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### Abstract

This study attempts to explore the "image" of San Francisco as it is created by the newspapers. The main assumption is that the perception and evaluation of the urban environment is to a great extent shaped by verbal and iconic frames of reference selected by the media. In this process, newspapers play a central role in influencing not only political decisions on the urban environment, but also public consensus about the possible alternatives for action, their value and their consequences. The specific topic of research is the controversy in local newspapers over the proposed construction of high-rise buildings in San Francisco during 1970-71. The analysis focuses on the themes of the articles, the actors involved in the controversy, the strategy of their action, the environmental attributes attached to San Francisco, and the mythology that the controversy created about the city.

### Introduction

Communication about the urban environment is shaped by words as much as by iconic images. Newspapers contribute largely to creating a representation of San Francisco, its image is much written about and discussed by the press. This will be the focus of the study: the specific topic of research is the controversy in the local newspapers over the proposed construction of high-rise buildings in San Francisco during 1970-71.

The description of the environment by the press reflects, on the one hand, codifications and representations of the environment that come forth from the collective image (Boorstin, 1961; Strauss, 1968); on the other hand it modifies or guides the environmental perceptions of the public. The media select and combine units of information. They provide the public with some important patterns through which the public "reads" and perceives the city. In the controversy, the newspaper talks about different places, buildings and urban qualities that are assembled by the narration in a relation of contiguity. This is one of the mechanisms they used for building up the image of the city. The controversy over high-rise development is important because it deals with one of the processes that shape the city. The production process is here publicly discussed and, to some extent, the newspaper is the mediator between the community, which, in this case, exerted pressure to block the construction, and the decision-making groups (i.e. the Board of Supervisors). The study explores these central hypotheses:

1. That decisions about physical development are partly formed by verbal imagery propagated by the media and that this imagery is selective.
2. That different actors involved in the decisions select different images and axes of meaning to support their positions and systematically avoid talking about

other images and axes of meaning.

3. That certain journalists play key roles as ideological leaders. They will select and give attention to different environmental subjects, perspectives and positions, creating, thus, an imagery of the city. This imagery of the city is again, only one among many possible others, all of which imply different perspectives on the city.

4. That the legitimacy of the imagery is class-based.

5. That a mythology is created -- a rhetoric of controversy -- which hides the biases and underlying interests of the different actors.

The context of the study: In the last seven or eight years there has been a great deal of discussion in San Francisco about the development of new-high rise buildings. Newspapers played an active role in it both reflecting attitudes and shaping them. There has been an evolution in the urban values and in the meaning of the imagery of San Francisco, in both its iconic and written aspects in the last years: "modern" and "fast growing" city were positive attributes in the early 60's while "preservation" and "tradition" replaced them in the 70's. In order to understand how the image of San Francisco is generated by the media, I have analyzed one of the high-rise controversies, the one concerning the proposed U.S. Steel building. The building, a Skidmore, Owings and Merrill project, was to be a high-rise 550 feet high on San Francisco's Waterfront. The Waterfront height limit needed to be changed in order to allow the U.S. Steel tower. A few months after the proposal the controversy was raging. The arguments focused not only on the building itself and the Waterfront, but also on the whole image of San Francisco, its development, and growth. After one year long of inflamed debate, in February 1971, the Board of Supervisors voted a 175-foot maximum height limit on the portion of the Waterfront where the 550-foot U.S. Steel building was to rise. The project was therefore killed.

#### The study: methods

This study on the U.S. Steel controversy is based on 80 articles selected at random among those carrying information about the proposal and its influence on San Francisco's environment, published by the SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE between December 1969 and May 1971. The content analysis focused on the themes of the articles, the actors involved in the controversy, the strategy of their actions, the environmental attributes attached to San Francisco and the mythology that the controversy created about the city. The images (photos, drawings, graphics) published in the articles to accompany the written account were also analyzed, although this analysis is not included in this report.

#### The themes of the articles

I have organized the material of the articles into 5 thematic areas. Each thematic area is an area of meaning created by the common semantic elements of certain words. The five main thematic areas surrounding the central subject of high-rises and U.S. Steel are the following: 1) Political environment (the actors); 2) Strategic game (actions); 3) Economic environment; 4) Physical environment (physical and geographical aspects) and 5) Axiological environment (values). (See components of each thematic area in graphic 1.)

### 3. ENVIRONMENTAL COGNITION / 223

#### 1. The political environment (actors)

<u>In favor of the building</u>	<u>Opposition to the building</u>	<u>Arbitrating bodies</u>
Port Commission Chamber of Commerce International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Unions Downtown Association U.S. Steel Corporation Construction Industry San Francisco Planning and Urban Renewal (SPUR) Mayor Alioto Skidmore, Owings and Merrill San Francisco Art Commission The Editorial Section of the San Francisco Chronicle	Citizen's Waterfront Committee Alvin Duskin Herb Caen (San Francisco Chronicle) Charles McCabe (San Francisco Chronicle) Northern California Architects	Board of Supervisors City Planning Commission Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC)

#### 2. The Strategic Game (actions)

<u>Inputs</u>	<u>Processing</u>	<u>Outputs</u>
Proposal Opposition Picketing Protest Alvin Duskin Advertisement	Study Debate Delay Vote	Approval Blocking

#### 3. Economic Environment

<u>+Consequences of the building</u>	<u>-Consequences of the building</u>
Revenues for the city Employment	Increase of taxes Increase of city services Requirement of new freeways Increase in number of commuters

#### 4. The Physical Environment

<u>Geographic characteristics</u>	<u>Valued elements</u>	<u>Other cities or built environments</u>	
		<u>Good</u>	<u>Bad</u>
Location Topography: Bay Hills Flatlands	Views Height Access to water Open Space Scale Color Variety	Mill Valley Big Sur Monterrey	New York Chicago Waikiki Beach Chinese Wall Alcatraz

#### 5. Axiological environment (values)

<u>Human</u>	<u>Civic</u>	<u>Urban</u>
Quality of life Emotion Human rights Aesthetics	History Tradition Future	Deterioration Conservation Uglification Beautification Naturalness Imageability Visibility

### The actors in the controversy

The different actors involved in the controversy selected different images and axes of meaning to support their position and systematically avoided talking about other images and axes of meaning.

1. The main groups in favor of the building were the developer (U.S. Steel Corporation), the architects (S.O.M.), the Port Commission, the Unions, the Chamber of Commerce and the Mayor of San Francisco.
2. The main actors who opposed the building were the columnist Herb Caen, the conservationist groups and Alvin Duskin, a dress manufacturer. Herb Caen, whose column in the SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE is one of the most successful in the Bay Area press, played one of the key roles in the opposition to the building. He was clearly an ideological persuader who, positively and emphatically, based his arguments on the environmental and life-style values of the city: preservation of San Francisco's small scale, views, tradition. His role was so important because he alone provided the opposition with its most articulate ideology by talking about all the pro and con points broached into the controversy.
3. The arbitrating bodies were the Board of Supervisors, the City Planning Commission and Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC).

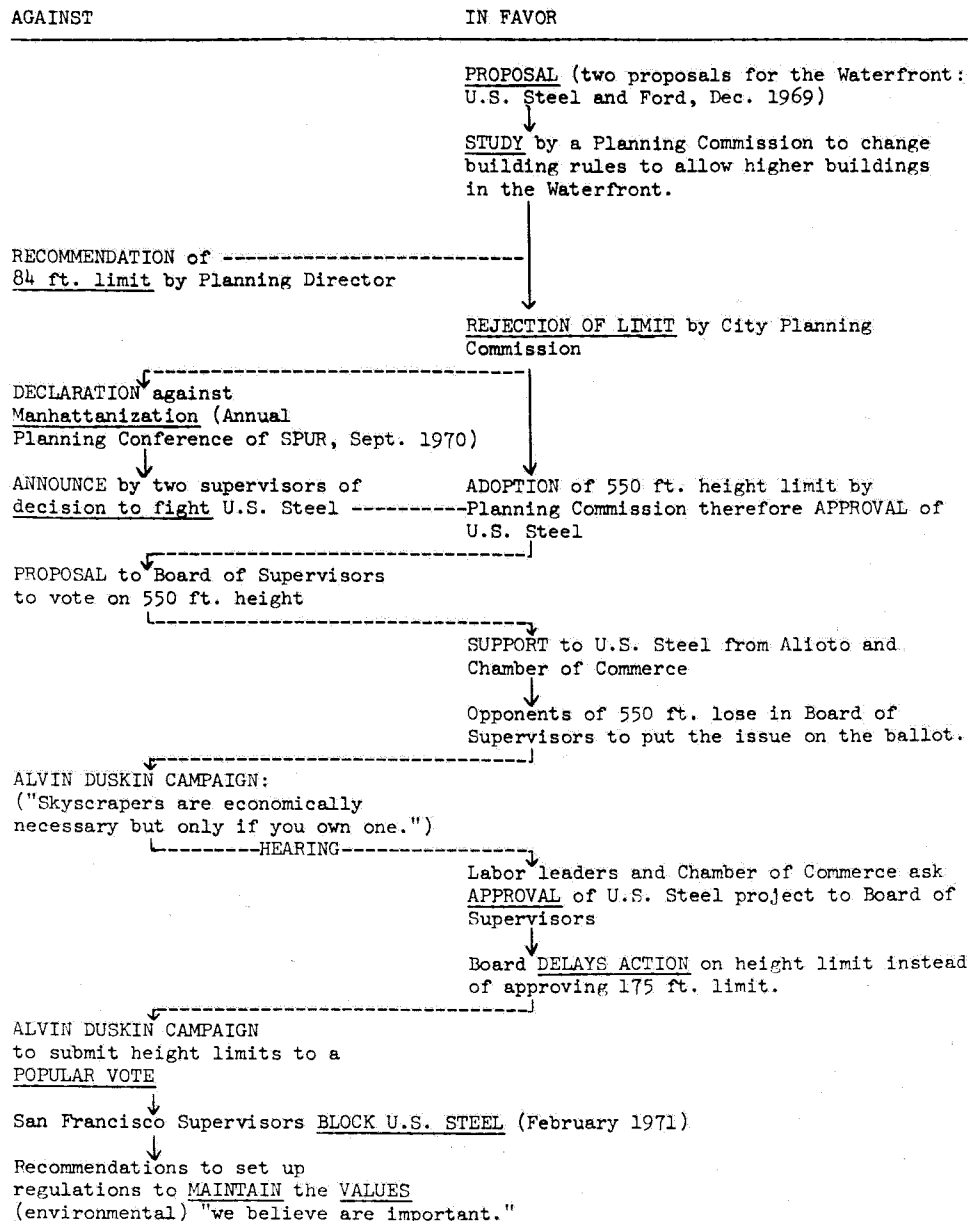
### The Strategy of Actions

In the graphic (II) I want to expose the skeleton of the chronology, showing the strategy of the actions undertaken by the two opposed groups. In the development of an action, some significant issues or subjects might determine or change the course of action (Bremond, 1963). The logic of the actions follows two patterns: a) each group develops over time a series of arguments: it has to maintain, then, a certain degree of coherence in its arguments, i.e. if the group who favors the building says that taxes will not increase because of it, and that it will have a positive effect on the environment, the "pro" group cannot, later on, support an increase in taxes on the grounds that the positive effects of the building justify the tax hike; b) the development of each group's arguments evolves when it must answer the points introduced by the adversary group. In this case, for instance, the conservationists found a most important ally in Alvin Duskin: he was able to sustain the conservationist position and answer, as well, the economic arguments introduced by the groups in favor of the U.S. Steel. In a sense, his intervention brought about a tie between the opponents in the area of "economic arguments." From there, the controversy shifted back to the purely environmental area. It was decided, ultimately, in terms of environmental considerations.

### The Environmental Attributes Used in the Controversy

If we look back upon the controversies about the Bank of America, the Alcoa, the Transamerica or the U.S. Steel building, (all high rise projects built in San Francisco in the past seven years) we see that each one centered around different cultural and urban attributes. Attributes are elements of the language that become "attached" to the topics and thus qualify them within a specific semantic

## THE LOGIC OF ACTIONS



GRAPHIC II.

area (Barthes, 1967a). In this case, the topics of the argument are the U.S. Steel and the city of San Francisco. The different attributes work together in providing a framework for the narration; they are the elements of paramount importance in the shaping of a mythology. Each attribute carries, in each case, a positive or a negative "sign." This qualification is cultural and it varies with each urban-architectonic style or ideological frame of reference: thus, in the early 1960's "tall" was marked as positive: "I'm at home where the tall buildings grow...I'll take the vertical city." (H. Caen, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, July 1960). In 1970, it is negative: "The entire concept of Manhattanization or 'verticality' seems old fashioned." (H. Caen, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, September, 1970).

The topics are semantically organized by the following attributes: identity as a city, visibility, authenticity, scale, coherence and harmony, and color. I will determine for each attribute the main pairs of opposed meanings, and a checklist of the words related to each opposition pole and utilized by the newspapers to configure the semantic area of the attribute. The relative importance of the attributes can be seen in Table II.

Table II

Mentions	Attributes
More than 35%	Identity (36%)
Between 25-35%	--
Between 15-25%	Visibility (19%) Authenticity (18%)
Between 5-15%	Scale (9%) Harmony (6%)
Less than 5%	Color (1%)
Other	

#### Attributes of Identity

San Francisco appears as "The City" -- the model of the ideal city. The image on which this concept is built assumes that San Francisco is different from another model, that of "problem cities," the archetype of which is New York. Its identity and idealized image derive from its character, color and variety and most especially from its geographic implantation and its connection with the water. About the relationship city/water, Barthes (1970), writes: "There is a relation between the road and the water; and we know quite well that the cities that are the most 'resistant to meaning' and to which, often the inhabitants have trouble adapting are those cities without water, without a river, without a lake, without a stream. These 'waterless' cities present difficulties for living, for reading them." The identity is reinforced in the newspaper controversy because San Francisco is identified with other places which have similar topographic characteristics (hill and sea), and appear as uniquely "good" environments: Mill Valley, Monterrey, Big Sur. The opposite examples are, on the one hand, places with "standardized characteristics" (Waikiki Beach) and, on the other hand, "problem cities" (Manhattan, Chicago).

Pair of opposite identity attributes:

	Ideal City	Problem Cities
Components:	San Francisco	Other American Cities
	The City	Manhattan
	Singularity	Chicago
	Uniqueness	Standard Cities
	City in hills	Flat cities
	On the seashore	Inland
	Mill Valley	Waikiki Beach
	Monterrey	
	Big Sur	

#### Attributes of visibility

A complete openness, allowing a multiplicity of views, is considered optimum for the city. Visibility is linked to "legibility": the more one can find one's precise location in relation to the city's surroundings from different spots in the city, and the greater the possibility of achieving a structured "reading" of the city, the better. The topic of views appears as an important matter in its own right. It is so unquestionable a value that it is not even necessary to justify its importance. Both parts in the controversy consider it a valuable topic: the conservationists use it as a flag and as an argument, while the developers do not attack it, saying, "The proposed skyscraper would have 'minimal effects' on views and the skyline." In all the collected material only in one case the argument of the views was disdained and even openly attacked: "To hell with those people who live on Nob Hill who worry about having their view destroyed." (Harry Bridges, leader of the International Longshoremen's and Warehouse Union). Perhaps it is important to point out that the only opinion in which the topic of the views is set aside comes from a Union leader. This difference in the perception of San Francisco can be related to the way of life of different social classes and their prejudices with regard to the quality of life in San Francisco. A sociological analysis should be done to test the hypothesis that environmental values correlate with social class orientations. In this light, the high-rise controversy could be approached from the point of view of an inter-elite fight.

Main Opposition:	Visibility	Blockage
Components:	Openness	Encirclement
	Legibility	Enclosure
	Visual access	Hemmed-in space
	Transparence	Obstruction
		Barrier to views

#### Attributes of Authenticity

San Francisco is presented in the controversy as "true," "authentic" and, therefore, opposed to "false"; a natural environment as opposed to an "artificial" and superurbanized one: a city with a strong tradition, history, good taste and spirit of conservation. The controversy opposes the old buildings to the new ones. For

the opposition groups, "old" has maximum positive meaning. Even when Herb Caen talks about "new" he is referring to old structures with a new meaning: "some new buildings in San Francisco add new vistas, open up new spaces, add greatly to the joy of living in the last best city in the U.S.: Ghirardelli Square, the Cannery, The Ice House and similar projects of civilized scale are pluses." All three, are in fact old structures which have been readapted to new uses: the old built structure remains, and the use shifts (i.e. from a Chocolate factory to a Shopping Center). On the other side, the Corporations and the U.S. Steel supporters attach importance to the image of a modern city. Chuck Bassett (from S.O.M.): "If I had my way, I'd tear it down tomorrow (the Ferry Building)...in fact I'd tear down every building in town except the City Hall...Forward into the past." The image of San Francisco as a traditional city, a museum piece, is associated with a definite group of sophisticated people: the traditional elite, the San Franciscans who legitimated history and tradition by giving value and meaning to old, antique objects. To this group, "Manhattanization" is anathema. The image proposed by the corporations is supported instead by other social groups: for instance, by the unions for whom the functionality, bigness and modernity of the objects represent jobs. The subjectivity of categories such as good taste/bad taste can be seen in the history of art or of fashion: "Beauty is not a quality inherent in things themselves, it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them and each mind sees a different beauty." (Hume, 1970)

Main Opposition:	Naturalness	Artificiality
Components:	Tradition History Heritage Good taste Conservation Aesthetics Emotionality Museum piece Humanity Old Style: Victorian, sophisticated elites	Computerized thinking "Plastic" environments Manhattanized Dehumanization Modernity New 'unrefined' social groups

#### Attributes of scale

Scale is a very important element in the humanized nature of San Francisco, which according to the terms of the controversy, is "the last possible city in the U.S." Little things are important to the quality of San Francisco. "The old timers who knew what San Francisco was all about, built their buildings to scale and made the city grow beautiful. The giants have passed and now we have rich pygmies with ego problems" (H. Caen). Associations with fables and plots are continually made: Gargantua, the giants and the pygmies, David and Goliath. Of course, the giants, Goliath and the rich-pygmies-with-ego-problems are the Corporations and David, the San Franciscans. Height is the attribute of scale which was at the center of almost all the discussions. This subjective scale of height is crucial to the image of San Francisco. What is considered "high" here would probably be considered normal in New York or Chicago.

Main Opposition:	<u>Civilized scale</u>	<u>Uncontrolled growth</u>
Components:	Human scale	Super-urbanized Inhuman Massiveness Disproportionate height Giraffe

Attributes of harmony, coherence

This set of attributes reflects a balanced internal relation in the city and, as well, between the city and the bay. The harmony comes from perfect ecological adjustment between the urban environment and the water. In this category, the concept of enclosure and blocking is "naturalized" by some metaphors like Chinese Wall, Waikiki Beach. The opposition to high-rises uses them to symbolize the rupture in the natural continuity city/bay. Waikiki Beach is nature destroyed as a consequence of massive anonymous tourism, of development and of high-rises.

Main Opposition:	<u>Equilibrium</u>	<u>Imbalance</u>
Components:	Natural profile Positive integration Access to the Water Continuity	Interruption of natural profile Waikiki Beach Discon. city/water Rape of the Bay

Attributes of Color

The controversy presents San Francisco as both colorful and white in opposition to darkness. The color is given by the variety and richness of elements both architectural and human. This dimension "humanizes" the city. The predominant light tonality of the city was broken by the new black buildings (Bank of America, Alcoa). The color, although it is not one of the most important attributes in the case of the U.S. Steel building, was the fundamental attribute in the Bank of America issue. In the U.S. Steel controversy, the color is mentioned as an attribute of the city and of its diversity. "Thanks to the keeper of the flame, the colorful, the individual, the old San Franciscan...Thanks to the little things that give the city its true tone and texture" (H. Caen). "These are 'natural' colors, while the new buildings are felt as 'unnatural.' Bank of America, Crocker, Alcoa and all those other dark buildings thrown up by newcomers with cold New York hearts..."

Main Opposition:	<u>"Natural" colors</u>	<u>"Unnatural" colors</u>
Components:	White, light Colorful Diversity of colors Warm	Black Grey (lack of color) Homogeneity of color Cold

The mythology of the controversy

In this reading of the high-rise controversy, we see concepts used which apparently convey very well defined meanings, such as San Francisco, Manhattan, Mill Valley, San Franciscan, Waikiki Beach. What is the role of these concepts in the building

of the controversy? The newspaper narration presents some characteristics which I will call "mythical" and certain concepts which are keys to the mythology. Their function is to attach metaphorically a value to the main subject under the appearance of a fact, as a "concrete reality." (Barthes, 1967b) The context of the high-rise controversy can be reduced to a mythological inventory which states some concepts and relates them to a conceptual system as if they were facts and not values. In the previous analysis I cited certain concepts whose relation to others is taken as mandatory or as a "natural" meaning. Such concepts are the "mythical operators" of a larger mythology that applies to the image of San Francisco. Myths conceal the underlying reasons of the controversy: the location of big corporations in San Francisco, or the goal to convert the city into a financial empire, the "Wall Street" of the West, or the fight between two elites.

The analytical reading of a given myth implies both a search into the structure of the myth and into the context which organizes the mythological universe. For example, in order to grasp the qualities attached to the term "Manhattanization" (dirtiness, crime, etc.) and those that are excluded (modern metropolis, for instance), we have to resort to the mythology existent in public opinion. In the narration these qualities appear as naturally inherent to the concept, as if the only natural meaning of Manhattan really was dirtiness, urban problems, crime. Similarly, the meaning attached to Waikiki Beach changes according to the contextual frame in which it is included. In the U.S. Steel controversy, Waikiki Beach is an example of nature destroyed by man. But "destruction" is conceived only in a "conservationist" oriented mind, because Waikiki Beach is the tourist goal of thousands of lower middle class people. The travel section of the same newspaper is full of advertisements praising the marvels of the "Waikiki Paradise."

The two positions in the myth: The core of the controversy is the confrontation between two opposite views of "what the outsiders want to do to San Francisco so that it stops being what it is and changes its way." Each of the two large adversary groups structures its own mythological narration from a specific perspective: a) those opposed to the U.S. Steel emphasize the mythical argument of "San Francisco" (ideal city, unique); b) those in favor of the U.S. Steel propose the mythology of progress through technological advance and enormous projects. The two antagonistic positions permit us to discover how the image of each adversary is established in the narration: the San Franciscan and the Outsiders; those who war to protect San Francisco, "different from other cities," and those who think that San Francisco would be better if it accepted the alleged key to American urban progress, high-rise development. This helps to explain the strategy of the leaders of the opposition: they succeeded in combining in their favor a mythology supported by marginal and anti-establishment sectors (intellectuals and artists) with a mythology supported by the traditional local elites. The convergence of anti-establishment and traditional sectors around historical preservation and conservation urban ecology, and the taste for nature, represent different things for each of the sectors in the anti-U.S. Steel coalition. The anti-establishment "intellectual" rejects the increasing power of corporations on the life of the city and its inhabitants. The traditional elites find in this theme signs and criteria with which to establish social "legitimacy."

Conclusion

I have proposed a reading of one of the issues that has helped to shape -- along with many others -- the image of San Francisco. I have interpreted the material and tried to show the multiplicity of meanings underneath the positions of the various newspaper items. My objective was to show how the explicit and implicit meanings give rise to a mythology of San Francisco. In other words, these meanings shape an ideology which influences both the actual and the future image of the city and therefore affects the plans for the city's development. In the case of the U.S. Steel building, the opposition was strong enough to block the plans for the building. This analysis of the rhetoric of the controversy allows us to understand its value base and, as well, the values and imagery which it helped to build. The systematic knowledge of the media's role concerning questions as important as the urban environment is indispensable if we want to avoid in the words of G. Gerbner: "the selective habits of participation in one's cultural environment (that) limit each of us to risky and often faulty, extrapolation about the cultural experience of heterogeneous communities. Informed policy making and the valid interpretation of social response increasingly require general and comparative indicators of the prevailing climate of the man-made symbolic environment." (Gerbner, 1969)

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