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Guest Opinion: Queer history brings new future to downtown SF

by Robbie Silver | Wednesday June 19, 2024

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Robbie Silver, left, executive director of the Downtown SF Partnership, joined drag performer Bobby Friday at last year's Drag Me Downtown. Photo: Matthew S. Bajko

The San Francisco that we all know and love is undergoing quite an evolution.

It has dealt with its fair share of challenges, but as the city continues to pave a path forward to emerge successfully, it's important to look back at how far we've come — and what still needs to be done.

Decades before the Castro became internationally renowned as a queer haven, the fight for LGBTQIA+ rights unfolded in the grid of downtown San Francisco and along the waterfront.

In the early 1960s, the heart of San Francisco's LGBTQIA+ nightlife thrived at unique establishments like Head Hunters and Ginger's — providing a haven for those seeking camaraderie and refuge after the bars had closed for the night. After a four-year hiatus, Ginger's has returned, reopening in time for Pride Month as the Financial District's sole queer-identified bar. This revival highlights the enduring strength and history of the queer community in San Francisco's downtown, demonstrating the

neighborhood's resilience and capacity for reinvention. However, as we celebrate these milestones, we must also acknowledge the work still required to embed local institutions more deeply into the fabric of downtown life.

A lot of the work that the Downtown SF Partnership (<https://downtownsf.org/>) has done to drive people back to downtown leans toward creating a sense of place and destination — with services, activations, and event-driven programming like Bastille on Belden, Let's Glow SF, and the ever-popular Drag Me Downtown, which just returned for a second year in a row for Pride Month.

The sequin-studded series showcases new drag performers at different downtown restaurants and bars each week to provide direct support to local businesses, shine a light on San Francisco's LGBTQIA+ community, and drive a diverse range of economic activity downtown — encouraging visitors to experience the area like never before. This annual event is a prime example of how diverse economic activity can transform the downtown area, encouraging visitors to experience it in novel ways and signaling a shift towards inclusivity and accessibility for all.

In addition to celebrating another year of Drag Me Downtown, this June also marks another, more personal milestone. I chose to relocate from Southern California to San Francisco in 2018, but I didn't fully come out until this year. I've learned that bisexual invisibility is real and present, and I deeply appreciate San Francisco for making me realize that who I am as a bi man shouldn't just be tolerated, but celebrated.

Many, like me, have grappled with questions about their identity — "Am I gay enough? Am I straight enough? Will I ever find love? Will my friends and family accept me?" — and have found solace in this city's welcoming arms.

Inclusivity and openness have been, and always will be, a crucial piece of San Francisco's identity, but we must not take it for granted.

To honor and uplift our city's rich queer heritage, our vision for a post-pandemic downtown must go beyond its traditional role as an office hub. We should foster a diverse array of arts, culture, and hospitality experiences that activate the area outside typical work hours.

This vision began to materialize last September with the launch of Landing at Leidesdorff (<https://downtownsf.org/things-to-do/landing-at-leidesdorff>), a new social destination created in the heart of our downtown adjacent to the Transamerica Pyramid. We transformed an underutilized intersection of alleyways and celebrated the bold history of Captain William Leidesdorff — a young

Black visionary regarded as one of the founding fathers of San Francisco. The mural here recalls the historic shoreline and the long wharf, reminding us of the ships that once landed in what's now a thriving urban center.



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These hidden corners and alleyways downtown echo its past as a refuge for diverse communities, underscoring the need to reimagine public spaces to reflect this heritage.

Initiatives like Drag Me Downtown and Landing at Leidesdorff offer a glimpse into a future shaped by the lessons of our past. They demonstrate how we can engage San Francisco's economic engine creatively and inclusively. San Francisco today is not the same city it was three years ago. We must adapt and innovate to keep the downtown area vibrant and thriving. I've learned this first-hand in my journey of self-discovery. Like everyone else, I am still growing and evolving. So is downtown.

The area holds immense power and potential to be reimaged as a lively neighborhood brimming with diverse experiences, where people can confidently say, "This is where I see my future." Achieving this vision requires a collaborative partnership between public and private entities. The pandemic has underscored the value of our interconnectedness, revealing that our best work arises from meaningful interactions. To truly recover and thrive, we must embrace a broad spectrum of perspectives and innovative ideas, moving beyond the traditional mindset that previously anchored us to a mono-economy.

Small but significant enhancements can shift perceptions of what downtown San Francisco has to offer. Achieving this requires creative thinking from various stakeholders to drive meaningful change. What will it take to attract the creative class back to the city and ensure they have a place downtown? How can we bring in businesses owned by BIPOC communities, LGBTQIA+ individuals, women, and veterans? And how can each of us contribute to this momentum?

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There are vacant ground floor spaces in the Financial District and Jackson Square that are ideal for new uses that are not just amenities for the building but serve as a community benefit and bring new audiences downtown. We are already witnessing a downtown renaissance in hospitality with 22 new businesses that opened over the last two years, outpacing closures. Many are near our activated spaces, like Landing at Leidesdorff and Mechanics Plaza.

As we chart the course for downtown San Francisco's future, it's clear that honoring our rich history while embracing innovation is key. From the legacy of LGBTQIA+ havens to modern initiatives like Drag Me Downtown, San Francisco's resilience and inclusivity shine through.

By celebrating diversity, supporting marginalized communities, and repurposing spaces for community benefit, we can create a thriving downtown for future generations. This vision embodies the spirit of San Francisco's past while paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable future.

Robbie Silver, a bi man, is the executive director of the Downtown SF Partnership, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization driven by a mission to create a more vibrant, active downtown that directly supports San Francisco's economic development. For more information, visit downtownsf.org (<https://downtownsf.org/>).

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