



## Neighborhoods of the future debated

by **Katie Dettman**

It seems that the giant rainbow flag at Castro and Market streets isn't for everyone.

"For me, the future of the Castro begins when we burn the [rainbow] flag and when we find meaningful ways to deal with the realities that we face now," said Henry Urbach, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's new Helen Hilton Raiser Curator of Architecture and Design.

Urbach, who has only lived in San Francisco since last September after more than 20 years in New York, joined a panel of five other speakers during the GLBT Historical Society's fourth and final installment of its popular series "Queer in the City: GLBT Neighborhoods and Urban Planning," which started last November.

The March 27 session was called "Queer Neighborhoods of the Future." Panelists included Urbach, Susan Stryker, Andrea Shorter, T. Kebo Drew, Tito Vandermeijden, and Joy Silver.

Don Romesburg, board co-chair of the historical society, moderated the forum. In his introduction he spoke about "a national and even international flow of queer people out of some of the spaces that have been traditional LGBT ghettos or living spaces and its happening for all sorts of reasons." He quoted Tommi Avicolti Mecca's March 27 piece on <http://www.BeyondChron.org>, saying: "Without the rabble-rousing activists who used to call it home, the Castro is quickly disintegrating into a symbol of a bygone era that has no more tourist appeal than Betsy Ross's grave.

"Making the neighborhood affordable to activists and artists would go much further toward restoring the old Castro than all of the ruby slippers in the world," Avicolti Mecca wrote, referencing a March 22 *Bay Area Reporter* article about the Castro.

"In the 1960s and 1970s, the middle class fled urban centers and it provided a kind of space for other populations to move into but now that we've done such a good job ... the middle class and the upper class and, in fact, the super rich are moving back in, so that sends us out into a new kind of diaspora □" said Urbach, who explained that although he has lived in the Castro since his move here last fall, he doesn't feel particularly drawn to it as a gay man.

"That [rainbow] flag really symbolizes an attitude toward space that I think is a kind of reactionary and maybe even destructive one. With that flag we mark an attitude toward space, which is one of appropriation and conquest — 'this is ours, we planted the flag,' and of course immediately we get into all kinds of questions about who are 'we', what is the 'our' that 'we're' marking with this flag?"

Vandermeijden, who works for Nextbus Inc., is also vice president of Castro Area Planning and Action. He spoke about his move to the Castro from the Netherlands. He found the Castro to be a friendly place full of neighbors who were willing to help one another. He found a job and a place to stay in only one afternoon.

Vandermeijden advocates the Castro being formally recognized as a community in the San Francisco General Plan, which guides development. There are many important social and cultural and historical institutions in the

Castro that need to be recognized and protected in light of all of the development that is being planned in the district, he said.

Andrea Shorter, commissioner on San Francisco's Commission on the Status of Women, spoke about sometimes feeling like an outsider in the Castro, even though it has been her home for 16 years.

"What does it mean for me to live in what so many people herald as the gay capital of the world? It represents so much to many folks worldwide," she said.

"Clearly, as an African American woman, as a lesbian who is living in the Castro ... I do feel very much part of the neighborhood, I do feel it is my community. Not to say that there are times that I still feel as an outsider, even as involved as I am."

Shorter discussed the recent activism around racism in the Castro.

"I think it is important to have that geographic space. It is very important not only for the political - and economic empowerment that it creates - but it is important because of what I think it so much represents and symbolizes. We still have many struggles, I think, that clearly the issue of And Castro for All is a recent one in terms of how far we've come but also how far we have yet to go."

And Castro for All is an organization that was created to combat race- and gender-based discrimination experienced by customers at some Castro businesses, including Badlands bar, whose owner, Les Natali, was accused in 2004 of discriminating against African American and female patrons. Natali has denied the allegations.

"I think that the next step for the Castro is really continuing to push on those issues of ethnic and racial diversity," she said.

The issue of older LGBT folks was also addressed.

Joy Silver is president of RainbowVision Properties, the first retirement community company in the country specifically marketed for LGBT people. It currently has one property in Santa Fe, New Mexico and is planning a development in Palm Springs. Silver also is on the historical society's board.

"We're just learning to take the power and establish what we want for ourselves," she said of aging LGBT pioneers, those that were among the first to stand up for their equal rights as LGBT people in the 1960s and 1970s.

"We have always been accepting the things that other people didn't want and so rather than the gay ghetto that we were forced to live in, we're really putting together communities by design and that's really different," than the way LGBT people lived in the past, Silver explained of Rainbow Vision.

Others were concerned about those who may not be able to afford such a home.

"I'm really concerned about those of us who don't have the money for a retirement home, for those of us who are getting pushed out of the Castro who might have been able to live there at one point in time," said Drew of Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project.

"I'm very concerned about whether we are able not to just go to a neighborhood because we feel some sense of community there, but can we work there? Can we live there? Is there education? What is the cost of groceries in the neighborhood?" Drew said.

Historian Stryker spoke of her dislike of the nostalgia she sees emerging as queer neighborhoods evolve.

"It's not that I feel like I've lost community, I just feel like it's been specialized differently," she said. "I don't want to romanticize the past nor do I want to make the kind of communities that shaped me any less significant than they were. I just want to be alive to the fact that cities and neighborhoods have to be living spaces that we continue to occupy in these really intentional and conscious ways and that we will take that community with us into the future even if it's shaped a little differently than it was in the past."

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