



Don't let fear get in the way of solutions

By David Prowler | December 19, 2015 | Updated: December 20, 2015 3:42pm



Photo: Terry Schmitt



Construction cranes join the Transamerica Pyramid and 555 California Street (R) jutting through the fog at sunrise in San Francisco on October 20, 2013. San Francisco is seeing a boom in new housing and commercial construction alter the skyline.. UPI/Terry Schmitt

Here in San Francisco, passions run high. But sometimes it's hard to match the mood of anger and fear to the scale of the real effects on residents or to match the proposed solutions to the real issues, which makes me think that there are subtexts and currents below the surface.

When I served on the San Francisco Planning Commission, I was often puzzled by the angry, passionate objection to minor changes. Often, I realized, it had little to do with the item before us, which was sometimes just the trigger for people's fears or other emotions.

I don't mean to say that the problems caused by the city's economic success aren't real. They are. But the undercurrents that fuel the flames are worth looking at too. Here is how I would characterize them.

Nostalgia

"The things that spell San Francisco to me are disappearing fast."

— Gavin Elster, the shipping magnate in Alfred Hitchcock's "Vertigo," 1958

Nostalgia for a Golden Age is a San Francisco tradition. But some things were better before and some are better now. An affordable San Francisco has been a rarity, not the norm. I've still got a little campaign handout entitled "You Can't Live in San Francisco Anymore." I wrote it in 1977.

Fear of change

The pace of change seems unprecedented (though it doesn't match what San Francisco saw during the Gold Rush, or during and after World War II or even in the 1970s). Change is a fact of life; it is what cities do.

Night after night, while serving on the San Francisco Planning Commission, I heard neighbors railing against small changes. I came to believe that this was less about a new cafe or a house and more about fear, powerlessness and a need to identify with a team — with a mission.

Facts or problems

We need to differentiate between facts and problems. Problems have solutions, facts don't. In a boom time, costs — and for some, incomes — go up. Some people benefit and some people pay the costs. That's regrettable, and I think we should do what we can to mitigate the effects. But “solve” it? C'mon.

The need for an enemy

In San Francisco, land-use politics is a team sport. It's complicated because the enemy is ... who, exactly? Ron Conway? Commuter buses? Hipsters? Progressives themselves? Technology? It was clearer in the 1970s when we had villains, like the evicting owner of the International Hotel or the bulldozing city Redevelopment Agency. It's hard to be David without a Goliath.

Because you can't solve facts and because it's hard to pinpoint fault, there is a lot of lashing out.

Symbolic issues

“Gentrification” itself is a symbol. The problem isn't boutiques or fancy new neighbors. It's displacement.

What does gentrification look like? Apparently it looks a lot like American Apparel. When that retailer **tried to open** on Valencia Street in 2009, the proposed arrival of a chain store was treated as an invasion. It's a good example of the kind of symbolic triggers that set off alarms. But, really, what was the community at risk of losing? Boutiques with \$100 T-shirts and \$300 sneakers?

Xenophobia

San Francisco has a long history of fighting newcomers, from the Chinese after the Gold Rush to hippies in the Haight and gays in the Castro. Fear of newcomers gave us Dan “Unite to Fight” White, who was elected to the Board of Supervisors in 1977 by a largely

white, middle-class district disturbed by the growth of the city's gay community. Ugly rhetoric led to horrible actions.

The animus against techies doesn't feel much different. The rhetoric sounds the same: It was better before, these people aren't like me, and they are ruining my town. It's NIMBY bigotry, no matter how progressive it is. In these topsy-turvy times, such rhetoric is not aimed at poor people; it is fueled by the resentment of middle-aged, middle-class residents against the young and well paid.

This hostility toward outsiders might have its roots in the city's original sin, the enslavement of the peaceful natives by the savage Christian missionaries. The newcomers were big trouble.

San Francisco is changing, as always, and we are right to work to make the city better for everyone. The city's problems are real. But so are the less obvious undercurrents of fear and anger. We should be aware of them: They can get in the way of real solutions.

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