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July 2018

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Amin Ghaziani, author of
There Goes the Gayborhood?

Saving LGBTQ Neighborhoods: "People May Come and Go; the Community is Here to Stay"

by Alan Martinez

The notion that LGBTQ neighborhoods (or "gayborhoods") around the world are in decline has been under discussion for more than a decade. Reasons given for this situation include the rise of the internet and apps as a means of connecting, the increased acceptance of LGBTQ people, the rising expense of living in cities and a preference to live closer to families of origin who are now more likely to be accepting.

Our cities and communities are not accidental or a product of the workings of nature; they're the result of deliberate human actions and as such are under our control as much as any other aspect of our society. As a consequence, it behooves us to think about the ways some LGBTQ people have chosen to live together in cities and to consider the forms such communities have taken in the past and could take in the future.

Amin Ghaziani's book *There Goes the Gayborhood?* (2015) offers a valuable contribution to the thinking on this subject. He looks closely at available data and at evidence from interviewing people around the country. An associate professor of sociology at the University of British Columbia, Ghaziani also is an [active public intellectual](#). In the following interview, he offers insights on why gayborhoods matter and how we might sustain their vitality.

What are "gayborhoods" and what opportunities and challenges have they embodied for LGBTQ people?

A gay neighborhood has four features. First, it has a distinct geographic focal point. Second, it has a unique culture that makes LGBTQ people visible and makes them feel connected. Third, gayborhoods are residentially dense, with many people who live there identifying as LGBTQ. Finally, gayborhoods have a cluster of commercial spaces and nonprofit organizations that target the needs of LGBTQ people.

Gayborhoods incubate unique cultures, political perspectives, organizations and businesses, family forms, rituals and styles of socialization. In doing so, these areas stand guard against a peculiar problem of ancestry that we encounter as LGBTQ people: They help us to answer the question, "Who are my people?" And thus they renew a sense of our roots.

The opportunities and challenges that gayborhoods embody arise from their intimate involvement in nearly every aspect of modern life: from the municipal promotion of urban spaces to city planning and the shaping of real-estate values; from pride parades to protest events; and from the institutional development of LGBTQ communities to our civic engagement and ability to respect our own remarkable internal diversity.

In San Francisco's Castro as well as the gayborhoods in other cities, the population is increasingly straight, but there's still a concentration of businesses that serve LGBTQ people. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this arrangement? Do you think this pattern is sustainable?

Gayborhoods continue to house what I call "anchor institutions," despite ongoing residential fluctuations. These distinctive facilities, which include

bars, bookstores, cafes, churches, heritage sites, museums and theaters, are the primary engines of community building, and they ground the material culture of a group of people in a specific part of the city. Although change is a fact of urban life, anchor institutions in a gayborhood seal the area's character in the local imagination because anchor institutions are often more salient than are mere residential clusters.

Residential and commercial concentrations can each signal the presence of a gayborhood, but even as the former wanes, as is the case today in cities across the country, institutional anchors can still provide meaningful indicators of our ways of life. As a gay man in Boystown in Chicago told me, "As long as those businesses are still here, that's a big thing that keeps the perception in people's head that Lakeview is still gay." That the institutions are located in a physical place imbues the neighborhood with a home-like quality: Anchor institutions are powerful, and sustainable, because they make sexuality feel like a quasi-ethnicity.

How do you think the establishment of LGBTQ cultural districts such as the recently established Tenderloin TLGB Cultural District and the proposed Castro LGBTQ Cultural District might affect this dynamic?

My thoughts about cultural districts resemble what I said about anchor institutions. Both are planning devices that facilitate placemaking efforts -- meaning, they help people feel attached to a specific part of the city and give it a symbolically charged quality, much like a homeland. To declare that the Castro is a gayborhood or to establish the Tenderloin TLGB Cultural District feels like we're planting a flag in the ground and saying, "This is our community space. People may come and go for different reasons, but the community is here to stay."

My new work has taken me to London. The conversations over there are much like the one that we're having right now, although British activists and urban planners use the language of "enterprise zones" to think about the complex nexus of sexuality, space, culture, identity and history. The idea and underlying principles are the same: Gayborhoods are the urban product of a lot of work that people lived for and died for.

Establishing LGBTQ districts create important cultural continuities across periods of historical change. People on the street might look different today than they did one, two or more decades ago, but a cultural district retains the area's historical significance. Cultural districts transform neighborhoods from a set of streets into places of meaning. The trick, however, is to prize the area's diversity, rather than reduce it into a Disneyfied space. How to do that is a topic for another conversation!

Alan (Bobby) Martinez studied architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, then moved to San Francisco in 1977. Being both queer and Hispanic, he is particularly interested in the ways ethnic and LGBTQ

From the Staff

Creating the Castro LGBTQ Cultural District



by Terry Beswick

Gentrification and economic displacement are not mere abstractions for LGBTQ San Franciscans. We see the tangible effects daily on the places where we live, work and play. The loss of a neighborhood formed around our identities is devastating -- not just for individuals but also for the extended families, institutions and events that form our

collective, living culture.

Recently, members of the GLBT Historical Society participated in a march through the Polk District led by activist [Juanita More](#). We laid black wreaths at former gay businesses in that once-thriving gayborhood. Longtime LGBTQ activist Cleve Jones joined the march to remind us all why such territories are invaluable (for a video of his remarks, [click here](#)). The gathering was a powerful reminder of the centers of LGBTQ life we have lost not only in the Polk, but also in the Valencia Corridor, the Tenderloin and North Beach.

What We Stand to Lose

The march also was a vivid reminder of what we stand to lose today. The threat has inspired activists to pursue establishment of recognized cultural districts in our LGBTQ neighborhoods. This approach has proven a powerful tool for sustaining ethnic neighborhoods in the Japantown Cultural Heritage District, the Calle 24 Latino Cultural District and the SOMA Pilipinas Cultural District.

More recently, the Compton's Transgender Cultural District in the Tenderloin and the Leather and LGBTQ Cultural District in South of Market are leveraging political power to protect community institutions, support special projects and promote affordability. Both the proposed city budget and a November ballot measure hold out the promise of further funding for such districts.

A new initiative modeled on these existing efforts is in the organizing stages. The Castro LGBTQ Cultural District was introduced in May by Jeff Sheehy, the outgoing Board of Supervisors member representing the Castro. The newly elected supervisor, Rafael Mandelman, has pledged to bring the district to fruition in this world renowned gayborhood.

Enhancing Cultural Assets

Those of us involved in advocating the Castro LGBTQ Cultural District hope that city recognition will help enhance the area's LGBTQ businesses and cultural assets. At the same time, we're working to reassure local residents and merchants that the Castro will remain a neighborhood where all are welcome to live and work together.

Of course a cultural district can't counter broad economic and social forces that extend far beyond our city's borders. But it does provide one important tool to help ensure that LGBTQ people do not lose the housing, services and institutions that give us our heritage and our home in the Castro. That will be invaluable for both locals and visitors from around the world to whom this neighborhood means so much.

To learn more or to help with organizing the Castro LGBTQ Cultural District, visit the organizers' [Facebook page](#).

Terry Beswick is executive director of the GLBT Historical Society.

Upcoming Events

[Open House](#)

The Historical Society Archives: Behind the Scenes



Saturday, July 14

11:00 AM-1:00 PM

The GLBT Historical Society

989 Market St., Lower Level, San Francisco

Free | [Advance Registration Required](#)

The GLBT Historical Society preserves one of the world's largest collections of LGBTQ historical materials. This special open house will offer members of the public a behind-the-scenes tour, including a rare opportunity to visit the archival reserve normally accessible only to the society's staff. Joanna Black, director of archives and special collections, will provide an introduction to the holdings and the function of the archives. Visitors also will have a chance to see scarce objects, artwork and documents that have never been displayed publicly. Guided tours of the archives will take place at 11:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. Light refreshments will be served. RSVP online no later than 3:00 p.m. on July 13: To reserve free tickets, [click here](#).

[Community Forum](#)

Fighting Back: Saving San Francisco's Gayborhoods



Wednesday, July 25

7:00-9:00 PM

The GLBT History Museum

4127 18th St., San Francisco

[Free Tickets](#) | \$5.00 Donation Welcome

The latest in our monthly "Fighting Back" series exploring contemporary queer issues in a historical context, this community forum will

explore the evolution of San Francisco's LGBTQ neighborhoods and their importance for the creation of queer culture and politics. It also will consider the establishment of LGBTQ cultural districts recognized and funded by the City as a tactic for helping diverse and inclusive "gayborhoods" survive and thrive. A panel of historians, veteran organizers and younger activists will discuss how this history can help inform today's resistance movements. Reserve your free tickets [here](#).

Illustrated Talk

Sex in the Streets: Akimbo, AIDS & Cultural Activism



Thursday, July 26

7:00-9:00 PM

The GLBT History Museum

4127 18th St., San Francisco

[\\$5.00](#) | [Free for Members](#)

Boy with Arms Akimbo/Girl with Arms Akimbo was an anonymous queer cultural activist network founded in San Francisco in 1989 at the peak of the AIDS crisis. For three years,

they covered the city and beyond with DIY posters and other graphic productions that sparked viewers to question their conceptions of sex. Akimbo not only attracted the gaze of urban passersby, but also made effective use of the media, receiving coverage across the United States. This illustrated talk by Isabelle Alfonsi, a feminist author and [gallery owner](#) from Paris, looks at Akimbo as a case study of queer art as a renewed possibility for collective action and the creation of diversified visualizations of bodies and sexualities. Alfonsi has done extensive research in the archives of the GLBT Historical Society, which preserves the complete archives of Akimbo. Purchase advance tickets [here](#).



**The GLBT
Historical
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**Friday,
Oct. 5
6-9 pm**

**Save
the
Date**

**Gala
2018**

The Green Room
401 Van Ness Ave.
San Francisco, CA



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EXHIBITIONS & PROGRAMS

The GLBT History Museum
4127 18th St.
San Francisco, CA 94114
(415) 621-1107
www.glbthistory.org/museum

Monday - Saturday: 11:00 AM - 6:00 PM
Sunday: Noon - 5:00 PM

ARCHIVES & RESEARCH CENTER

The GLBT Historical Society
989 Market St., Lower Level
San Francisco, CA 94103-1708
(415) 777-5455
www.glbthistory.org/archives

Call to schedule a research appointment.

CREDITS. Feature: Portrait of Amin Ghaziani by Sameer Kahn. From the Staff: Photo of Terry Beswick by **Gareth Gooch**. Upcoming Events: Photos by Gerard Koskovich. Archives Open House: Director of Archives & Special Collections Joanna Black. Fighting Back: San Francisco's Castro District. Akimbo Talk: Posters by Boy With Arms Akimbo/Girl With Arms Akimbo.

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