sacramento, California, Wayne Thiebaud became intimately familiar with San Francisco when he bought a home on Potrero Hill in San Francisco in 1973, the same year he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the California College of Arts and Crafts (now CCA, California College of the Arts). The city's steep hilly streets became a deep source of inspiration. See <https://www.cca.edu/newsroom/wayne-thiebaud-learning-interdisciplinary-art/> Accessed July 27, 2020

⁹ When Thiebaud was showing a slide of one of his cityscapes during a lecture, someone from the audience called out, "Streets aren't that steep." "Have you been to San Francisco?" was Thiebaud's reply. See *Thiebaud Delicious Metropolis: The Desserts and Urban Scenes of Wayne Thiebaud* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2019) p. 101.

¹⁰ Wilkin, Karen. "Wayne Thiebaud: American Master." *The Hopkins Review* 11, no. 3 (2018): 411-415. [doi:10.1353/thr.2018.0073](https://doi.org/10.1353/thr.2018.0073).

¹¹ Paul Groth describes landscapes as those spaces to which people belong and develop a shared sense of identity and meaning. Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi, *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

¹² See Susan Goldman Rubin, *Delicious: The Life and Art of Wayne Thiebaud*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007).

¹³ Wilkin, Karen. "Wayne Thiebaud: American Master." *The Hopkins Review* 11, no. 3 (2018): 411-415. [doi:10.1353/thr.2018.0073](https://doi.org/10.1353/thr.2018.0073).

¹⁴ Janet Bishop recalls how at a dinner party in Davis the then 96-year-old Thiebaud graciously offered to help the hosts put some appetizers out for the guests. He picked up a jar of olives and instead of emptying them out in a single swoop into a bowl, he carefully placed each on a platter, with a little space between them. Bishop writes, "With Thiebaud, every olive, deviled egg, lollipop, cupcake, or slice of pie is treated with respect." Janet Bishop, "Five Cupcakes," in *Thiebaud Delicious Metropolis: The Desserts and Urban Scenes of Wayne Thiebaud* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2019) p. 51.

¹⁵ "Telegraph Hill is one of the most famous hills in the world, as well-known as Sugar Loaf in Rio de Janeiro, and a visual landmark to sailors entering the Bay since its European discovery by Capt. Juan Manuel de Ayala in the *San Carlos* on August 5, 1775." Accessed on July 12, 2020"
http://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Telegraph_Hill_Historic_District

¹⁶ Florence Lipsky, *San Francisco: The Grid Meets the Hills* (Marseille: Editions Parenthèses, 1999), p. 16.

¹⁷ Op cit. Lipsky 1999.

¹⁸ See Andrea Ponsi, *San Francisco: A Map of Perceptions* (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

¹⁹ See section drawings on pages 19 and 41. Ponsi, 2015.

²⁰ Gary Kamiya, *Cool Grey City of Love: 49 Views of San Francisco* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 317.

²¹ Peter Booth Wiley, *National Trust Guide: San Francisco* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2000).

²² Geri Koepfel, "Street Running Between Kearny Steps Gets a Much Needed Makeover," Hoodline, <https://hoodline.com/2015/05/street-running-between-kearny-steps-getting-a-much-needed-makeover>

Accessed July 10. Also see <https://www.sfparksalliance.org/our-parks/parks/peter-macchiarini-kearny-st-steps> Accessed July 2 2020.

²³ At times, to achieve greater precision, I wish I could have drafted these sections, as Andrea Ponsi does beautifully in *San Francisco: A Map of Perceptions*. However, I began these sections color drawings during Covid-19 lockdown when could not access my office at the University of San Francisco and a nice, solid drafting board.

²⁴ This is a thought expressed by Jesse Willis. Listen to, Eric Rabkin and Jesse Willis, *Reading Short and Deep* #183, <https://www.sffaudio.com/reading-short-and-deep-108-the-angry-street-a-bad-dream-by-g-k-chesterton/> Accessed July 2, 2020.