A California Passegiata

Every Sunday morning, San Francisco’s Parks and Recreation Department sets up barriers across Golden Gate Park’s John F. Kennedy Drive, barring automobile traffic for half its length. The wide, elegant roadway, conceived as a carriage drive for polite society but disused during the week as a commuter cut through, becomes an hustle-stirring artery of self-propulsion, an agora of the American obsession with movement. The street becomes the vibrating, energizing spine of this 1,000-acre, nineteenth-century pleasure ground—all because the city skips its nervous Nellying about defining and loser the convivial action hip. The asphalt is seized by a swelling surge of bicyclists, inline skaters, trolley riders, skateboarders, roller skaters, bike racers, runners and their prolific variations. In the byways, the disco skaters, ad hoc skaters and street hockey players rink, and the brave and smark, entertaining spectators who occupy the natural theaters formed by the picturesque topography. The kids are out, too, carefully watched by parents, egg crated in helmets, elbow protectors, and knee pads, demonstrating their splayed-leg task of expertise on skates or trundling along on training wheels, indulged in the illusion of independence.
The paths that parallel the roadway are filled with amazed onlookers—parents propelling baby carriages, interlinked elderly couples, strollers who seek the security and warmth of numbers and wide-eyed tourists. Some of the edging meadows capture weekly habitues of communal athleticism: backyuck players and jugglers who kick and flip under particular Monterey cypresses; volleyballers who shoot from an exception-ally wind-sheltered enclosure, Wiffle ball and Frisbee players. Other meadows, less proprietary, harbor the eddies of the human tide the quietly weaved observance of the few: parents and children who recognize each other from school and neighbor-hood, drinking juice and checking for injuries; families picnicking on broad blankets; and lounging lovers willing to be distracted from each other by sleek athletes.

The hot exoticism of the rose garden, the rhododendron dell, the conservatory and the fern forest bejewels the roadway and gives satisfaction to the veterans of flower shows and garden clubs, families in their Sunday best posing for the picture to send Far East or back East, and the plump ladies who mini the aiter back in Rossinot one bit. At the pedestrian underpass near the conservatory, instead of the lurking danger we have come to associate with such places, the civili-izing serenity of live music, acoustically resonant in the arching tunnel, lulls an audience crowded cheek to cheek. In the morning the music flows from a sparkling jazz trio, in the afternoon from a Middle Eastern, New Age ensemble with a horn-dressed, dark-headed Fabio who sits the juices of at least three quarters of his audience.

An ample, curving roadway, set amidst the generous pastoral of easy undulating lawns and the arcs of sheltering tree groves simply structure this antithetical, savvy sociability. People can make it their own—with heat, happiness and the inevitable West coast—left coast hiphers. The speed and the risk are unfettered yet there are generous, genial havens in the invis-ible lines of demarcation, mutually agreed upon by the tacit negotiations of urban life, socializing habits, and the salubrious effect of shared pleasures. The spaces layer up and everyone, including the elderly, the young and the less than Spon-dex-ready, finds a place to be.