

The Boomtown Chronicles: Reflections On a Changing California

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**Transcript: Interview with James Houston, Author
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~James Houston Interview~

JAMES HOUSTON: And they figured something out you know, cause they've got family connections and the parents know people.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Do you mind if I tape whatever we talk about and I'll edit it massively later.

JAMES HOUSTON: You know after you've lived in a region awhile, you know a banker, you know a mortgage lender, you know a broker, you can help your family members navigate through this whole business of finding an affordable rental or finding an affordable piece of land. They've got a support system, and in fact you know I think most of the world works that way. The thing about California is, it's such a mobile place, there's so much in migration in and out, it's very rare, it's atypical for a family to be here into the third generation. Where as in India or in Japan we met people in Japan, this woman we went to dinner with one night, she invited us to her house. She was the first person in her family that had moved from the farm into the city. Her family had been on the same piece of land in Southern Japan for a thousand years. So when you've been there for a thousand years you know a lot of ways to survive, you know a lot of ways to manage whatever the reality is there. But so many people are coming into California for the first time, and are constantly having to reinvent the process of survival, and it makes it, I think, different from most places in the world, most people, you know, their families have been there for many generations. So it's interesting to think about California as a place where people have to figure out the real estate problem for the first time, I'm just thinking out loud now, but it occurs to me, that, that around the world, and in the history of the world, that's not a common situation, people tend to stay where their families have been for generations, and, you know there's something on the side of a building or something on the side of a piece of land and they figure it out.

RACHEL GOODMAN: How do you think, that's changed? I mean, you've been here for 40 years, that wasn't always the case really when this place was first getting settled and before the university came in.

JAMES HOUSTON: When we moved here in 1962, the population was obviously much smaller, but the demography was much different. Percentage wise, more older families, a lot more families had been here awhile, m, across the county, and, and a higher percentage of a lot of retired people had retired here. But was assessed as a low budget area. I mean this is a Victorian house, three stories, we got the whole place for 75 dollars a month, because it hadn't even been occupied for 3 years it was empty nobody wanted to live in it, it was in danger of being torn down, old buildings like this were kind of a nuisance and people wanted to get rid of them. So you could live here really marginal, what's called margin. It was easy to be on the margin. I was probably making

400 dollars a month, so seventy-five was less than 20 percent of my income. So even that way, it's all, it was a totally different world, But a lot people had been here into the third or fourth generation at that time. What's changed percentage wise over the years, it's hard to find, that's no longer the norm, and the exception is if you've been here for 15 years you're a veteran

RACHEL GOODMAN: And what does that do to the fabric of the to have so many new people, trying to get to know each other, and trying to get to know the place, how does that change the sort of fabric, and the sort of tenor of the times.

JAMES HOUSTON: Well you know, SC is an interesting place because, one of the reasons people are drawn here, even, even with today's inflated real estate market, they're still drawn to this place and the benefits of this region, you know, you don't move to Santa Cruz, for professional advantage, if you're after professional advantage if you're after professional advantage you go to LA you go to Chicago you go to new York, or you know depending on what industry you might be in. But you don't come to Santa Cruz for professional advantage, everybody who lives here they want to make a living, but they don't necessarily want to make a killing. They'll go someplace else if they want to make a killing. So there's that kind of, I've found that over the years, that kind of continuity to the population You meet somebody who's in a totally different line of work who's doing something that he may not even approve of, but they love being here, they love this place, and that runs across the economic spectra from people who are living in the back of somebody's garage, to somebody who's living at the top of the hill in a 3 story estate. There's something about this place that draws, people who, for whom place itself is, is a priority and a value

RACHEL GOODMAN: As CA grows and the big sprawl kind of rolls across the valleys and hillsides, the placeness of places is getting wiped out, in a lot of ways, it's getting homogenized. There's a big movement toward that right now, and the effort to just build as many houses as possible to fit the demand. How does the central coast fit into that kind of change sweeping the nation, I know we have managed to hang onto the character of this town, and there are other towns that have too, in our area but now all of them. so I was wondering if you could reflect a little bit on how the central coast either fits that pattern or doesn't fit it, and the placeness of displacing. If you will, if I'm getting at the right thing.

JAMES HOUSTON: (Laughing) well, to live in a really pleasing location like SC, it's a blessing and a curse, cause you come here, you fall in love with the place, and there are the waves behind you. Who are also falling in love with the place. And They want to settle here, they want to live here, they want to be here, and there's always that debate about where's the saturation point, how long can this continue, and we've had what they call a no growth or slow growth mood in the boards of supervisors in the county, and the city council for years and years, and there's some people who ring there hands and say it's too late for slow growth, and even with slow growth the population of the county has multiplied by 4 or 5 times in the last 25 years, what would happen if we had had fast growth, there wouldn't be anything left it's a strange kind of irony that the more desirable

the place, the more endangered it is, especially here on the coast That's one of the reasons the property prices keep going up because the, the, the, the housing, the available housing can't keep up with the demand, and there's all kinds of you know, you go down to the city council, and listen to a housing proposal come before the county, and all the people come in to protest it because their view rights are going to be endangered, or their, their, the place where they have their organic garden is going to be endangered, or their traffic patterns are going to be endangered, and you have endless battles going on, every proposal for a new, a new housing unit is resisted and resisted and resisted, but even with that, the rate of growth is phenomenal, and there comes a point where you do reach that saturation point and, the place is no longer the place, you know I've watched this in Santa Cruz. When we first moved here in 1962 we didn't plan to stay more than 3 or 4 years. Because we had just come over, I had just gotten out of graduate school at Stanford, and we had been living on the peninsula for 4 years, and watching what was going on, on the peninsula, and we thought it would only be a matter of time before SC would be overwhelmed by the forces that were already on the rise in Santa Clara valley and up and down the peninsula, and so we figured SC is a great spot now, let's go over and get some of it while we can, but it's not going to last long, but that was 1962, and we're still here, (laughing) because relative to everything else that's going on, relative to now, you have to put up with in Santa Clara valley or Palo alto or a lot of other places that have been overwhelmed, SC still looks pretty good.

RACHEL GOODMAN: There's a song by Nancy Griffith that says "the heart of every town is the people that you know and that always call your friend, and it used to be, for awhile I would walk downtown and see scads of people I knew, and now it's bigger and they're more diluted, and I still see them, but that feeling you know, and the people like yourself who, are here, who make this what it is. It's the people who make this an interesting place, and it's a very creative and dynamic place full of people who revel in being original. And that makes it very worth living to me, but I wonder, is that changing or is it that still there?"

JAMES HOUSTON: Well, it's still here. You know SC has that reputation for at least being open to, kind of inventive lifestyles (laughing) and adventures of one kind or another, this bumper sticker that circulates now "Keep SC Weird", (Laughing) it, that's, there's something dangerous about that, but at the same time, it's kind of wonderful, because it really catches something that's right in the spirit of this town ever since the 60's. , it wasn't always that way. When we first moved over here it was mostly retirement people, and trailer court people, and people didn't want to be disturbed by anything. It was like a little mid-western resort town. Then the University opened, and then the counter culture, you had this huge influx of people from all over the place, just spilling into SC by the 100's and by the 1000's. That's when the current kind of flavor and mix of, of the county began to take its shape. It's not that long ago, we're talking 35, 40 years ago, 35 years ago.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Right, you look at those old pictures of SC, and it looks like any mid-western town, the founding fathers at the bank, and everyone's dressed very conservatively, and they're serious about what they're doing, the bankers and the

business owners, and, there's that side of the history, but then there's another side of this history of this county, the ethnic groups coming in and being part of that, and you know, I know G. Dunn's written about that and Sandy Lide, and people like that, and that appreciation of what's gone before us, I didn't get till much later living here, it took me a long time to realize where I was, and I don't know that new comers are getting that either. The appreciation for you know, all the different changes and waves that have come through here and changed it in their own way as they come through. And I don't know, you know, if you feel that too, that people come, there's not an induction saying here's where you are.

JAMES HOUSTON: No I think that's true. I think that's true not only here but all over California. California has a great history a really interesting history, but most people who live here, don't know much about it, because they're so recently arrived. , I mean it helps to have an uncle whose been here, or two uncles who have been here, or a grandfather whose been here, and a grandfather with just something as simple as weather memory, who can say oh yea, yea, we had a little bit of flood here this year, but you should have been here in 1956, that's when we really had a flood. So then you don't have to join a support group to get over the flood. You just go talk to your grandfather. There's a sense of history in a family, but if you're new here, and you've only been here for 10 or 15 years, and you're from another country, you're not going to have any sense of California. SC, Santa Barbara, San Francisco, whatever, it takes awhile to absorb all that stuff. And that's that's one of the interesting features, ironic features of California, cause I hear people from other parts of the country say well California doesn't have a history. It's just kind of this superficial floating place. It has a fantastic history that shaped, in several ways shaped the history of the rest of the US, and it takes awhile to, to find that, to learn that, and SC is a little microcosm of that. Great history here of Italian American population. You go down to Watsonville you have Japanese American families who have been there into their fourth generation, fifth generation, they're not very public figures, they don't write articles, they don't make a big thing about what they do, but they've been there, and they're real solid salt of the earth people, and you have a lot of histories here that make up cultural mix, and professional mix, and it just takes awhile to be here and enter down into the place and pay attention to what's going on.

RACHEL GOODMAN: A lot of writers have written about this, and I know you have done anthologies of these same authors who have come to grips, trying to come to grips with that California dream, what is it being sold to people coming in and how does that change how they relate to this place when they get here. And part of that seems to be the common denominator, shed your history and come reinvent yourself, that people might come here and not be that interested in history would make some sense if they were getting away from the restricting part of their own past and their own traditions.

JAMES HOUSTON: Well that's exactly right. A lot of people to this day are leaving history behind, sometimes a painful history, come times a painful family history, or a painful national history, and California is still by a lot of people thought of as somewhere where you can begin again, or start over, to be a different person or another person, so there's a lot of reinvention, reinventing yourself, reinventing your family reinventing

your history, and also when you're a new comer, especially, we've got all these people coming in from foreign countries, , there first concern is survival, of getting a foot hold, getting enough money to have a car, to have a piece of property. , you know usually you don't have time to read van crofts history of the west, they want to make sure they get promoted and get a foot hold here, and that's true into the first into the second generation. Just survival itself is where a lot of people are for a long, long time. I know that was true when my dad, you know my dad came out here from west Texas during the depression, and he was a hard working guy, he came out here with zero money, and by the beginning of WWII he was a painting contractor in San Francisco, and he had his own business and heh had 5 guys working for him, but he wasn't a particular introspective or intellectual guy, so he didn't know anything about California, his whole life, because of his hard work, because he was out there every day, bringing home the bacon, I had the leisure and the privilege to get a good education and go to a couple of good schools and find an interest in where I grew up. But, you know but that's the second generation is granted that by the labors of the third generation.

RACHEL GOODMAN: and sometimes it takes 2 or 3 before they look around them to see where they are.

JAMES HOUSTON: Absolutely, yea that's it. That's exactly it.

RACHEL GOODMAN: So with the majority of people being new to this area, to the central coast to California in general, because I think, I read somewhere a pretty alarming statistic, that the majority here are the first generation, or are just moving here in their adult years, how do the old families, like the Italian Americans or the Japanese Americans that have been here for 4 or 5 generations, how do they communicate to the new people, or is there any dialogue that can happen to say "this is an amazingly special place, and it has a history. And when you look around you, you might not see it, but how can we make that dialogue happen in a way that introduces the new comers to the old history or at least gets them to acknowledge they might be entering a fabric and not a blank slate?

JAMES HOUSTON: Wow, that's, that's an interesting question Rachel I don't know

RACHEL GOODMAN: It's fantasy hahaha

JAMES HOUSTON: I don't know if there is. I have to think about that. I don't know if there's a way to think about that.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Well there are separate places, I mean Watsonville's got a circle around it, SC, and Salinas, between never shall meet, and so you have this completely bifurcated region that's been botched together on a map. I don't think we talked to each other even over in Salinas this evening.

JAMES HOUSTON: No you don't and you get this type of tribal mentality. Tribes take all kinds of different shapes, and sometimes their the older families, see themselves as a

tribe and they cling together because they have common interests, and they don't want to get too entangled with people who are just passing through. One of the things that's true about California you know people from other places say we have this instant kind of conviviality because you're always meeting people who you have never met before, so you have, we have, techniques for appearing to be, to get acquainted instantly, but at the same time you're prepared for everyone to disappear, because you may never see them again, especially in a place like SC, you don't know how long anyone is going to be here, and you tend to be, because we're westerners we want to be accessible and friendly, but at the same time as a long time resident you learn to be sort of, a little bit guarded, because there's so much transience, there's so much in and out migration, and if you've chosen a place and you know you're going to be here, I don't think. It's interesting to think about that, you know, how far do you want to extend yourself, toward people who said, just moved into town and I love it here, embrace me and accept me, there's a reluctance to do that, and how do you cross those, I don't know if you can, you know my work is writing, I have written a lot about California history, and I've written a lot about SC and SC history, and I hope people can read that stuff, and it opens up windows here and there about perception, but

RACHEL GOODMAN: But you make a very interesting point about the old timers versus the new comers, they have a commorodiry (SP) of transience among themselves, that says I'm just here, yea you're here but we're not going to be here long, but they haven't taken a stand for this place yet in their minds. It changes the way you relate to a place.

JAMES HOUSTON: I remember talking to a woman from Arlington VA, and she was from an old Arlington family, and I said it must be exciting being this close to Washington DC, and she said almost anyone can get elected to office, (Laughing>>>) You never know. She said people come in and out of the white house like it's a revolving door, and we have our, our community here in Arlington.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Well, I had an interesting experience being a Californian moving to Kentucky to the eastern Kentucky hills, where the families go back you know 10 generations, they go back to the pioneers, and they can trace it all the way back to the Indians, and so to them you would never ask them what they do you would ask you who are you related to, who are your family, I've never heard of your family name before, and that was all important in fact is who you're related to, and they did, and if you're grandfather did something wrong, you're doomed.

JAMES HOUSTON: NO, that's exactly right, in the south family is everything and I remember I made a pilgrimage back to Tennessee. My grandmother is from the Oberlin Mountain region of Tennessee. And really mountain people and they're still there. When I went there some of my grandmothers first cousins were still alive. And they'd been there into the 10th generation. Here I was from CA. The first person they had seen from Ca, they didn't care where I was from or how I got there, I was Nor's Grandson that was it. All doors open. We had great meals great time, great fun. They didn't have to know anything else about me. I was Nora's grandson. And, that, whereas out here, you want to

know, how long have you been here, where do you live, what are you doing, things like that. You know families way down on the list a lot of the time.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Well because they're nowhere near here. And so it doesn't impact their lives, it must when they come here, come with them in some sense, but it's not immediate in their lives.

JAMES HOUSTON: I think and it depends in part on whom you are talking to. If I run into, I was born in SF, but my families from Texas and Alabama. And if I meet anyone from Texas Alabama or Georgia, we immediately start talking about you know where you're from, where'd you go to school, floating around trying to find some realm of friendship, cause that's what you do in the south, you find out if you're related or not and who knows whose family. And my wife does the same. My wife's background is Japanese. And all the Japanese in CA they, most, almost all of them, they have families that go back to a couple counties in southern Japan. . They all came over here you know some time between 1895 and mid 1920's and she can sit down and within 2 minutes figure out what county you are from and what the family name is and who do you know and it's all interconnected. But she doesn't talk about that with anybody who's not of Japanese background because it's meaningless, but if you're from that background you immediately have that conversation to jump into. Otherwise you're just another Californian trying to figure out another range of connection points.

RACHEL GOODMAN: I wonder if that explains why people join so many groups like their yoga group, or virtual communities, or you know they get involved with a particular cause and that's their family and that's their network, but it's not the same cause you know when you're in bed with some fatal disease they're not going to come around your bedside.

JAMES HOUSTON: It's true, it's interesting, the blood ties are the strongest ties, but at the same time, people are out here in CA, not only here, but I think it's typical here to be looking for that other family, the family of the heart, the family of the common belief, that new network of kinship that replaces the blood family. Cause you know, in the older, like back in Texas, or Arkansas, or Alabama, got families back there that's been there for 10 12 generations, and that gets kind of stultifying, and claustrophobic, and everybody knows everything, if your grandfather did something to somebody, or your great grandfather did something during the civil war, nobodies forgotten that. If they're still fighting it, and they still hold it against your great grandfather, we'll see. It might be like that, one of those black-Irish types HAAAA. But out here, all bets are off, you're starting over, and nobody knows what your grandfather did during the civil war and nobody cares, so there's a kind of trade off there. If you find that second family, that new kinship, that's a wonderful thing. I've got a new network of people that are my allies, they're not blood kin, but as a kind of ultimate family that gives me a lot of nourishment. CA's good that way. This part of California.

RACHEL GOODMAN: So bringing it back around to the house thing and how that ties into your history. I'm sitting here in this house thinking how much history is here. A lot

of history here. And how that feeds your sense of? (*Unclear in Tape*) ...ness and you know connection back and forward in a community, whereas when you're living in a tract home somewhere, that's hard, it's not the home place, it's not what I think where hands have invested in an actual physical site. Their history becomes invested in the way they build and you know the way they stay. Only long run, of the trees their growing, maybe their grandfather planted, that history as made physical, and how do these transient people just moving in, they're wanting that, but they have to create it somewhere

JAMES HOUSTON: Well that sense of place is a very elusive thing. And , most people now a days they live in cities something like 80 percent of the national percent is urban. And if you're living in downtown LA on the 18th floor of a bunch of condo apartments, surrounded. ...Graphic, it's hard to, I would think, you know, have a passion and sense of place. You have a sense of other stuff, but that sense of place, being attached to my habitat, you know, that's, , I think most people in America now don't have a sense of place, cause you have to, a lot of it has to do with being wherever you are over time, you know, and having enough time to get a lot of different kinds of roots running down, you know, we're lucky. We've been, I grew up in San Francisco, and, and then my family moved down to Santa Clara Valley and then after a few other things happened my wife and I moved over here to Santa Cruz, so I haven't gone very far, I've traveled around all over the place, but most of my life has been spent, over half my life has been spent right here in this house, you know, we've been in this house since 1962 so, and this house itself has a great history but that's sort of unique, the house next door doesn't have much of a history, it was subdivided off the land that came with this house and was built in 1960, so that house was built forty years ago and , that house, architecturally, with all due respect to my neighbor, you know, in terms of its relationship to the region, isn't a very, it's a very different kind of building than this one, for instance, you look around we're talking about the, , material, , you got all this paneling and this, this turned wood doweling that's made out of heart redwood from Big Basin, right back around the turn of the twentieth century, well, you know, if you just think about trees like that, the age of those trees, the age of that wood, the relationship of those trees to the terrain, bringing that wood into a building, you know, and then you're sitting around surrounded by that kind of, , I don't know, ancient forest material, that's got to do something to you, you know, at the cellular level over time, I would think.

RACHEL GOODMAN: I would think too, surrounded by the ancients all the time. (Laughing) yes.

JAMES HOUSTON: Like gravity in certain areas whereas if it's some kind of composition board (laughing) and cement block and all the stuff that a lot of houses have been, you know, they make great shelters with, I'm just thinking, you know, in terms of just the chemistry level that's one kind of history, but the other thing is, is you know, an old pioneer family lived in this house for quite a number of years that links right to the, to the settling 0of the American West.

RACHEL GOODMAN: That's one of the Donner party yep, this woman who was one of the Donner Party survivors, she lived here at the end of her life.

JAMES HOUSTON: That's how I got inspired to write my last novel, but it all had the story, that novel was here inside the house, you know, in a strange way, and I just had to be here long enough to hear it, and... (Laughing) , speak out of the walls to you. Speaking out the walls, you know, and so you know we got this mirror over the fireplace and that's built into the house that hasn't gone anywhere since the house was built, that's a hundred-year-old mirror, and I can look in that mirror and I can think, "wow, Patty Reid looked in this mirror."

RACHEL GOODMAN: Maybe she's looking out at you. Maybe she's looking out. I mean I wonder if, is there a way that mirrors can kind of invisibly hold the reflections of all the images that they have perceived? I don't know. If we could unlock that... if these walls could talk! (Laughing) if mirrors could open their eyes, open their windows, anyway, you know, that's another kind of history that's part of the blessing of being in a place like this, cause the house is so old, that it's, that, you know two or three interesting families have been in here, and then they leave their , resonance behind.

JAMES HOUSTON: Their mark, their legacy, something like that.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Yes but, you know, not all house... There are a lot of old buildings in Santa Cruz that have great histories, and there are a lot of old buildings in San Francisco that have great histories.

RACHEL GOODMAN: a lot of stories behind them, it's true, well, if we were to discuss this region to the rest of California, which is part of what I'm going to try to do with this story, what would we tell them about, how quintessential are we on the central coast to the California experience? I know we're kind of this hog pog melting pot of a little of everything, but we do have sprawl going on, we also have this place that's trying to hang on to its history, and then we have all these pockets of ethnic groups all over, so are we in the middle, right here in the middle where the most expensive place to live? What does that tell the rest of California about themselves that there's this place in its center like this.

JAMES HOUSTON: Well, there's a lot of stuff going on here I think that, that's going on around the state in various ways, you know, Santa Cruz is inside California, is perceived as a desirable location, and a lot of the property owning pressure is coming over the hill from Silicon Valley, where a lot of money is made, and there is a lot of two income families that want to, that can afford to come up with a down payment on a house over here, and they come over from Silicon Valley. They want the work in Silicon Valley cause that's where the jobs and the money are, but they don't want to live there, they want to live in a more, benign place so they want to have a spot in Santa Cruz, and you know, I a way that's a kind of microcosm for one of the ways that people see the state of California, they see the state of California as a desirable place to be, even though the state budget is in ruins right now, there's an enormous amount of money in this state. The

state's economy on a world chart is still up there, you, know, seventh or eighth, I'm not entirely sure why that, why not enough money of that money gets to Sacramento but, that's another problem. The state has a huge amount of money, the state is an enormous magnet for people from all over the world. They say that of all the legal immigration into the United States, no matter where people, no matter where their first destination might be, one fourth of the legal immigrants end up in California, so, you know, that's a huge, that's a huge parcel in the state of California, at the growth level, we all talk about the growth level, but when you think of the actual numbers everyday the net increase is about somewhere between twelve and fourteen hundred people everyday, today, tomorrow, the next day, next week, twelve to fourteen hundred people everyday, and that's been going on since 1940, you know, this is not new. California began to grow at the rate of a thousand people a day just before the outbreak of World War II, and it's been growing at least a thousand people a day for sixty four years, but bow it's like twelve hundred, fourteen hundred people a day, and there's no indication that that's going to stop.

RACHEL GOODMAN: So we're living in a constant state of growth?

JAMES HOUSTON: Constant state of growth, and it's a perpetuate, yeah, and it hasn't ended, it's been going on and it hasn't ended and, so California you know, continues to be this place that magnetizes other from all directions, and, so you get this here in Santa Cruz, you get this pressure on the real estate because it's a desirable place, and at a larger level you get the pressure, the same kind of pressure all over California, you got shrinking amounts of agricultural land in the Central Valley because a decision is that, , people are more important than crops, and you have the same thing, we watch the same thing happen in the Santa Clara Valley in the 60's and 70's. When I was in high school in the Santa Cara Valley that was the world's biggest orchard, six million fruit trees, but over time it became clear to the people who owned the land, even the ranchers and the orchard people that there was more money in real estate than there was in fruit, and so no more fruit trees, and we're watching the same thing going on in the Central Valley, and as long as the population continues to proliferate, as it does, you sort of have a no win situation.

RACHEL GOODMAN: It also seems that people are willing to do almost anything to live here and have somewhat of a rose colored glasses on when they're willing to accept driving two hours each way to get to a job just to live in California, but they don't have any time to enjoy it anymore.

JAMES HOUSTON: (Laughing) That's right, that's exactly right, a lot of people live her in Santa Cruz, and they'll drive an hour and a half each way, which is extended by who knows how long any time there is one accident on highway seventeen, in either direction, so, yeah, it's a, it's a hard call, a hard call, and I don't know, either something has to happen in the transportation area or something has to happen in the immigration area, but if we want to accommodate the numbers of people who will continue to come in here, , we're going to continue to lose open space and continue to lose agricultural space, and there's no way around it, that's the trade-off.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Now our group of planners and visionaries who talk about smart growth and that its packing people in a little closer and preserving open space to a greater degree, but that's certainly not going to solve it if you have that many people coming in, it's still not going to meet their needs, but it seems like a smarter way to go than to just simply make suburbs from here all the way to the Sierras.

JAMES HOUSTON: Well, it's true, it's true, the sprawl model is under a lot of attack these days because that has huge problems connected with it, not only the gobbling up of space, but, the fact that people live farther out in the suburbs, they're just driving miles and miles and miles every day, every week to get to the markets, to get to the malls, to get to work, you know, there's more driving, there's more gas consumed, there's more pollutants that get released into the atmosphere, whereas if you somehow can concentrate growth so people are closer to transportation hubs and stuff like that you solve a lot of problems. So, yeah, but there's a lot of resistance to that too. What I think, you know, smart growth, I've read a lot about that and That seems to be the lesser of the nervous evils (laugh).

RACHEL GOODMAN: What about the optimism level, I mean right now you say we're going through this horrible time with state budget crisis and then things shutting down schools just bankrupt, I mean, this is not a good time to be a Californian, but we've always been infected with a relentless optimism that things are going to get better, and it seems like since Prop 13 they haven't been getting very good, but you still see that optimism, where does that come from, I mean why is it so Californian?

JAMES HOUSTON: (Laugh) Well look, read the paper, I talked to my friend in Minnesota, you know, I got a friend who lives in Northfield, Minnesota, teaches at Carleton College, and he's a California guy, and I don't know, I talk to him last month, and you know the snow was up to the top of his windowsills, and I'm looking out the window here, you know, and we're in the middle of the Santa Cruz winter which means the temperatures drop down to the high forties for about three days and everybody's down in the dps because they can't wear their shorts when they go downtown, and you know the weather here is quite extraordinary compared to anywhere else, almost anywhere else you go, except Hawaii, Hawaii's got probably better weather than here, but you know, the California coast has this Mediterranean climate, and you can have a lot of economic problems and handling problems of one kind or another, but most, most people in the world wrestle with the same kind of problems in terms of their personal life, but if the sun is shining, that makes a huge difference, I think, and the climate itself has a lot to do with how you regard the prospects in front of you, it's easier, I mean why do we have, one of the reasons we have so many homeless here in Santa Cruz is cause it's really easy to drop out in Santa Cruz you know.

RACHEL GOODMAN: You don't freeze to death as easily.

JAMES HOUSTON: Yeah, I don't, you know, you know, you go up to, I don't know, they have homeless in Boise, Idaho, but I doubt they have many up there.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Not out on the street.

JAMES HOUSTON: Not out on the street, it's, you know, this is a Mediterranean climate, and, and that softens a lot of the, softens a lot of the edges I think. That's not the only thing, but that part of it. Plus the, you know, the people, I don't know, the people who come to California, (pause) they tend to be, they tend to be people who are, you know, open to the next opportunity or ...

RACHEL GOODMAN: Entrepreneurs.

JAMES HOUSTON: Inclined, inclined to believe there's a next opportunity, there's an entrepreneurial spirit here that goes right back to the, to the first days of the Gold Rush, and a lot of that just stays in the atmosphere.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Sustains people even through the realities not looking so good.

JAMES HOUSTON: Yeah, yeah, and you know a lot of people, there's a lot of people Leaving California, a huge amount of people, there's a huge exodus, people getting fed up.

RACHEL GOODMAN: I know, and here, and leaving here. I have several friends who moved to Washington state said, "you wouldn't believe the computers in every classroom and books, you know, and children have classrooms, there's twenty kids to a class, and so they, they realized it wasn't working for them here and it could work just as well in Washington state as here, or better, and that's, we don't us natives like to hear that.

JAMES HOUSTON: Yes, well you know I, read an article, some colonist in San Jose Mercury news not too long ago, was talking about the fact that California, that the California dream was over, but that doesn't mean that California's unlivable, it's just that, California is just, ending up to be pretty much like every place else with the same kinds of problems and, we don't have to, the relief is we don't have to wrestle with these high expectations, you know, is there trouble in paradise and what went wrong. If we kind of let go of the idea that there's some kind of paradise to be achieved, there's something kind of relaxing about that, and you know, that's, that's part of the, when people get disappointed in California part of the reason has been over the years that their expectations were higher than they should have been.

RACHEL GOODMAN: You figure, well I'll move there and then I'll be happy.

JAMES HOUSTON: Because the idea; the word "paradise" still gets attached to California from somewhere. I don't hear very many people in California refer to it as paradise, but, ...

RACHEL GOODMAN: Like those old handbills they used to put up around Kansas, you know.

JAMES HOUSTON: And you know, editors at Newsweek, and Time magazine, they like to say, you know, if there's a big fire in southern California, is there trouble in paradise, you know if you have a big fire in Alabama nobody says, "is there trouble in paradise," it's just a fire in Alabama. I would like to get to the point where we could have a fire, or a flood, then it's just a fire and a flood, it's not, something has gone wrong in this wonderful place where things aren't supposed to go wrong. (laugh)

RACHEL GOODMAN: That'll be the day. We'll have to retrain all the editors.

JAMES HOUSTON: I mean, you know, it's extraordinary when you think of the stuff that just happened in this last few months, you know that enormous fire, and then the floods to follow, and earthquakes, and mountain lions attacking people in Orange County (laugh)

RACHEL GOODMAN: That's paradise

JAMES HOUSTON: Why do people want to come here? (Laughing) But you got all that stuff going on, and then you got the, you know, the economic magnet more than anything else right now, I think.

RACHEL GOODMAN: And then you got Sunset magazine

...And Sunset magazine.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Making it look awfully good.

JAMES HOUSTON: Yes.

RACHEL GOODMAN: It's the Tuscan sun out here, right?

JAMES HOUSTON: And the, what was that car, was it a car ad or a credit card ad about all the wonderful stuff that, you know, California was going to present you with this endless sequence of glorious experiences.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Well you know they record all the car commercials in Big Sur, I used to get real homesick watching television cause I lived back in Virginia, I was like "Look, there's Big Sur!"

JAMES HOUSTON: Yes.

RACHEL GOODMAN: It would be a car commercial.

JAMES HOUSTON: Yeah, and there's only one car, right? How come there are no more than one car on the road? (Laughing)

RACHEL GOODMAN: Maybe not show that part. (Laughing)

JAMES HOUSTON: They didn't show you that part.

RACHEL GOODMAN: They had to do it in two in the morning.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Or after the flood, cause it had closed the road and they could shoot their car commercial.

JAMES HOUSTON: (Laughing)

RACHEL GOODMAN: (Sigh) Well thank you so much for all of this.

JAMES HOUSTON: Well when I think about how I think about California, I'm not; I'm not one of those people who chose California. I wasn't living some place else and said, "wow, that sounds like the place I need to go." My father was the one, who chose California, and it was partly economics, it was the thirties, and he had no prospects in Texas. It was partly because he had been out here in the Navy, and he knew what things looked like, and he'd had good experiences in San Francisco, so I was born in San Francisco, but I, you know, I grew up here, and it's my, it's my home and land because I was born here, and it never occurred to me to live any place else. I said, you know, we didn't plan to stay in Santa Cruz for long, but that didn't mean we were going to go to Washington or Santa Fe or something, it never occurred to me to live anywhere but California, and I remember during the economic downturn of the nineties, the first big economic downturn before this one or the last one, a lot of people were bailing out of California then, because they had lost their jobs, and they were here for jobs, and I had talked to a lot of people who said California's really an economic opportunity, and you can see when the economic opportunity ended they were gone, they were gone to Dallas or gone to Chicago, and I thought about that and I said wow, I would never make a decision like that. You know this is where I live. I like it here. It's my home place. I'm not going to move away because money's in short supply. It's always been the place where I live, and I got interested in watching the patterns, and watching the way people move through here, and watching the lives, and over time, getting familiar with people who've been here for generations, and people who've been here for a little bit of time, and it's interesting to think about all that.

RACHEL GOODMAN: It's an interesting thing to ponder. And I only noticed my relationship to this place strongly when I left for 7 years, and also my father also moved here in the 40's to get away from the blacklist actually,

JAMES HOUSTON: Oh really?

RACHEL GOODMAN: Yes, well he actually, no, it's the 50's, would have been the 50's. He was on the McCarthy era blacklist, he was college communistic, he was living in Dayton Ohio, and he needed to be somewhere where it didn't matter if you were leftist,

and he was no longer communist by then, so they moved too, to get away from a political kind of stodginess that they experienced and felt at home immediately on the peninsula they moved to San Mateo, and immediately were like ahhh, they had gone to heaven. But when I left to go to eastern Kentucky you know where it was very conservative in a lot of ways, I realized I needed to get back here again, you know something as subtle as the smell of ponderosa pine would make me intensely homesick, what I was used to, to not have everything be always new, and always unfamiliar, and all of the customs to be learned. They're very custom bound. The way you invited somebody to your house.

JAMES HOUSTON: In Kentucky?

RACHEL GOODMAN: If you said it casually it meant really mean you wanted them to come. Sometimes it just meant you wanted to be seen as generous, which didn't really mean... you had to make it twice. It just like the entire thing was foreign or the way in which you were introduced in a room in order. There was like, it was very Virginia, you know, it was Virginia and Kentucky, that had social norms, I don't know, it's like walking into Japan and knowing how to sit at a table with all of that foreign to me.

JAMES HOUSTON: Ah ah, that's nice. (Laughing.)

RACHEL GOODMAN: and then there's the other side of that with peoples intensely generous, they'd spend three days with you and just drop everything and visit with you so there was that other side of things too that once you did get accepted none the less I wanted to come back here and lightly and make money CANT UNDERSTAND REST OF RACHEL

JAMES HOUSTON: The other thing is, when we talk about California, I don't, I no longer, I find it's really hard for me to identify with all of California, you know, it's too big, and there's too much of it, and it's too various, and there's too many disconnects, geographically, demographically, and it took me a long time to figure it out but my real sense of habitat, my natural habitat, it is the coast range from like Mendocino down to Moro bay. There's a continuity there of terrain, of landforms, of fauna, flora, a weather, you know the coastal fog, the artichokes, the coastal valleys, you know the way the hills turn brown in the summer, which a lot of people find to be very depressing, and they want to get away from that, and get away where it's green, I love that in August and Sept, when they get that really tawny *hoed* skin, cause that's the homeland. . I go to the central valley, I enjoy going to the central valley, but that's not my place. Go to southern California and you know that's a whole different world. There should, there's too many places California, it should be about 5 different states at least.

RACHEL GOODMAN: look it overlaid on the east coast, it goes like from Atlanta to DC or you know some path to New York...

JAMES HOUSTON: Yeah Atlanta to Rhode Island or something.

RACHEL GOODMAN: and think of how different Atlanta is from Maine. Then you realize how different San Diego is from Santa Cruz.

JAMES HOUSTON: That's it.

RACHEL GOODMAN: There's nothing to do with it.

JAMES HOUSTON: Yes.

RACHEL GOODMAN: When you talk about your home habitat, I really recognize it. I had to be where I felt right, and there was nothing to describe it to anyone else. I said, you know the fog and the redwood trees, that's where I should be, I need to be there, that's why, you know I'm like a plant that grows there, it's where I'm supposed to be. And that's a body thing, you just feel it when you know it, you're there, you know it's right, I think you know people get attached to it being a certain way. That's what I was attached to, it being like this.

JAMES HOUSTON: Yeah, yeah, that's exactly it. And, so I talk about CA, people are always trying to generalize about CA, and just because of stuff I've written about they're trying to find these big guiding principles, that speak to CA, it gets harder and harder to do that, because there are so many different pieces of it, and every piece has its own reality.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Someone in San Diego's not going to be someone else's Mendocino,

JAMES HOUSTON: So in history, yes.

RACHEL GOODMAN: yea that's very good, that's perfect, because someone saying I'm a Californian who lives in San Diego is gonna be completely different meaning, and their identity as a Californian, than mine. We're supposed to share something right, what do we share. Sacramento right?

JAMES HOUSTON: Sacramento, the question is how does the central coast, how does the central coast speak, to the rest of the state. I think there are ways you can do that. Once you get outside California, you know, get, if, we were in Italy a few years ago you know, people say where are you from, well we're from a Santa Cruz, oh where's that, in California, ohhh, California, and it's just the light goes on. It's all this one big glowing thing.

RACHEL GOODMAN: That's the way we see Italy too, the whole country, you're all artists right? (Laughing)

JAMES HOUSTON: Yes. (Laughing laughing)

RACHEL GOODMAN: Generalization is tyrannical hahaha.

JAMES HOUSTON: Fascinating.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Thank you. There's actually a number of people coming into the state. The population increases by this amount every day, or every week or every month, and what's a productive way to think about that. Well, they have a formula figured out for that. For every two and a half people, it's something like that, for every 2.5 people you need a housing unit. That doesn't mean a house, but an apart. Condo. Omro some place for people to live. So for every 2.5 people you need a housing unit. And the states growing at like... 600 new housing units a day to keep up with the rate of growth.

JAMES HOUSTON: It's a horrifying prospect and nobody wants to think about it, but you know when they come up with numbers like that and that's why they get in touch with SC county planning office and they say look, this is what we foresee for the next 5 years. This is a projected growth on based upon the growth rate of the last 10 years, and the projected housing needs, and we've got to figure this out, so we're parceling this out county by county as its share of, addressing the projected growth rate, so you guys in SC county in the next 5 years, you've got to come up with 10 thousand new housing units. What! 10 thousand new housing units, where do you expect, where are we going to put that. And they all yell and scream and bang around on the table, in every office in California they bang and scream. But talk to these people in Sacramento, my sense was, they didn't have a political agenda, they didn't have a numerical agenda, how are we going to deal with this if the growth doesn't stop.

RACHEL GOODMAN: and I also heard there's going to be a meeting to revise the general plan... I'll go to that and hear what the public has to say

JAMES HOUSTON: It's huge.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Then there are the Han stories, so many choices, how they choose to live and how they relate to the place.

JAMES HOUSTON: You know I've got a perspective after sitting in the same place for 40 years, but for someone else who just discovered SC, and thinks this is where they want to be, what do they bring to it.

RACHEL GOODMAN: it's giving as well as getting.

JAMES HOUSTON: Yea when we came here in 62, it was really easy to choose SC. A. it was before the UC opened. Nobody was moving here. There were places all over town that were empty, You know, this place was not only empty nobody knew who owned it. And we found the people who owned it, and they didn't know what they wanted to do

with it, tear it down, sell it rent it. We had to persuade them to rent it to us. That's the kind of place it was then

RACHEL GOODMAN: times have changed

JAMES HOUSTON: And you know, you could a, it was just real simple to hang out here, the town, one thing I saw here then. The political registration was, I think, 75 percent republican and 25 percent democrat, and I knew there were a lot of people here I didn't want to talk to, retired army officers, everything was fine because one of the reasons they lived here is because they wanted no one to bother them. And if you didn't cause any trouble, and didn't want to comfort anybody, then you could live here and it was really easy. You know when the counter culture came along, there was a sort of missionary prospect, we've all taken acid, I think it's a good thing if everyone In the world takes acid, because we're promoting consciousness.

RACHEL GOODMAN: Oh my, well you've been really generous with your time, thank you...

THE END