

# Opinion: Kafka can't believe California housing

By Frank Kafka (as told to Joe Mathews)

I keep hearing you Californians calling your state's housing crisis Kafkaesque.

You are far too kind: I never imagined a nightmare this cruel, absurd, and surreal.



Joe Mathews

I don't know exactly how I got to California. But I appeared here some weeks ago, in the form of an insect, like my protagonist in "The Metamorphosis." And I'm glad I did. If I'd known weather like this in my lifetime, I might not have died of tuberculosis in Prague in 1924 at age 40.

In my prime, I was a master of conveying oppressive and intangible systems that trap humans. California, and its housing markets, do indeed fit that bill. But I couldn't have conceived of a wealthy and beautiful place of 40 million people that claims it is welcoming to the whole world, while refusing to house people.

You Californians talk a big game about how you support the environment. But by a surreal trick, the laws that supposedly protect the environment also make it so difficult to build housing—especially near your transit hubs—that housing is

pushed to the periphery, where environmental costs are higher.

And while I am proud of my ability to create nightmares of labyrinthine illogic, I never managed to dream of anything so diabolical as your California Environmental Quality Act. One lawyer, Jennifer Hernandez, writes about CEQA with scary flair: "Imagine spending five years and \$5 million to defend against a lawsuit challenging a plan for where to put critically needed housing and related public services—and then to get sued again, and again, and again, and again, for trying to implement the plan ...."

That surpasses my most chilling passages!

Californians have forgotten just how fundamental housing is—not merely as shelter from life's cruelties but as a space to think. As I once wrote, "It is not necessary that you leave the house. Remain at your table and listen .... The world will present itself to you for its unmasking, it can do no other, in ecstasy it will writhe at your feet."

I portrayed the paradoxical isolation of an overcrowded city in "The Trial." Your state is reminiscent of that, but at an overwhelming scale—of escalating homelessness and an estimated shortage of 2.5 million homes.

And oh, the terrible price you pay! I had some real health problems in my life—migraines, insomnia, constipation, boils, and clinical depression. But your housing crisis is making you sicker than I ever was.

Millions of you have moved far from your jobs to find affordable housing that suits your family, but now your commutes are ruining your health. I know about commuting—while writing literature, I worked for insurance companies—but I couldn't imagine the traffic or the hyper-crowded BART cars you endure.

All these pressures can put households in, well, Kafkaesque predicaments. I know about families—my father was a tyrant. In my story “The Judgment” a father won’t make any room in the world for his son, who jumps off a bridge.

But many younger Californians can’t even have a child. So many of you delay marriage and child-rearing (in part because you can’t afford a home) that your state’s birth rate is at the lowest level ever recorded. And good luck educating kids while paying your giant mortgages. Your schools don’t capture the full value of today’s high housing values because you have constitutionally limited your property taxes.

Housing makes most of you prisoners in your own homes. Yes, I once described an apartment as a prison in my unfinished novel “Amerika.” But by not building enough housing you’ve created such a run-up in prices that most of you couldn’t afford the place where you’re currently living if it came on the market.

Even worse, the ideas that your state officials propose (Mandatory solar! Affordable housing requirements! Rent control!) would only make housing more costly. When listening to your legislators, I thought of an old line of mine: “It’s only because of their stupidity that they’re able to be so sure of themselves.”

If you don’t address the crisis more forcefully, I fear you Californians will lose your taste for your sweet land, just as the salesman-turned-insect in “The Metamorphosis” loses his taste for his favorite foods: bread and milk.

I’d suggest that Californians read my posthumously published novel “The Castle,” in which the protagonist K arrives in a village but can’t get the permission to live there.

I never wrote the ending, but I planned to have the village grant him the right to have a home only when he was on his death bed.

California, do you really want an ending as Kafkaesque as that?

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