

Celebration caps first round of Tenderloin building face lifts

Original Joe's, a classic lunchtime and dinner destination since it opened 60 years ago, rarely has been a place to meet for java, OJ and bear claws.

brick, removing paint from glass transoms and clerestory panels, replacing rotting wood, ensuring that window and door grilles meet code, and, when possible, getting rid of bars on

paint and a new awning. Most impressive: its restored neon sign, a blast from its 1940 past.

The Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corp. sponsors the Facade Improvement Program, which gives participating building owners 50% matching funds up to \$9,500 to spruce up their properties. Owners also must agree to maintain their property for five years after the restoration.

A \$282,000 grant from the San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund supported Round 1 of the program, which included restoring historic neon signs on the Page, Senator, Jefferson and Midori residential hotels. San Francisco Beautiful has put in \$6,000 in seed money to launch Round 2.

"This program has been music to the ears of people who work in City Hall because you can SEE the improvements," Mayor Willie Brown told the group. "The Tenderloin is a place of long memories for me," he added, recalling his days at Hastings Law School, cramming for classes and grazing in local restaurants. "This is a vital, viable neighborhood. Every facade improvement makes it better, preserving it

as a family community."

Nicholas Rosenberg, new director of Adopt-A-Block, presented certificates to the property owners who've participated in the program. "You are the distinctness and the memory of San Francisco that the Facade Improvement Program is trying to preserve," Rosenberg told them. Adopt-A-Block works closely with the FIP, encouraging owners whose buildings are being renovated to implement public safety strategies.

Other speakers included David Baker, chairman of the Facade Improvement subcommittee and co-chair of the LE/L Task Force, who made the gracious and articulate opening remarks; Brad Paul, Task Force staffer who briefly described the Tenderloin's history since the 1970s; District 6 Supervisor Chris Daly, who compared the Tenderloin of eight years ago — "cold and hard" like Philly, where he was raised — to today's promising community; and Ana B. Arguello, outgoing director of Adopt-A-Block, who was presented with a certificate of honor.

Braving icy winds and cold rain, a handful of folks took a half-hour tour of the renovated sites, one of them the Page Hotel at 161 Leavenworth. Built

in 1915, the Page now sports clean brick, a repainted base, a repaired cornice and a renovated neon sign. To come: a huge mural on the side of the building that will depict various Tenderloin personalities, including Kathy and Leroy Looper.

"This [restoration] work will spill over to other sites," said Baker. "Appearances are destiny." ■

PHOTO: CARL ANGEL



Ilaria Salvadori points out the renovations to the Page Hotel.

But on Jan. 25, about 50 people gathered there at 9:30 a.m. for a joyful celebration: the completion of the Lower Eddy/Leavenworth Task Force's Facade Improvement Program, Round 1.

Begun in 1998, the program has given face lifts to 14 Tenderloin buildings. Round 2 will tackle 10 more structures, repairing canvas awnings and marquees, restoring ceramic tiles at the base of buildings, cleaning

windows and doors entirely.

"This is subtle restoration," program manager Ilaria Salvadori told the crowd of city officials, Tenderloin activists and property owners. "We've tried to restore the buildings to their original look and colors — to make them beautiful without being shiny or out of character."

Salvadori showed before-and-after slides of the 14 buildings. Original Joe's, for example, the first completed project, got

RESTORATIONS "Beautiful . . . and in character"

FIP evaluates a structure's facade improvement needs and recommends upgrades to help return it to a semblance of its former glory. For some buildings, it's just an awning; for others, it's new paint, new tile, new glass and more. These are the Round 1 FIP buildings:

- 155 Hyde apartments**
- 509 Cultural Center - 509 Ellis**
- Adrian Hotel - 493 Eddy**
- Cadillac Market - 499 Eddy**
- Jefferson Hotel - 440 Eddy**
- Kinney Hotel - 410 Eddy**
- Midori Hotel - 260 Hyde**
- Original Joe's - 144 Taylor**
- Page Hotel - 161 Leavenworth**
- Phuong Lan - 45 Turk**
- Riveria Hotel - 420 Jones**
- S. Cristina Hotel - 1010 Market**
- Senator Hotel - 519 Ellis**
- Youth With a Mission - 357 Ellis**



Eric Robertson has a way with aspiring writers

Eric Robertson reached under his chair, pulled out a top hat and dropped it onto the middle of the table. The hat was empty, but soon it would be filled with inspiration.

"Put in some topics you'd like someone to write about," he instructed the participants in a recent "Out of a Hat" writing workshop sponsored by the Tenderloin Reflection and Education Center (TREC). Robertson is the facilitator of the group, which draws from two to 12 people to weekly meetings at the YMCA.

Each person took a topic, contemplated it briefly and wrote for 20 minutes. The results were eclectic.

One woman wrote that her pick out of the hat — "first love" — elicited memories not of her first boyfriend but of her mother and her dog. "Long before I experienced romantic love, they were the beings I felt most strongly about," she wrote.

"Stuffed animals" generated a comic essay on sibling jealousies.

"How do you know what to pray for?" prompted a group member to write about his experience as a white man asked to give the blessing at a

Kwanzaa celebration.

This casual mix of off-the-cuff suggestions and timed writing exercises power the TREC workshop. Participants also can bring work from home to share with the group or read selections from published writers they like, but most of the workshop centers on in-class assignments that let participants build on each other's ideas and stimulate dialogue.

"These exercises help me think about things I wouldn't ordinarily think of," commented Leah Fennimore, a group regular who lived in the Tenderloin for four years. "They remind me that I have to write to make things understandable for others."

Fennimore began attending the workshop after meeting Robertson at a reading by Tenderloin poet Denise Dee, whom Fennimore praises for her "strong artistic convictions. She wants everyone to be able to see they can write."

Robertson, TREC group facilitator for three years, seems to operate the workshop from a similar vantage point, considering all contributions valid and valuable. He launched "Out of a Hat" after attending a writing workshop at Hospitality

House, one of a handful of arts programs in the Tenderloin that give marginalized people a means of expression.

"TREC has always had a writing workshop in one form or another, be it drama or a more specialized group," said Robertson, who lives in the Tenderloin, "so it was easy to get involved."

It's also easy for group members to stay involved because the sessions are relaxed, nonjudgmental and supportive. Robertson is more facilitator than instructor, the group less focused on critiques than a forum for individual expression and personal support.

Urban observations pepper much this group's writing: A quasi-haiku expressed disgust with Old Navy billboards, and an essay pondered the fickleness of friendships in the city.

"I'm not such a poet, but at least I can pretend for shelter in this market of wind," wrote John Patrick Foley in his ode "The Wind Market," published in the Summer 2000 edition of *Tender Leaves*. TREC has been publishing this modest journal two to four times a year since the early '80s; it showcases poetry, short fiction, non-fiction, essays and illustrations from TREC workshops as well

as outside submissions.

TREC also sponsors groups in bookmaking, writing for teen-agers, drama writing, spirituality, and the "Roving Library" — a shopping cart full of donated books pushed up and down

"Recognition is the most important part" of groups like "Out of a Hat," said member Marsha Campbell, who has belonged to several writing workshops in the last 15 years. She's a published poet, but

PHOTO: CARL ANGEL



Eric Robertson, left, and workshop member Mitch Gibson listen to a fellow writer reading his short essay — foreground: the inspiration hat.

Tenderloin streets to serve homeless people who can't get a public library card without a mailable address.

Writing can be solitary — even isolating — and "Out of a Hat," which recently received a San Francisco Arts Commission grant, provides an invaluable environment for people to share their voices with other writers.

still ventures from her North Beach apartment every week to polish her skills and read and listen to Tenderloin-based poetry.

"Out of a Hat" meets Mondays, 10 a.m. to noon, YMCA, 220 Golden Gate, 3th floor. Robertson can be reached at TREC, 558-8759. For more information about TREC: www.jps.net/voices. ■