

## PREFACE

### ***GOLDEN GATE CONVERSATIONS***

People are living archives of the memories, incidents, stories and experiences that shape their neighborhoods. This organic, collective knowledge reflects complex neighbor relationships, and these nonlinear histories are everywhere, without clear beginnings and endings. When does the story of a place start? It all depends on who you talk to. In early 2015, I began to look for ways to gather and share Golden Gate's histories to understand the impacts of the area's recent changes. To do this, I needed to know people, and to get to know people, I had to build trust. Though I live in North Oakland and have for nearly 20 years, I'm still an outsider to the Golden Gate neighborhood. It was only after seeing me at four different community events that Laura, a longtime neighbor and activist, gave me an insider's contact list.

That sparked six months of candid conversations with diverse neighbors, black and white, female and male, new and old. Neighbors introduced me to other neighbors, resulting in this collection's 12 recorded conversations. These stories naturally offer no consensus; they are the palimpsest of this neighborhood's many life-cycles. Meetings in kitchens, living rooms and cafes revealed neighborly sagas big and small: the legacy of the crack epidemic and the rise of block clubs; the kindness of next-door neighbors in times of distress; the shift in demographics today, and in the 1950s; the role of dogs as protectors versus companions; why and where to build fences and how to pinpoint gentrification.

In 2015, *Communities' Crossing* was part of Print Public, Kala Art Institute's initiative to find a deeper connection with its surroundings. Located where Berkeley, Emeryville and Oakland meet, this 40-year old art-making hub offers professional facilities to artists working in and across print and digital media. Kala teamed up with UC Berkeley's College of Environmental Design, and provided me with the unique opportunity to partner with urban planner Anisha Gade to explore this region through the lens of creative place-making. *Communities' Crossing* unfolded as a series of unconventional programs to engage neighbors and share the area's histories: neighborhood walking discussions led by knowledge bearers; on-the-street improv performances based on collected stories; a gallery installation with video, large photo banners and signs displaying neighbors' messages.

As with many creative place-making projects, this one was concerned with this elusive yet overused concept of 'sense of place.' In these conversations, newcomers and longtime neighbors repeatedly expressed that 'sense of place' cannot be created or simply discovered. Understanding what makes a neighborhood distinct is essential, yet essentially intangible. It depends on a seasoned process of getting to know your neighbors.

Stories like these are easily lost. I am fortunate to have worked with the talented documentarian Matt Dibble, who filmed all of these conversations. Urged by neighbors to find a permanent form for these stories, we began to develop Commons Archive. I am indebted to the neighbors who shared their histories for this volume.

sm