Michelin stars and Big Architecture have come to Oakland, California, one of America’s most storied melting pots. And with gentrification comes controversy—whose city is it? Jeff Chu meets the people on the forefront of change and finds that, if this is not the same town it once was, maybe that’s just fine.
OAKLAND’S TEMESCAL ALLEY GLOWED ON A BRIGHT

August morning, as I sat at a public outdoor table. Before me were an espresso, brewed from locally roasted beans, and a $3 doughnut injected to order with small-batch cherry jam. Around me was a hipster communion. A couple with carefully tended mustaches and MacBooks sipped cappuccinos. A quartet of French speakers swept through wearing summer scarves. A plaid-clad dad tended to his doughnut-silenced toddler.

Temescal Alley’s two narrow rows of stables were once home to trolley-pulling workhorses. Now they house purveyors of precious goods and services. There’s the Cro Café and Doughnut Dolly, where I bought my breakfast. Crimson Horticultural Rarities sells succulents and terrariums, Japanese gardening tools and L’Aromatica fragrances. The bookshop Book/Shop stocks $38 canvases sleeves in which to carry your first editions.

As significant as what I saw is what I didn’t: non-white people. Oakland, a city of 414,000 on the eastern shore of San Francisco Bay, remains one of America’s most ethnically diverse communities: a third of its residents are white, a quarter African American, a
quarter Latino. 17 percent Asian. Yet, excepting shop staffs, I saw only one other person of color in Temescal Alley, a focal point of gentrification in the North Oakland neighborhood of Temescal.

One black shop clerk told me that dozens of camera crews have visited, eager to glimpse this sparkling “new” side of the city. Some reporters have then declined to identify Oakland on its own terms, dubbing it “Brooklyn by the Bay” (the New York Times) and “the Brooklyn of the West” (the Seattle Times).

“Are you one of them?” she asked, eyeing my notebook.

I spent much of my childhood nearby, and my grandmother lived in Oakland’s Chinatown. I confessed that the comparisons to Brooklyn—where I now live—irritate me. She relaxed.

“You know, then,” she said. “The real Oakland isn’t here.”

WHAT IS THE “REAL” OAKLAND? To start to get at the answer, look first at the city’s many historical layers now forgotten. This sunnier side of the bay was first home to the Ohlone tribe, then Spanish colonial ranchers. In the mid 19th century, much of what is now Oakland was a separate city called, ironically, Brooklyn. In the mid 20th century, a vibrant music scene earned it the nickname “the Harlem of the West.” The Black Panther Party was born here. Oakland was a hub for the Chicano arts movement, too.

But as manufacturing slowed down, decimating the post–World War II economy, Oakland declined. Gangs and drugs appeared. By the 1980s and 90s, when I was growing up in the Bay Area, it looked like San Francisco’s ugly stepsister. Its Victorian homes, unlike the camera-ready models across the bay, had boarded-up windows.
No longer. Although some pockets of Oakland have always been affluent, gentrification is transforming previously impoverished sections. Those Victorians have been restored. Historic high-rises are becoming luxury condos. Upscale cafés, restaurants, and shops like those in Temescal Alley are opening at a rapid clip, particularly in the northern and western parts of the city.

The entire Bay Area is undergoing transformation, thanks to Silicon Valley’s money and power. It’s startling to see all those Maseratis and Teslas on San Francisco’s streets. In Berkeley, the Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive recently reopened in a $150 million Diller, Scofidio & Renfro–designed building, and the century-old Claremont Club & Spa hotel has been given a major face-lift by Fairmont Hotels & Resorts.

Part of Oakland’s appeal is that housing remains relatively affordable (for now). Coaches whisk workers to Facebook, Apple, and Google’s campuses, an hour’s drive away. Last fall, Uber announced plans to move thousands of staff into a new office in the long-empty Sears, Roebuck building.

This new energy has buoyed Oakland. But it has also fed terrific tension, as residents fret about who’s getting priced out, whether Oakland’s past is being honored, and if the city is becoming another San Francisco. Underlying these strains are questions of race and class. In neighborhoods such as Uptown, which has seen a condo boom, the contrasts are particularly stark. Newcomers often buy there because they can’t afford to live elsewhere in the Bay Area, yet more than 40 percent of Uptown’s residents still live below the poverty line.

What I heard in the shop clerk’s declaration about what’s “real” was a plea for respect, for what—and who—was here before, and what—and who—still is. “When you put people from diverse backgrounds together, it’s not always comfortable,” said local painter Bryan Keith Thomas, who specializes in African-inspired iconography. Temescal Alley is unquestionably real. But it—and the city as a whole—isn’t just a blank canvas waiting for new arrivals.

One upside of the gentrification debate is a reconsideration of what makes Oakland unique. Thomas spoke of the city rediscovering its beauty: “When you know, ‘This is my charm. This is my talent’—that’s where the power lies. There’s a strong life force here.” What I discovered on my return to Oakland was just how strong that life force is right now, fed by rich history, cultural diversity, and, yes, wave after wave of newcomers. And to experience it in full, you have to venture well beyond one alley.

OAKLAND IS SHAPED LIKE A FAT HORSE STANDING on its hind legs. Its head nuzzles Berkeley. The hills form its crest and back. Its front legs kick toward San Francisco.

You’d think that Oakland would be oriented west, facing the bay. But the city’s container port, America’s fifth busiest, forms an ugly barrier along 19 miles of shoreline, so development looks instead toward Lake Merritt, just east of downtown. As local landscape architect and UC Berkeley professor Walter J. Hood Jr. said as we circled Lake Merritt in his Porsche: “Oakland is introverted.”

Lake Merritt was once an estuarial marsh. “Estuaries are such rich ecological areas,” said Hood, a National Design Award winner whose projects include the grounds of San Francisco’s de Young Museum and a multipurpose community park in downtown Oakland. The fish-rich marsh lured birds, which attracted the Ohlone, the area’s earliest locavores. White settlers completed the food-waste cycle in the 1860s, using the marsh as a sewer. Then they damned it, forming a brackish lagoon.

Two of Hood’s current projects seek to recognize Oakland’s history and reweave its urban fabric. One, called Releaf, aims to
replant the city’s eponymous coast live oaks, which are almost all gone. (You can find a rare survivor in the plaza by City Hall.) Hood and his students recently planted 73 saplings in Lowell Park; they intend to transplant the trees to yards and gardens in West Oakland.

The other plan involves redeveloping a multi-block area on Lake Merritt’s southwestern shore into a pedestrian-friendly recreation-and-culture district. Eight lanes of traffic now divide the ribbon of lakeside park from the Beaux-Arts Henry J. Kaiser Convention Center, where the Grateful Dead played nearly 60 shows, and the Oakland Museum of California, a low-slung Brutalist building that evokes the entrance to a Bond villain’s lair.

None of it organically connects. As we drove, Hood cursed the ghosts of urban planning past. "Are we ridiculous or what? Can we create a cultural diagram as strong as Golden Gate Park? Or Central Park?" He spoke of revaluing existing riches, not building anew. "Maybe the failure to do so thus far reflects low civic self-esteem. "Can we get people to see Oakland in a clearer way?" he asked.

"THIS IS THE GREATEST CITY IN THE WORLD!"

Musician Xavier Dphrepaulezz, a.k.a. Fantastic Negrito, said this as he jumped off the sidewalk near Jack London Square, where Blackball Universe, his art gallery/record label/creative space, is headquartered. One of Oakland's first neighborhoods to gentrify, the area is home to old warehouses, new condos, and Blue Bottle
Coffee’s headquarters. The change has been steady, not shocking; produce wholesalers have held on, as has the 133-year-old Heintz’s First & Last Chance Saloon, Oakland’s oldest bar.

With his shock of hair sprouting from his slim frame, Dphereaulez resembled, in body and spirit, an exclamation point. Now 48, he arrived in Oakland from Massachusetts at age 12. It was a revelation. “So colorful! There were brothers! And Asians!” he said. “The streets just called me.”

We got into his car and drove through West Oakland to Seventh Street, once the heart of the Harlem of the West. Any respectable jazz or blues artist touring California from the 1940s to the 70s played Slim Jenkins Café or Esther’s Orbit Room. One of the few visible reminders of this history is the Blue Walk of Fame, unveiled last spring outside the West Oakland BART station. It commemorates musicians who performed here in that heyday and, in a play for relevancy, some who came after: Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin, homegrown talents the Pointer Sisters, and MC Hammer(!).

We paused outside a Victorian where, Dphereaulez said, he almost died during a wayward drug deal 30 years ago. The house had fresh paint, new Andersen windows, and blossoming bougainvillea. “Even the flowers are hustling,” he said.

This neighborhood, long predominantly black and poor, is convenient—a one-stop, seven-minute BART ride from San Francisco. Lately it has lured white millennials and businesses targeting them. When I passed the two-year-old restaurant 10th & Wood (the menu features “Oakland cuisine,” like pulled pork with coffee-and-hoisin sauce on “artisan buns”), all six people at the sidewalk tables were bearded white men in plaid shirts.

Dphereaulez has gentrified, too. He married (“my wife’s Japanese—very Oakland”). A longtime marijuana grower, he diversified (“kale, cauliflower, kabocha squash”). Last year, he entered NPR’s Tiny Desk music contest on a whim. From the first bars of his winning entry, “Lost in a Crowd,” which beat out nearly 7,000 others, you feel Oakland—gospel hum, bluesy thrum—and hear echoes of past greats. (His first full-length album, The Last Days of Oakland, which focuses on the city’s rebirth, comes out this May.) “Black roots music is part of our story here,” he said. “Our art comes from their struggle. You think of that and you stay humble.”

(Continued on page 131)
beef—rolled in black truffles. We set to work on this paleo feast seated at a rough-hewn farm table, surrounded by antique photos and cut flowers, the only customers in one of the city’s most popular eateries.

It is difficult not to be impressed by how comfortable and gracious life seems in Ljubljana. I went for a stroll past the cafés facing the river with Miran Mohar, one of the country’s most successful artists, a native of the city who spent years living in other places, including New York. “Life in Ljubljana is like being on a constant vacation,” he told me, gesturing at the scenery. Mohar had been an artist in Yugoslavia, but even under Tito’s authoritarian regime, Ljubljana offered a surprising degree of freedom; he recalled a gay club that opened here in the 1980s and brought plenty of visitors from Italy and Austria. “Of course, after a while you end up knowing everyone,” he said. As if to demonstrate, he waved to a significant-looking, leonine man at a sidewalk table who, he said, was a novelist. The key to living happily in Ljubljana, Mohar suggested, was not living there all the time. “When you’re based in a small city,” he said, “it’s good to spend a lot of time traveling.”

It was nearly time for dinner, so Garrett and I took a taxi to Cubo, a crowded, brightly lit space on the city’s outskirts that turned out to be an unabashed celebration of Slovenian capitalism. The parking lot was packed with the kinds of cavernous black sedans that often come outfitted with curtains. The interior was decorated with paintings of large-denomination euro notes and vintages containing taxidermy birds plucking jewelry out of geodes. The garulous owner, Boštjan Trstenjak, sat with us and guided us through the salient points of his biography: after starting out as a waiter in a Yugoslavian disco and a used-car salesman in East Germany, he founded Cubo in 2003 and began his inexorable climb to the summit of Slovenian fine dining. He was the country’s first chef to publish his own cookbook, he informed us. In 2010, he opened a second Cubo in the city center—where the previous afternoon I had tasted a porcini risotto better than any I’d eaten in Italy—but last year he sold it to some Russians. Like the room, the food at the original Cubo was modern and bright, if not particularly Slovenian, and everyone around us appeared to be having exaggerated amounts of fun. “Isn’t this awesome?” Trstenjak exclaimed, before leaving us with our octopus.

We spent our final waking hours in Ljubljana at Vinoteca Movia, a wine bar opened several years ago by Aleš Kristančič to showcase his bottles in the capital. There we met Eva Klemenčič, a 25-year-old employee who was studying for the Master Sommelier exam. She poured us glass after glass of unfamiliar wine—a lime-scented Pinella, a savory Klarica—while patiently answering our questions. On the quiet side street outside, the chestnut roasters were rolling their carts away and the last drinkers were heading home, and it was easy to succumb to the illusion that the city had been this way for centuries. We were the last customers.

“Towhen,” Garrett said. We raised our glasses before Klemenčič wished us safe travels and shuttered the bar behind us.

FOURTEENTH STREET is the key artery connecting West Oakland, Downtown, and Lake Merritt. Yet in 2003, when Joyce Gordon opened Downtown’s first black-owned fine-art gallery right on 14th, “there was nothing here. Well, there was a doughnut shop,” she said. Why Downtown? “Because I’m crazy.” She cackled.

Today, Downtown has half a dozen galleries, adjacent Uptown more than 20. Streets that were desolate when I was a kid now bustle with pedestrian life. Uptown’s First Fridays—monthly street fairs featuring artists and musicians—can draw 25,000 people.

Yet Gordon, who sits on the city’s Public Art Advisory Committee, worries that her industry isn’t representing, or attracting, all of Oakland. “On First Friday, 90 percent of the people are white and 95 percent of the businesses are white-owned. Do I need somebody to redefine diversity for me? I don’t know what to do.”

The demographics probably reverse in Oakland’s biggest “art gallery,” liminal spaces like parking lots and underpasses that display some of America’s best street art. These pieces colorfully channel Oakland’s past and its hopes for the future, and are created by artists who might struggle to reach First Fridays’ crowds.

A block from Gordon’s gallery, on Harrison Street, I fell in love with a naughty-looking owl presiding over a parking lot. Its caption: NADA ES BASTANTE BUENO PARA MI ("Nothing is good enough for me"). And in Jingletown, in Oakland’s southeastern corner, I surveyed one of the biggest murals in the city, Wildin’ Out, an exquisite menagerie covering a 240-by-30-foot warehouse wall.

The two-year-old mural was produced by Fuming Guerilla, a nonprofit that facilitates street art.

“There’s so much talent in Oakland,” founder Sage Loring told me. "I wanted to help artists put together projects and get them paid."

Fuming Guerilla has placed nearly 20 projects. Some are by well-known graffiti writers like Vogue, Griffin One, and Ernest Doty, who created Wildin’ Out. Others are educational: for 99 Dragons—which has enlivened Chinatown with 99 beasts—artists Doctor Dragon and Anderson Gin worked with local youth.

One of Oakland’s most prominent murals—a woman holding a dove, on the 1914 Cathedral Building—was commissioned in 2014 for the United Nations’ 70th anniversary. The artist: Zio Ziegler, whose parents founded Banana Republic. He lives in Marin County. Several people mentioned this mural to me unbidden, with questions: Why an outsider? Isn’t what we have here good enough?

Two blocks away, in a storefront facing the historic Tribune Tower, Justin Carder wrestles with
similar questions of what's organic to
the community. On April 1, 2014, he
opened E. M. Wolfman General
Interest Small Bookstore, Downtown's
first new indie bookshop in years.
Carder confessed his privilege as a
white, first-time entrepreneur (a
graphic designer, he previously
worked at 826 Valencia, Dave Eggers's
literacy-focused nonprofit). “It was,
‘Great! White guy wants to gentrify!’
That’s problematic,” he said. “I don’t
want to be this super-cute curated
space that caters to white art kids.”

Though it is a super-cute, art-kid-
friendly space, with reclaimed wood
flooring and Ilлад quotes on the wall,
Carder’s products reflect careful at-
tention to Oakland’s diversity. He has
best-sellers. But he also publishes
zines and prints from local artists
including the all-female, all-minority
Black Salt Collective. As we talked, he
grabbed the book Black Panther: The
Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas,
about an Oakland designer whose
work was featured in the Black
Panther Party’s newspaper. “Everyone
should read this,” he said. “Everyone.”

IN 2010, COMMIS, which serves only a
$125-person-tasting menu, won
Oakland’s first-ever Michelin star. The
restaurant now has two, thanks to
Oakland-raised, El Bulli-trained chef
James Syhabout’s revelatory food; no
amuse-bouche has ever wowed me like
Commis’s financier—corn bread el-
evated to heavenly heights.

A $125 tasting menu is still striking in
a city where 20 percent of the popu-
lace lives in poverty. Equally notewor-
thy is that since Commis opened,
Oakland has welcomed more—and
more affordable—restaurants that
reflect its diversity. Fusebox offers
modern Korean cuisine amid West
Oakland’s warehouses. At Belly, Alice
Woo and Alan Chun’s casual Uptown
spot, kimchi and sambal invigorate
the tacos. Chef Malong Pendar’s Taste
of Africa, in East Oakland, could be
the country’s best Cameroonian kitchen.

My favorite: Cosecha, Dominica
Rice-Cisneros’s modern-Mexican
counter-service joint. One of a crop
of Oakland restaurants opened by chefs
who trained at Alice Waters’s Chez
Panisse in Berkeley, Cosecha anchors
Swan’s Market, a busy food hall in a
landmark brick-and-terra-cotta build-
ing on Downtown’s south side.

Rice-Cisneros’s profoundly flavor-
ful cuisine features some extremely
local produce; when possible, the epa-
zote in her mole comes from urban-
agriculture educator and writer
Novella Carpenter’s tiny Oakland
farm. Tacos run $3.65 apiece. No lunch
entrée exceeds $11.50 (the dinnertime
cooking is $15). When I ate there, the
crowd was diverse: black, white,
Latino, Asian.

Of course, you can get tacos else-
where for less than at Cosecha. One
afternoon, Chicana artist Natalia
Anciso and I wandered Fruitvale. This
East Oakland neighborhood may be
most famous because of the 2013 film
Fruitvale Station, which dramatized
the killing of a young man, Oscar Grant
III, by transit cops.

Anciso, who mentors at youth cen-
ters in largely Chichano East Oakland,
earned a master’s degree from
Berkeley last year. She noted that
many Berkeley students have discov-
ered Fruitvale’s cuisine—especially
the Tacos Sinaloa trucks, which serve
$5 burritos and $2 tacos. “You’ll see
lots of hipsters. It’s great they’re pro-
viding business.” But she wishes they’d
push past culinary consumerism:
“How do they respect the community
beyond saying, ‘Hey, this is a good
place with good tacos’?”

New residents and investment may be
changing North and West Oakland
quickly, but less transformation has
reached South and East. While crime
has dropped, Anciso and her school-
administrator husband have lost sev-
eral students to shootings. The hear-
breaking spurred their move to safer
Jack London Square. How’s her new
neighborhood? “Boring,” she admitted, with
both relief and guilt.

It also lacks Fruitvale’s diversity.
We passed an elderly Chinese woman
selling knickknacks, an Ethiopian
Orthodox priest whose blue robes
swep the surface of his church’s park-
ing lot, Chicano boys doing their
chores. Oh, and tacos: Anciso says the
ladies at St. Elizabeth Catholic Church
make the best, selling them after Mass
to raise money for the parish. But it’s
not Sunday, so we settle for Anciso’s
eyeday favorites, the tacos al pastor,
at Taqueria El Grullo.

EARLY ONE EVENING, I drove into the
Mountain View Cemetery—a prime
spot to watch the sun set over San
Francisco Bay. (Local secret: though
closing time is 7:30 p.m., the ceme-
try’s automated gates will still let you
out after hours.)

Accepting residents since 1869, the
223-acre cemetery is appropriately
diverse. It’s the permanent home of
five former California governors and
other Golden State giants—look
among the tombstones for the names
Ghirardelli, Kaiser, and Stanford. In
the southwestern corner is the
Strangers’ Plot. Hundreds were
buried in this redwood-shaded field
between 1865 and 1914: poor people,
people who committed suicide;
Chinese people who, because of laws
prohibiting Chinese immigration to
the United States, died alone, since
family couldn’t join them.

The man who chose the cemetery’s
cypresses and cedars was Frederick
Law Olmsted, designer of some of
America’s greatest parks. Driving up-
hill, I saw how the living use this land:
moms jogged with strollers, couples
walked with their dogs. Near the top of
the cemetery, I exited my car to stand
in the cool dusk. The sky looked like a
slo-mo lava lamp, all oranges, blues,
and pinks.

Driving downhill post-sunset, I felt
at peace—until I spotted a white
horse, its back open. Two people, pic-
nicking in full zombie makeup, stared
out at me. But it was early September,
not Halloween. In the gloaming, I
couldn’t see what they were eating, I
stepped on the gas and the horse dis-
appeared in the rearview mirror.

Later, thinking of the zombies, I
returned to the question of what’s real
in Oakland. “Real” can be code for “fa-
miliar.” Change—the unfamiliar,
the unexpected—can be jarring, even
threatening. But it also keeps a city,
this city, dynamic and alive to differ-
ent forms of beauty.

Today’s Oakland isn’t the one I
knew as a child. In many ways, that’s
wonderful. But it’s also incumbent on
recent arrivals—residents and visi-
tors alike—to acknowledge the past.
“Let’s love all of Oakland, even the
parts of it you may fear,” Dphrepnulezz
told me. “That’s what makes it
cool. That’s Oakland, baby.”

132