

Never Back to School

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When guests came to visit us at Stanford, they'd always comment on the beauty of our campus — the copious greenery, the modern decorations, the classic architecture. I used to take them at their word. I always thought Stanford was a very pretty campus. Now I realize that it was merely bright.

Coming back to Stanford after living in San Francisco is an odd experience, because the place seems so obviously much more fake. You don't notice when you're in it, but Stanford is a real wonder of a bubble. Surrounded by a moat of trees, it pretends to be its own self-sufficient city, complete with its own name (Stanford, California is not technically a city, but only a "census-designated place"; it has its own zip code, nonetheless). It has its own food, housing, public transit system, gas station (this is California), police force, job openings, newspaper, and events calendar. Most large universities have such things, of course, but they mesh with and supplement the outside world. At Stanford, despite being in the center of Silicon Valley, you'd hardly know the outside world existed.

Everything here is immaculately clean. There is rarely weather, just constant sun from a cloudless sky (the sky kindly rains only at night so as not to disturb anyone). There are no outsiders, just scrupulously examined teachers, carefully selected students, and well-behaved maintenance staff (who are not paid a living wage, despite the protests of generous-minded students).

Coming back to Stanford, wandering its august halls once again, it feels so strange. I lived here for a full year; this should feel like coming home. But while I recognize it all — not much changed while I was gone — it doesn't feel like home at all. Everything seems, well, smaller.

Part of that, obviously, is literally true: I'm physically bigger now, so things seem smaller in comparison. But it also feels psychologically smaller, like after living in San Francisco I can no longer accept this simulated city as a reality. Instead, I'm constantly seeing it in its context in the wider world.

The result is that everything feels like a bizarre show, played out on this phony stage. Beautiful guys in pajamas, talking to beautiful girls in less. Party music blaring. Kids scooting elegantly by on bicycles. Before I just thought this was the strange reality of the world I was dropped into. Now I see it as just another act.

I went to the top of the large tower in the middle of the Stanford campus, something I'd never found the time to do while I was a student. And looking

out, the school splayed before me, I noticed something odd. The beautiful Stanford buildings, so varied and complex at ground level, all look like big red rectangles from the sky. Perhaps Stanford is one of those things you really have to be in to genuinely see.