

the importance of picking your neighborhood

a convo with Phil Levin, part 1



AVA

JUN 05, 2024

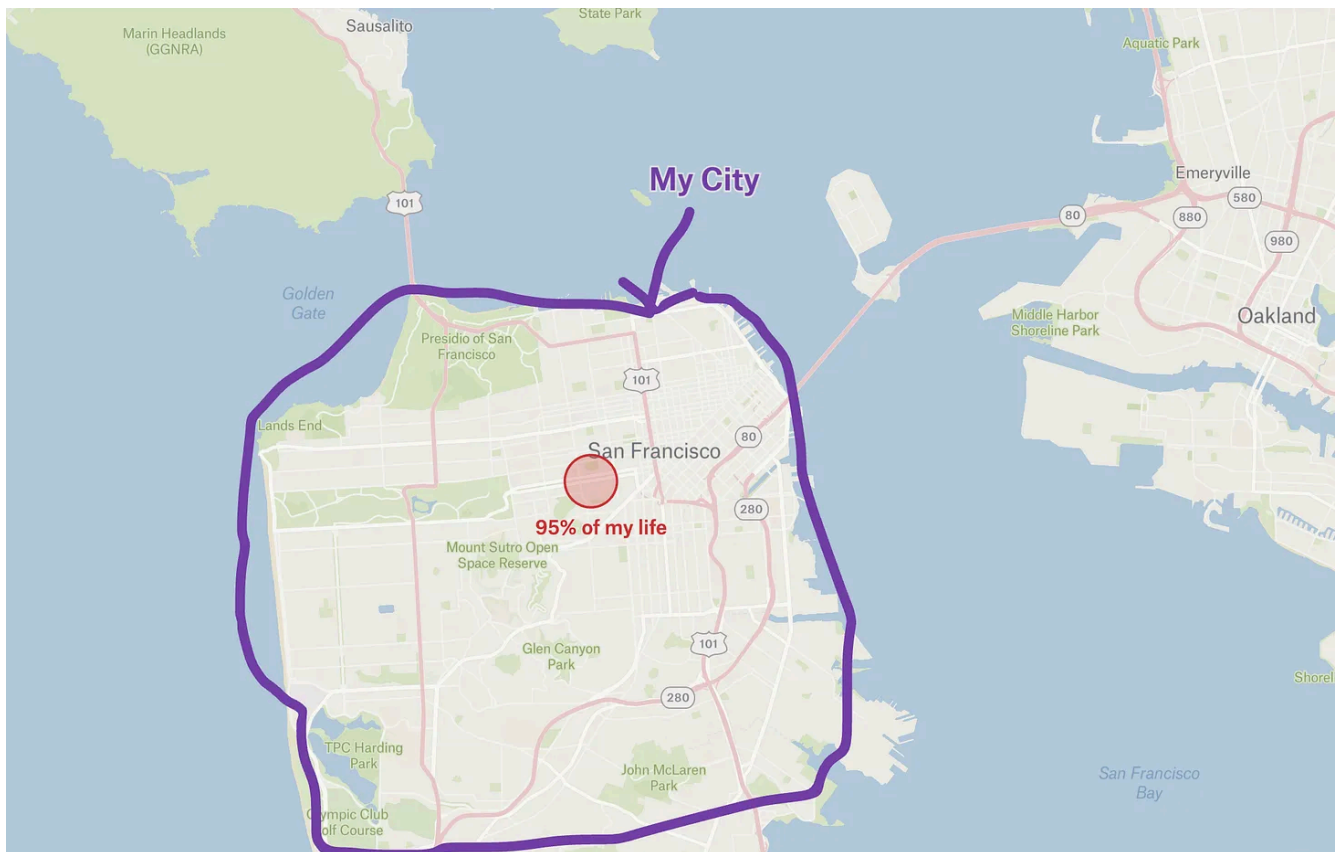


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Picture provided by Phil :)

Last year I moved back to San Francisco and ended up in the Lower Haight. I didn't put a huge amount of thought into it. I had gone to my friend R's housewarming a couple of months prior and noticed the area seemed nice—there were parks, which was convenient for my dog Akko, and there were several coffee shops. I looked at a couple of houses and exactly one apartment, and signed the lease a week later.

During my first stint in San Francisco from 2015-2020 I lived in many different parts of the city. Since I never signed a proper lease and was usually in a group house, I was free to bounce around as much as I wanted. I've lived in Nob Hill, Glen Park, SoMa, Potrero Hill, NoPa, the Mission, and Cole Valley from anywhere between a month to a year. I liked most of those places perfectly fine. There were things that bothered me about them, and things that I really liked. So I was really surprised to discover that I *loved* my new neighborhood.

I like that it's very walkable, it's close to the Panhandle and Golden Gate Park so it's great for running, there are multiple parks within 15 minutes of me, there are lots of good cafes and restaurants, and many of my friends live nearby. I didn't realize this when I moved in, but during the time when I was gone (2020-2023) many people I knew moved to this area. I think this is partially because of efforts like [The Neighborhood](#) and [The Commons](#), and partially because the area is a little more sedate than the Mission and SoMa, where a lot of people I knew lived in their early and mid-20s.

All this to say, my neighborhood choice has really affected my experience of San Francisco. So when I started chatting with Phil Levin, who founded [Live Near Friends](#) and [Radish](#), a multigenerational compound in Oakland with 20 adults and six children living across 10 homes, and he mentioned that **picking your neighborhood is more important than picking your city**, everything clicked into place.

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The things that Phil really said that stuck with me:

- You spend 1000x more time in your neighborhood than you do in other parts of the city, so it's weird to talk about your experience of "San Francisco" as a whole if you spend most of your time in one neighborhood.

- Because of this, picking your neighborhood really matters! Things within five blocks of your home will dominate your daily experience.
- Caring about your neighborhood will make you invest way more in it
- It's good to have institutions or communities that act as stepping stones for people to discover the neighborhood and realize that they care about it
- Group house culture as it exists in the Bay is fairly unique!

Below is my interview with him about the topic, edited for clarity:

Ava: I remember the last time we talked you made a great point about how people think, *I should move to New York or I should move to San Francisco*. And they're really considering the city as a whole, like *I should move because I have so many friends from college who live in New York*. They're not really thinking about whether their friends live in Queens or the Upper West Side or Bushwick. And when they actually move they'll pick a neighborhood based off of Redfin listings, what's convenient for work, price. There's not a lot of thought that goes in the neighborhood. And neighborhoods actually affect your experience so much. So I was curious about when you first started thinking about this and how you reached this conclusion.

Phil: So, the first thing I think of is that **you're going to spend 1000x more time in your surrounding 5 blocks than you will in any other neighborhood in your city**. And so thinking about all the things that New York City or next city has, is to me a lot less important than **thinking about the things within the five blocks where you live**. Most neighborhoods in your city you might never step foot in, they might as well be in the other side of the country. But **the things in your immediate vicinity are the things that are going to dominate your life**. So picking and influencing your neighborhood is really important. And the two big ways you can influence your neighborhood are one, determining who lives in your neighborhood by moving people there, something I am very biased on because I work on it. And two, improving your neighborhood.

We can think about the self as one unit of organization. And then you have the family unit as an unit of organization that people talk about a lot now. Strengthening the family unit has been a big conservative cause. But there's actually not a lot of people

who think about how you strengthen the neighborhood. And I want us as a society to pay more attention to that. I get the sense we used to and we've stopped doing that. I think that's sad, because **the neighborhood is an organizational unit determines quite a bit about our life and our happiness.**

Ava: Yeah. That strikes a chord with me, because both of us have probably lived in lots of different neighborhoods in the Bay Area. I've been all over, and picked places based mostly on which group houses had space available. So it's been very radical for me over the past year because I started living near Alamo Square. It's the first time in my adult life where I had this immediate sense of, I like this neighborhood, I want to commit to it. And the reasons are pretty simple. But it just feels very revolutionary to me, because it's so obvious when I say that--why wouldn't you care about your neighborhood?--but it's totally changed my experience of living in San Francisco. Now I have this conception of, I like this area I live in, I care about who's the supervisor for my district, I want to convince other friends to move here. I'm campaigning all of a sudden and I never in my life have been invested in a place in the way I am now. But it's making me realize a good way to select a neighborhood is thinking about **what would make me want to invest in a place?**

Phil: Yes, it's actually very beneficial for cities to have distinctive neighborhoods. First of all, it makes the place interesting. Second, it allows people to select into the place that most embodies their preferences and personality. I think it's kind of a bummer when neighborhoods end up with a "copy/paste" set of retail establishments and housing. My favorite places serve a variety of preferences, rather than just building for the median resident.

Ava: What has living in your current neighborhood been like?

Phil: Our experience has been that Radish itself is sort of a mini neighborhood that helps people integrate into the larger surroundings. So we've had people move both into Radish and as well as move near it because they want to be part of the Radish community. But, once they're here and once they're planted, and like once they sort of feel like this is their place that they started, they become more interested in investing in the larger neighborhood around them. So it's almost like a stepping stone. It sounds like group houses have maybe played that role for you?

Ava: I live on my own now, but I live within five blocks of multiple different friends. So it's pretty much as close to a group house as you can get without actually being in one.

Phil: I think it's important to have these institutions that give people a sort of first home within the neighborhood. Sometimes the neighborhood as a whole is almost too large and amorphous for someone to really grapple with at first. So I think Radish tries to be that first stepping stone where people get to know the neighborhood and before you know it they're planting trees on the sidewalk.

Ava: One of my friends was saying that the group house culture as it exists in San Francisco just doesn't seem to exist outside the Bay Area, in the sense of like, there are obviously group houses in other places, but I think it's quite rare for people with plenty of disposable income in other cities to say, *I would like to live in like a six bedroom house with other adults*. I don't know why that's the case here.

Phil: Yeah, I totally think it's one of my favorite things about the Bay Area, that people with resources choose to live together. I think it's because owning your own home is not as big of a status symbol here as it is in other cities, so people are free to make other decisions. To be clear, people in the Bay Area still play status games, they're just somewhat different from "I absolutely need to have my own house."

We talked about several more interesting things, including the **logistics of living with your friends** and **why you should do it**, but I'm trying to not make this post ten thousand words long so we'll cover that later.

Over the next few months I want to write more about friendships, group living, and the intersection of the two. **If you live in a group house (loosely defined, but probably eight of more people) with a distinct culture and want to talk to me about it**, please feel free to email me at avabearexpress@gmail.com. Thank you!



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Hannah Soupy Phase Jun 6

Rings true. You should read the Supernuclear Substack if you haven't!

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Khoi Jun 6

Recently moved within an eight minute walk to one of my best friends and it has immensely strengthened our friendship. The sheer proximity allows us to see each other 4-5 times a week! That number eclipses the amount of time we saw each other in one calendar year!

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