

“We are mavericks in the gay community,” says Matthias Hollwich, a New York architect at Hollwich Kushner. “We all have had to invent and reinvent our lives to get to live and be who we are now.”

Although Hollwich is only 41, he thinks a lot about aging and being able to openly enjoy who he is. Professionally, aging is his hot topic. He is involved in the now stalled development of the \$250 million dollar LGBT senior retirement community project aptly named BOOM in Palm Springs, CA. Hollwich is also the author of *New Aging*, a book that imparts lessons learned after three years researching aging and design, and details how to live a richer and happier life long into one’s golden years.

GROWING OLDER DOESN’T mean life is over. It happens to all of us. Yet aging alone is a reality for many LGBT seniors who live without the traditional heterosexual support system of a spouse and children. That’s a lot of love and care needed when considering there are reportedly up to 4 million LGBT Americans who are over sixty, according to the Administration on Aging.

“We as a [gay] community can get so caught up in maintaining our youth,” says architect Charles Renfro of Diller Scofidio + Renfro in New York, one of the firm’s behind BOOM as well as the renovation of the Pines Pavilion on Fire Island, another gaychitecture project. “We are so distracted by trying to stay relevant to young people that we turn our backs on our older community. There is less of a chance of having family to take care of us as we get older, [so] we need to

create and maintain our surrogate families.”

Of course there’s irony in marginalizing a community that everyone will eventually, potentially, be a part of, says Mark Segal, an activist and the publisher of the *Philadelphia Gay News*. “Are we a real community or not? Do we take care of our own? You find solid senior programming in the Jewish, black, Latino, and Catholic communities, but not ours.”

It’s about having real clout as a com-

“We want people to feel safe and accepted, where they can share their sexual orientation and just be themselves,” says Kathleen Sullivan, director of the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center. The facility recently partnered with Kaiser Permanente for a panel where LGBT speakers shared their personal stories to humanize their plight before participating doctors. “You can have a great staff in an assisted living facility, but the other residents can make it hard—saying homophobic things and excluding people.”

Creating a low-income affordable residential space exclusively for LGBT seniors has its challenges, and in some ways it’s counter-intuitive to the bigger picture of universal acceptance and equality. Therefore, there’s focus on education and coexistence for LGBT and heterosexual seniors.

“Why should we cloister ourselves?” Renfro says. “We talked about this kind of ghetto-ization with BOOM and loosened the definition of these ground up communities by thinking of them as communities of like-minded people.”

LOS ANGELES’ TRIANGLE Square in Hollywood, is currently the only affordable senior LGBT housing in the

country. Others cities across the nation are developing facilities, but they are in various phases of fundraising and build, according to The Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Elders (SAGE), an advocacy group that is the reigning resource for LGBT aging issues.

Following L.A., Philly takes the lead beyond talks and planning with the John C. Anderson apartments in Center City breaking ground last year. Linda DiSario, 66, and her partner Kathleen

RETIRING THE CLOSET

WHERE WILL YOU GROW OLD OPENLY?
PALM SPRINGS?
FIRE ISLAND?
WILL YOUR CITY DEVELOP
APPEALING COMMUNITY
AND RESIDENTIAL SERVICES
FOR YOU?

BY SHIRA LEVINE

munity, Segal believes. Not having such infrastructure is demonstrative of the LGBT community lacking a sense of community to care beyond what’s immediate. Without a family network of support, oftentimes when LGBT seniors enter retirement and nursing facilities they are afraid to openly be who they are. Homophobic peers and care workers can isolate and alienate LGBT residents, thus, forcing them to quash all their struggle and triumph and revert back into the closet.

Harihan, 62, of 15 years want in when all is completed, and if they’re approved. The couple left the city for the Pennsylvania suburbs four years ago to care for DiSario’s parents before they passed away. Now, they are anxious to return to the city’s center where they feel comfortable living openly together.

“We’ll feel more like we can be ourselves,” DiSario says. “If she wants to put her arm around me and hold my hand she can. I can’t do that up here. It’s not homophobic, but it’s very family-oriented and traditional. We won’t walk down the street here holding hands. We’d get looks or snickers. Downtown is geared toward LGBT where we can be ourselves, be confident, and have camaraderie.”

THE CENTER CITY development also has activities they can grow old enjoying, from theater and art to bowling and more diverse and adventurous dining options.

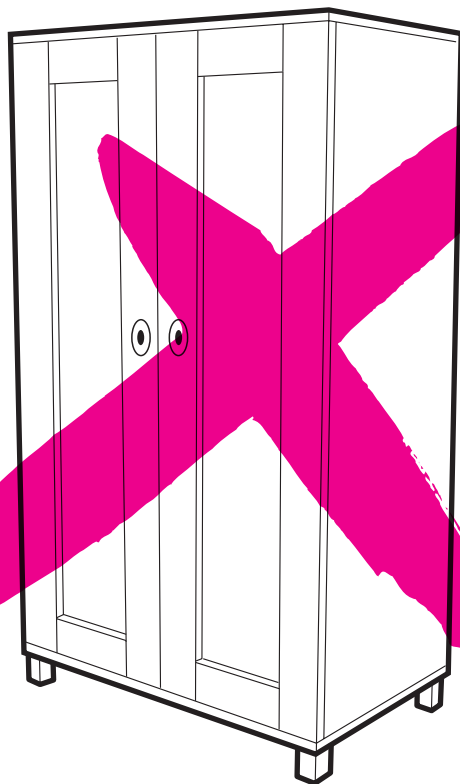
“It will be nice not to have to drive from out of town and spend money on a hotel room again, DiSario says. “We’ll have access to public transportation and elevators. If we get in, I hope to live there the rest of my life.”

Meanwhile, the private sector has gotten involved in the business of LGBT living and aging, although not without its own share of hiccups.

“Rainbow Vision was the real game changer, but it is in financial trouble,” says Hollwich about the pioneering, progressive senior living project developed in Santa Fe, NM. Like BOOM, its sister project, Rainbow Vision had to halt construction. (The desert oasis was hit particularly hard economically and still is recovering.) A similar project in Vancouver is moving forward, albeit slowly. Unfortunately, dozens of other projects have suffered a similar fall.

Still, there is promise on the horizon: Rainbow Vista, in Gresham, OR, for example, offers affordable living on a month-to-month basis with a one-year price guarantee. A studio apartment starts at \$595 a month and goes up to a one-bedroom/two bathroom for \$1,050/month.

“Look, the entire country is experiencing a lot of challenges in terms of people getting older,” says Seth Kilbourn of Openhouse. They are co-fundraising San Francisco’s 55 Laguna with Mercy Hous-



seniors, as are their discussion groups.

Despite the economy and housing crisis, Palm Springs and Fire Island remain LGBT safe havens for vacation and retirement.

“It’s where we go to grow old and die,” says Darryl Dean, 58. He and his partner David Woodward, 62, have been together for 25 years and plan to eventually relocate—just not quite yet. “With Palm Springs, you don’t want to go too early because it can get boring. There’s not that much to do out there. When we’re a little older and slower, we’ll make the move.”

For now, Dean, who was laid off from his banking job, keeps busy with activities like leading LGBT seniors ages 55 to 85 on hikes in Los Angeles’ Griffith Park.

“I’m working on reinventing myself at 58 years old,” Dean says. “I volunteer. We cycle. We travel. David works.”

The couple is in talks with two friends about buying a fourplex apartment and agreeing to take care of one other.

“**THERE ISN’T ANYTHING** we can rely on right now,” Dean says. “We know we’re going to have to do it ourselves.”

The L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center hopes in the next five years to develop its own housing, with up to 80 units, for those

who don’t plan to leave town.

“We have to figure out how to do this altogether,” Sullivan says. “Our older community members are discovering themselves and people that they wouldn’t encounter otherwise.”

Recently, an 86-year-old former bishop came to the L.A. Center and joined the facility’s choir. “He was singing Pink and Destiny’s Child songs!” laughed Sullivan. “He would never have gotten to do that. People feel safe trying things they would

never have tried elsewhere. These people are survivors and excited about life.”

Such programming and engagement are new frontiers. Centers across the country are training staff members to be allies to LGBT seniors and develop cultural competency and safety in existing facilities. Nationally, 55% of LGBT seniors live alone. In L.A., it’s 65%, the highest in the nation, Sullivan says.

Ideally, the government would step in and provide support to the millions of baby boomers pending care. That way, those who would prefer facilities that cater to like-minded residents might have that option. It makes sense that Hollwich and Renfro (and others) set out to develop something modern, forward thinking, and amenity-rich for this first generation openly enjoying life, and living longer. They just didn’t anticipate the damage a floundering economy and impending housing crisis could do to their vision.

“Existing properties weren’t selling, so our clients couldn’t commit to going into the development [of BOOM and Rancho Mirage],” says Hollwich. “It’s all beautiful, but for now it has to be just a vision we learned a lot from.”

Meanwhile, the reality of life has hit home for Renfro quite personally. In recent years he’s had to take on the responsibility of caring for his parents.

“All of this has really made me realize that, ‘Golly, I’m almost 50. I better start planning while I have my wits about me, since they didn’t. Until BOOM, it didn’t occur to me that there was something missing in our community and even larger in our society.’”

AS FRUSTRATING AS this is for LGBT seniors who’d had high hopes of moving into enticing community-strong developments, the struggle highlights the

community’s resilience and ability to inspire inner mavericks to do some DIY community building.

“I HAVE AN ongoing conversation between four of my best friends to create what I call our own micro retirement community,” Hollwich says.

His vision is to find or build four individual studios united by a common space in Manhattan. “Our micro community would be an open house filled with my closest friends, where we look out for each

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other and depend on each other so we can live the best life we can together—until we can’t. It would be self-organized and self-initialized based on the same principles of shared services, strong friendship, and shared burden, where we have an agreement of commitment.”

Renfro has a similar curated idea with his friends: “It stems from our Fire Island summer share at the Pines we’ve been doing for the last seven years. It’s a situation that is causal, friendly, and informal, but very engaged like a

family situation.”

Hollwich and his friends currently live all around the world, but like Manhattan as their base because of all the cultural activities the Big Apple would readily provide them. “A city is a great place to retire,” Hollwich says. “There is so much culture, entertainment, and opportunity. Our situations would later allow our social radius to further extend to more and different friends who we would share and access all around the world.”

Sullivan is also thinking about what’s next for her and her partner. They own their house and love their neighbors, but are weighing their options as they wait for local opportunities to finish development. “We have a gay and lesbian enclave nearby we’ve created, where we all take care of one another. Eventually, I could see moving into a place that was LGBT, but not 100 percent [LGBT].”

REALISTICALLY, NOT everyone can afford such plans and not everyone has the committed friendships Hollwich and Renfro enjoy. Thirteen percent of LGBT elderly are in need of housing, Segal says. “The rich gay and lesbian couple is a myth! These seniors are our pioneers who fought for our equality in the ‘60s!”

The people to look to for financing such endeavors, however, are those LGBT individuals who do have bank, Dean says. “There are plenty of our Baby Boomer gay brothers and sisters without kids and without money who need services.”

“We do need to take this seriously whether LGBT or heterosexual, wealthy or not,” Renfro says. “It can come from a developer in a top-down situation like BOOM, or, it can be self-made, but we’ve got to look out for each other together as one.”