

Excerpt from:

Smart San Francisco Realty

Your questions answered



by Tom Geller

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Publication notes

This booklet was developed in early 2002 in response to questions from clients, friends and family. The main typeface is Gill Sans; the header text is Gadget.

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The Web site at <http://www.tomgeller.com> also carries these articles, with links to relevant resources.

About the author

Tom Geller has had a lifelong fascination with real estate. As a teen in New York, he pored over rural land catalogs; as an adult, he studied the local market in every city he visited. He's made the Duboce Triangle neighborhood of San Francisco his home since 1994.

Before entering real estate, he studied composition at the Oberlin Conservatory and the College-Conservatory of Music in Cincinnati, where he earned his B.Mus. cum laude. While in college he edited the book *Bisexuality: A Reader and Sourcebook*, which went through three printings. He continued to work in communications for several years, first in design and layout, then as a writer and editor for computer magazines, then in public relations.

He's a member of the following organizations:

- National Association of Realtors
- California Association of Realtors
- San Francisco Association of Realtors
- San Francisco Tenants Union
- San Francisco Bicycle Coalition
- Duboce Triangle Neighborhood Association
- Friends of Duboce Park
- American Federation of Musicians Local #6
- SpamCon Foundation
- Media Alliance
- World Esperanto Association

He continues to sing and play music, and lives on 14th Street with his partner and their two cats.

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Smart San Francisco Realty

By Tom Geller, agent for Zephyr Real Estate

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buying

Home Buying 101

By Tom Geller – Smart San Francisco Realty

Number 1 in
a series of 24

Want to buy a home? Here's what you do.

1. **Decide what you want.** Some questions to ask yourself:
 - How much space do you need? How many rooms?
 - What sorts of neighborhoods do you like?
 - Do you want special features, such as a wheelchair access or a two-car garage?
2. **Find yourself a "buyer's agent"** (preferably me!). A little-known fact: The seller pays for whatever agent helps you buy a home! (The seller-paid commission is split among all agents involved.) If you don't use a buyer's agent, the seller's agent will end up negotiating on both sides of the table — a difficult task at best, bad for you at worst.
3. **Arrange financing.** Figure out what you have on hand for a down payment (typically 5-20 percent of a home's selling price), and how big a loan you can get. If you aren't already working with a loan agent, I can introduce you to one.
4. **Look at homes.** Most "open houses" in San Francisco happen on Sunday afternoons. To find out about them, read the Real Estate section of the Sunday S.F. Chronicle, check the S.F. Association of Realtors' Web site at <http://www.sfarms.com>, or call me. If you can't get to an specific open house, I may be able to arrange a private viewing time. I can also tell you about "broker's open houses", which by local tradition are held on Tuesdays.
5. **Make an offer** and await a response from the seller. The standard eight-page offer form is quite complicated, but I'll help you through it. If your first offer isn't accepted, you may receive "counter-offer", or you can make another offer of your own.
6. **Open escrow.** You and the seller give your instructions to a neutral third party (the Escrow Agent), who ensures that the transaction goes as agreed. A lot needs to happen during the escrow period, which typically lasts one to three months. Your agent will help you understand what's happening, and try to prevent your deal from being part of the 40 percent that fail to make it through escrow.
7. **Get the home inspected.** Buying a home is a big investment: The few hundred dollars you'll spend on a certified inspector is well worth it. (Your purchase offer should be contingent on a good inspection report, of course!)
8. **Remove your contingencies.** As inspections and financing fall into place, you let the seller know that those won't be obstacles to purchasing. Again, I'll help you through the forms.
9. **Move in.** Congratulations, and welcome to your new home!

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development publishes a booklet, "100 Questions and Answers About Buying a New Home", available online at <http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov>.

If you need professional assistance with any part of buying a home in San Francisco, contact me anytime.

Let's say you've found a place you like, have started to arrange financing, and believe the owner will sell at a price you can afford. Great! Now, things get a bit technical, as you:

5. **Make an offer** and await a response from the seller. The standard eight-page offer form is quite complicated, but I'll help you through it. If your first offer isn't accepted, you may receive "counter-offer", or you can make another offer of your own.



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What should I look for in a home?

By Tom Geller — Smart San Francisco Realty

Number 2 in
a series of 24

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Some things you can change, and some you can't. Here's a guide.

Things you can change...

- **Size.** Are there enough rooms to suit you? Are the rooms big enough? If not, will you be able to build out in a way that will satisfy you? Don't trust square footage statements alone, as measurement techniques vary widely. Consider local building codes as well as lot size: Building a third floor (or cottage in back) might be politically impossible. But if possible, it might turn an imperfect property into your dream house.
- **Condition.** The five most expensive parts of a house to replace are the roof, the foundation, the wiring, the plumbing, and the frame. They're also the parts that are hardest to evaluate. You can use your best judgement on the first visit, but it's smart to hire a qualified home inspector if you're serious about buying.
- **Configuration.** Is the layout convenient and pleasing to you? If not, will you be able to make it so? Add the cost of such changes to the selling price to determine if it's worth it.

...and things you can't.

- **Location.** How near are you to work and other places you go regularly? Will your friends visit you? How easily can you "escape" when you want to?
- **Environment.** Noise, smells and visual stimuli can all affect how you enjoy your new home. You might learn to ignore environmental annoyances, but don't count on it.
- **Local culture.** Go near the home at various times of the day and pay attention to how you feel. Do the neighbors seem like people you can

live near? Do you feel safe and happy when you're in the neighborhood? Are there enough shops, restaurants, and other businesses nearby to satisfy you?

- **Services.** Will anybody deliver a pizza to your house at midnight? Can you get high-speed Internet access? What public transport is nearby? How far is it to the nearest supermarket?
- **Transferability.** A lot can happen to a house in 100 years. Past owners may have (for example) failed to get a building permit for the back stairs... and you, the new owner, will have to rebuild them if the inspector finds out. Or (as is becoming more common in San Francisco), a previous owner may have used the Ellis Act to evict tenants, making it extremely difficult to subdivide or rent the property. Working with a title insurance company, I can help you spot these "red flags" before they become your problem.
- **Gestalt.** How do all the pieces add up together? Sometimes a place just might not resonate with you, despite all the individual details being good. You're going to spend a lot of time in your new home: If you honestly can't figure out what's wrong (and change it), it may be best to move on.



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How do S.F. districts compare?

By Tom Geller — Smart San Francisco Realty

Number 3 in
a series of 24

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When you buy a home, you buy more than a building. You also buy neighbors, access to nearby shops and services, and the feeling that makes each neighborhood unique. Everybody has a different idea of what makes a neighborhood “good”: You should spend a day or five driving around, sitting in cafes, and talking with people throughout the city.

Fortunately, just about everybody can find a San Francisco neighborhood they like, and each neighborhood has its fans. Here are some tips to help you find the best one for you.

Hard, cold facts

- **Transit.** Whether you travel by car, bike or public transit, an extra 15 minutes on your commute time will add up — as will the half hour you spend looking for parking if you have a car but no garage in North Beach. The San Francisco bus and light rail system (“Muni”) covers the city well, but you may wait as long as 40 minutes for a bus, especially in outlying areas. Parking varies throughout the city, but generally gets better the further you go from downtown.
- **Population.** Do you like peace and quiet, or the excitement of city life? In San Francisco, the two are often within blocks of each other. Nonetheless, it’s hard to escape the bustle in The Mission or North Beach, while the residential quality of The Outer Sunset encourages tranquility.
- **Housing style.** There are few condos in some parts of the city, while in others that’s nearly all you can buy. For example, condos are popular in the areas near the Van Ness Corridor, Victorian and Edwardians reign in Hayes Valley, and more-modern single-family homes fill the Outer Sunset.
- **Weather.** With its hills and valleys, San Francisco is a city of “microclimates” that make temperatures vary as much as twenty degrees Fahrenheit within a few blocks. But what you’ll notice most is the

difference in moisture. Neighborhoods near the ocean (The Richmond) and high on some hills (Twin Peaks) get more fog than most, while those on the eastern side (Potrero Hill, The Mission) are almost always sunny.

- **Price.** Prices for the same building vary wildly from location to location within San Francisco, and there are no truly “cheap” areas anymore. In general, homes cost less as you move south, downhill, and away from downtown: District 10 neighborhoods Bayview, Hunter’s Point, and The Excelsior are comparatively affordable, as is District 2’s Outer Sunset. Prices generally increase as you move north, climb the hills, and move toward downtown: Telegraph Hill, The Marina and Pacific Heights are famously pricey.

Soft, warm feelings

No amount of demographic detail can take the place of a stroll through San Francisco’s many neighborhoods, or the opinions of people who live there. Check out the links below, as well as www.tomgeller.com, for information about specific neighborhoods.

<http://www.sfgate.com/traveler/guide/sf/neighborhoods/>

<http://www.kqed.org/programs/tv/hood/>



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Expanded versions of these articles are available for free on the Web at <http://www.tomgeller.com>.

Mr. Geller is available to represent buyers and sellers of California real estate.

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