

Social Landscape: LGBTQ Heritage in Seattle's Pioneer Square
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Seattle's Pioneer Square, the birthplace of the modern city, is understood as Seattle's first neighborhood: the setting for the city's origin story, its rebirth after the fire of 1899, and the years after 1897, the time of the Klondike Gold Rush. From the 1930s into the 1970s, Pioneer Square was also the center of LGBTQ social life in Seattle.¹ The area was home to a territory of bars, taverns, bath houses, and restaurants that catered to LGBTQ patrons. Understanding Pioneer Square's historical LGBTQ landscape is complicated by several factors. The landscape is lost—there is little or no LGBTQ population currently activating the neighborhood's cultural overlay; physical traces of the landscape are scarce and belie the historical LGBTQ presence; and the landscape's significance is not derived from association with historic figures or events but as an ensemble of everyday social spaces.

EVERYDAY PLACES

Despite laws against dressing across genders and the threat of police harassment or even arrest, LGBTQ people found each other in Pioneer Square's establishments. The corner of Second Avenue Extension South and South Washington Street was the center of queer Pioneer

¹ It is important to note that the term "LGBTQ" represents a diverse range of social identities. Speaking about an "LGBTQ community" may give the mistaken impression of a single, monolithic voice or entity. This issue is complicated further when modern scholars use contemporary terms like "LGBTQ" to categorize people who might not have identified themselves according to their sexual practices or gender expression in the same way 21st century inhabitants do. This paper uses the terms "LGBTQ" and "queer" to refer to historical individuals who might have identified on the spectrum of identities that are most often represented today as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer.

Square, anchored by the Double Header and The Casino Pool Room. Originally, the Nugent and Considine building that occupies this block was the home of the bawdy People's Theater founded by John Considine in 1890.² The subterranean space became The Casino (172 South Washington Street) by 1930 and served as an after-hours club until 1964. Vilma, a patron who frequented the Casino in its earliest years recalled that, "We arrived in Seattle on June 15, 1930, and headed straight for the Casino...The Casino was the only place on the West Coast that was so open and free for gay people."³

The Double Header (407 Second Avenue Extension South), a street-level tavern, was located around the corner from the Casino's entrance. The tavern opened in 1934 and is considered by some to be the oldest running gay bar in the country at the time it closed on December 31, 2015. It was the last vestige of what had been a vital social territory of LGBTQ social spaces. One of the few remaining markers of the LGBTQ presence in the neighborhood was lost when its sign was removed from the building in May 2017.

Just north of Pioneer Square, The Spinning Wheel (1334 ½ Second Avenue) ran from 1935-1950 while two blocks away the Garden of Allah (1213 1st Avenue) in the Arlington Hotel featured a cabaret show with female impersonators. Both sites drew a mixed crowd of queer and straight folks. Pat Freeman, born in 1933, patronized the Garden of Allah as a queer teenager:

² National Register of Historic Places, Pioneer Square-Skid Road National Historic District, Seattle, King County, Washington, 2007, Section 7, Page 193, <http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Neighborhoods/HistoricPreservation/HistoricDistricts/PioneerSquare/PioneerSquare-National-Register-Nomination.pdf>, Last Accessed April 27, 2018

³ Paulson, Don, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah: A Gay Cabaret in Seattle*, Columbia University Press, 1996, 22-23.

It's like trying to describe the fear that existed back then. You can't describe it. And people today don't understand it when you say there was this terrible, terrible fear and it permeated everything. It's the same thing with this recognition, you had so little places to meet people; not everybody who was gay went to a gay tavern. You met people on the job, you met them other places, but you had to be so careful.⁴

Enabled by the end of Prohibition in 1933, these locations established the basis for a network of public places where queer individuals could gather socially with others like themselves.

Historical mapping projects have identified at least 36 LGBTQ public places in Pioneer Square that were active between 1930 and 1974.⁵ These were primarily vernacular commercial places like bars that catered to or tolerated an LGBTQ crowd. Taken together they formed a social territory that supported the bonds of an early LGBTQ community to emerge in Seattle.

Two gay bath houses were located in Pioneer Square, the South End Steam Baths (115.5 First Avenue South) and the Atlas Steam Baths (118 Occidental Street). The South End Steam Baths were located in the basement of the grand Northern Hotel that was built after the Great Fire in 1889. The hotel's original Turkish Baths became the South End Steam Baths after World War II and was a well-known gay bathhouse. Bathhouses such as these were public spaces for socializing and intimacy, "For gay men in Seattle, such places as the South End provided rituals that were both sexual and social".⁶ The Atlas Baths' original location was in use from 1965-1969 but has since been demolished.

A NEW MODEL: THE DORIAN SOCIETY AND THE GAY COMMUNITY CENTER

⁴ Pat Freeman, Interview by Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project, October 25, 1995, transcript.

⁵ Freitas, Richard, "'The Land at Our Feet:' Preserving Pioneer Square's Queer Landscape," Master's Thesis, University of Washington, 2017, 51.

⁶ Atkins, Gary, *Gay Seattle, Stories of Exile and Belonging*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003, 303.

Pioneer Square's LGBTQ social spaces flourished mostly unmolested by the police due to a well-established payoff system. This distinguishes Seattle from other cities, like New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, where police raids were a constant threat. As a result, political organizing was not a priority. However, by late 1965 a meeting was set up to gauge interest in forming a Seattle chapter of the Mattachine Society, a Los Angeles-based homophile organization. Hall Call was a leader of the group based in San Francisco and came to Seattle to hold the meeting downtown at the Roosevelt Hotel.⁷

The meeting marks the beginning not only of LGBTQ political organization in Seattle but also the spatialization of its development. The next meeting was held in early spring of 1966 in the St. Mark's Cathedral office of the Reverend Hineo Katagiri.⁸ Subsequent meetings were held in private homes on Capitol Hill. By January 1967, these early organizers opted to found their own homophile organization called the Dorian Society.⁹ The roving, temporary locations of these meetings defines the expansive geography of Seattle's nascent LGBTQ political movement. This new geography provides the context for locating a shift away from bars and towards new places where the city's LGBTQ community was able to find each other. That shift reached its culmination in Pioneer Square with the founding of the Gay Community Center.

Seattle's Dorian Society functioned as both a political and social group. Against the backdrop of formal, public, political action, the organization provided an informal channel for

⁷ Atkins, *Gay Seattle*, 107.

⁸ Katagiri was a civil rights activist, minister in the United Church of Christ, an ally of Seattle's LGBTQ community in the late 1960s. See his obituary in the Seattle Times, <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/seattletimes/obituary.aspx?n=mineo-katagiri&pid=15912002>, Last Accessed April 27, 2018.

⁹ Atkins, *Gay Seattle*, 108.

socializing outside of the bar scene. Nicholas Heer, a founder of the group, recalled in an interview:

Dorian always had the problem: Are we a politically activist group or are we a social group? And that was a debate from the very beginning because we started around the time SIR⁵ started in San Francisco and they were a social group. Trying to get people in — and out of the bars. And the same was going on in Vancouver. ... It was a big question of whether to be social or political. We ended up being sort of both.”¹⁰

In this dual capacity, the group posed a threat to the Pioneer Square bars. Doug Wyman, one of the early Dorian Society organizers, recalled that, “The bars were really down on any kind of organization because we were going to rock the boat” (Atkins, 110). The Dorian Society arrived the same year that an FBI investigation led to the dismantling of the police payoff system. The bars were likely concerned about the effects additional advocacy would have on their business; increased public visibility as “gay bars”; and competition from the new organization for their clientele’s attention.

The Dorian Society provided an opportunity to build community around shared interests. Ward Folsom, a former board member of both the Dorian Society and Seattle Counseling Service, spoke to the social role that the Dorian Society played as it spawned social interest groups:

And then there were a lot of social groups forming. One of those, the hiking group, still exists. We had — like a bridge group. We had a gourmet eating group, get together and go out to different restaurants; and we had a potluck group setting up social activities, things for people to do as an alternative to going to the bars.

Interviewer: So was it a problem, that that was the only social outlet for gay people, were the bars?

Leigh: Yeah, that was basically it, at that time. There was nothing. ¹¹

¹⁰ Nicholas Heer, Interview by the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project, March 25, 1996, transcript.

¹¹ Ward Folsom, Interview by the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project, April 3, 1996, transcript.

The new group acted as a channel for empowering its members to connect with each other over shared interests and in the process, fostered new opportunities for relating outside of the bar scene.

After its earliest meetings in temporary spaces, the Dorian Society began a new venture in a permanent location when it opened Dorian House on Malden Avenue East in Capitol Hill in 1969.¹² The space was run by Dr. Robert Deisher, a pediatrician at the University of Washington, and provided mental health services for queer youth in the form of a telephone hotline and drop-in center. Dorian House is remarkable as a physical location that housed an expression of community health that still exists today as Seattle Counseling Service.

In 1971, on the heels of Dorian House's establishment, a coalition of Dorian Society and Gay Liberation Front members founded the Gay Community Center. The center opened at 102 Cherry Street in Pioneer Square to provide a social space outside of the bar scene, primarily for those under 21. Ward Folsom, recalled:

One thing was to provide an alternative to the bar scene. That was one of the main reasons behind the idea of the community center, was to provide a non-alcoholic environment where young people could come in, people under 21 could come in, and just be able to get together and have discussions, and — [there were?] some discussion groups over the years.¹³

The Gay Community Center acknowledged the ongoing draw and significance of Pioneer Square to LGBTQ social life. If establishing Dorian House on a residential street in Capitol Hill was a deliberate attempt to create a home-like environment for queer youth services, then the Gay

¹² Atkins, *Gay Seattle*, 121.

¹³ Ward Folsom, Interview by the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project, April 3, 1996, transcript.

Community Center on Cherry Street was an intentional claiming of space in the territory of nightlife social spaces. It was an outpost that stood for a new type of community building.

The Gay Community Center was located in the Scheuerman Building, designed by Elmer Fisher, completed in 1890, and listed as a contributing resource to the Pioneer Square Historic District. The building was home to the original Washington Mutual Savings Bank, “now a leading banking establishment in Washington State, before Seattle's downtown center moved north (from the present Pioneer Square Historic District).”¹⁴ As the former home of both the Gay Community Center and Washington Savings Bank, the building marks the northward migration of both the gay community in the early 1970s as well as the earlier departure of the city’s banking and commercial institutions. Not an end in itself, Pioneer Square locates the stories of Seattle’s institutions as they move out of neighborhood to the city beyond, and in the case of the Gay Community Center, back to the neighborhood again.

The Cherry Street location of the Gay Community was established at a time of transition. -The Dorian Society would soon transform into the Seattle Gay Alliance, adopting a more activist approach, and the focus of gay social life moved away from Pioneer Square and established itself in Capitol Hill. It is a spatial expression of the formalization of LGBTQ social and political organization in Seattle, representing the Dorian Society’s dual role as advocate and social outlet. More broadly, it represents a key location in the development of queer community building in Seattle during the post-Stonewall era.

¹⁴ National Register of Historic Places, Pioneer Square Nomination, Section 7, Page 97.

Although the Pioneer Square location did not last more than a year, a new Gay Community Center would open on 16th Avenue in 1974, not far from the Dorian House location.

Despite the emergence of a distinct LGBTQ enclave in Capitol Hill, Pioneer Square remained a vital location in the LGBTQ community's social landscape into the 1970s.¹⁵ Occidental Park, completed in 1972, was the site of a picnic and evening "street dance" in 1974 to mark the fifth anniversary of the Stonewall Riot in New York City. Three years later, the park was the starting location of a parade to kick off 1977's Gay Pride Week. The new neighborhood park became the site of formal, public, outdoor expressions of Seattle's LGBTQ community. The National Register notes that, "'Because the park is a fairly recent work, it is non-contributing; however, as originally designed, it is very significant as a public place in the district. This work, as designed by Jones and Jones, should be considered historically significant in the years to come."¹⁶ When the time comes to assess Occidental Park's significance, its association with LGBTQ community events must be considered.

The LGBTQ social landscape of 20th century Pioneer Square is comprised of a collection of vernacular commercial spaces: bars, taverns, restaurants, bath houses, and public open space. There is no historical figure or event associated with the LGBTQ social spaces of Pioneer Square that the mantle of significance can be hung upon. Its significance is derived from the everyday use of spaces that supported the development of Seattle's LGBTQ community. This is

¹⁵ LGBTQ social spaces still existed in Pioneer Square through the 1980s, and, in fact, through the closing of the Double Header tavern in 2015.

¹⁶ National Register of Historic Places, Pioneer Square Nomination, Section 7, Page 157.

critical to acknowledge because physical fabric does not reveal the invisible history of the neighborhood.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRESERVATION

There are a number of tools that can be used to preserve the places that are important to the heritage of groups that make few, if any, physical marks on the built environment. The tools described here represent approaches that both work from within the existing National Register framework to establishing new local models for preservation. They are just a beginning.

National Register Nominations

The fact that a sizeable number of LGBTQ social spaces existed within the Pioneer Square – Skid Road Historic District presents an opportunity to revise the National Register nomination and acknowledge them. Otherwise this cultural overlay exists only in disparate sources that lack the centralization and authority that a National Register nomination imparts. This is especially important given the nomination’s role as a tool for planning and preservation decisions.

It would be appropriate to update the description of individual properties in the nomination, such as The Casino, whose association with LGBTQ patronage is included in the district’s period of significance. It would also be appropriate to extend the district’s period of significance to recognize its continued importance to Seattle’s civic life, notably the cultural development of the LGBTQ community. Pioneer Square, like all occupied places, is dynamic and continues to evolve. Its significance does not end in 1931.

Completing National Register nominations for individual spaces is another option. This approach weakens the conceptual frame of the LGBTQ territory and may dilute the richness and extent of LGBTQ life in the area at the time. However, while this approach privileges the importance of one location over another, having one or more individual Pioneer Square properties listed on the National Register is better than having the history remain invisible.

The recent listings of two LGBTQ sites in New York City on the National Register provide a blueprint for how a nomination can comport with current designation standards and definitions of significance while conveying cultural value. Julius' Bar, a contributing resource to the Greenwich Village Historic District, was individually designated in January 2016. The bar was the site of a 1966 "sip-in," a political action that drew attention to New York's legal inconsistencies regarding whether homosexuals could congregate and be served in bars and restaurants. The Julius' Bar nomination and subsequent listing on the National Register is an important step in the evolution of defining significance. Like many of the queer social spaces of Pioneer Square, Julius' was already part of a historic district. Julius' significance as presented by its nomination's narrative is tied to an event of political activism. The nomination concludes that the bar's significance as a landmark worthy of individual designation rests predominantly on its "key role in increasing the public's awareness of discriminatory policies towards homosexuals, with the publicity resulting from the sip-in creating an important step towards ending this discrimination."¹⁷ This type of event-based significance (criterion A) might be

¹⁷ Dolkart, Andrew S., Julius' Bar, National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 2016, Section 8, Page 19, <https://www.nps.gov/nr/feature/places/pdfs/16000242.pdf>, Last Accessed April 25, 2018.

applied to Pioneer Square sites like the Madison Tavern, where Seattle women were first allowed to dance with each other in public.¹⁸

Columbia University's Earl Hall was listed on the National Register in March 2018. The 1902 Classical Revival building was the meeting place for university's Student Homophile League, the first gay student group at a university in the country. Established in 1966, the group began using the building for monthly gay dances in 1970. The dances became an important social event in the life of LGBTQ students and city residents. The nomination states that, "Earl Hall is significant under criterion A in social history for its early and significant association with Columbia's LGBT community."¹⁹ These two nominations show a way forward for recording culturally-based significance and achieving listing on the National Register.

Individual nominations also provide an ideal opportunity to record the building's interior. In the case of vernacular LGBTQ social spaces, this is arguably more important than exterior fabric since it will almost certainly provide more insight into how the space was used. Documentation also preserves interior spaces since they are more likely to be reconfigured or

¹⁸ MacIver Wells, interviewed by Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project, October 12, 1997.

The criteria defined in the National Historic Preservation Act have not changed since they were originally published. They are the basis for determining the significance of elements in the built environment for potential inclusion on the National Historic Register:

Criteria for Evaluation. The quality of significance in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association and

(a) that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
(b) that are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or

(c) that embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or

(d) that have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

¹⁹ Dolkart, Andrew S., Earl Hall, National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 2017, Section 8, Page 1, http://www.nyclgbtsites.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NY_NewYorkCounty_EarlHall.pdf, Last Accessed April 25, 2018.

lost as part of evolving use or rehabilitation projects. Gail Dubrow, a social historian of the built environment, notes that a focus on architectural details instead of historical significance means that, “landmark protection powers rarely extend to interior features that may contribute to the property’s integrity of feeling and association with respect to gay heritage.”²⁰ A combination of archival photographs, historical mapping, oral histories, and site visits are ideal sources for interior descriptions. In the case of the Gay Community Center on Cherry Street, we have a description of the interior provided by Paul Barwick that provides insight into how the center was activated:

It had been many things. One of the more noteworthy was it had been a speakeasy, I guess, during Prohibition. And it was in a basement; you had to take steps down to these two big swinging doors, and even beyond there I believe there were more steps down. And it was – as you came down the steps, off to the right was a big open space in which we had a bunch of tables – tables and chairs – tables and stools and a dance floor. Straight ahead, if you had gone – as you come down the steps – straight-ahead was a long bar – a beautiful bar, with mirrors behind it. As you came down the steps, off to the left were a couple little rooms. One we used as an office, and the other was a library and a meeting room. And there were also a couple of rooms that went off underneath the sidewalks; it was part of, you know, the original Underground Seattle. And so we had that Underground Seattle running along two sides of us. We used that mostly as storage space.²¹

This description can be used as a foundation for understanding how the center was laid out and used by the community as a social space. An individual nomination for 102 Cherry Street as it relates to LGBTQ social history would greatly benefit from an interior description like this.

Context Studies

²⁰ Dubrow, Gail. "Lavender Landmarks Revisited: Advancing an LGBT Preservation Agenda." In *Queering Planning: Challenging Heteronormative Assumptions and Reframing Planning Practice*, 68.

²¹ Paul Barwick, Interview by the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project, January 20, 2000, transcript.

Context and theme studies are important development in planning for LGBTQ cultural history that examine the breadth of heritage and property types in a place. This planning approach supersedes the narrowing of focus to a particular site for purposes of preservation or representation. In San Francisco, the city's Planning Department released its most recent *Citywide Historic Context Statement for LGBTQ History in San Francisco* in March 2016.²² This was preceded by the first LGBTQ context statement in the US, prepared by San Francisco's Friends of 1800 in 2004.²³ At the national level, The National Park Service's *LGBTQ America: A Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History* presents a practical grounding in the diversity of preservation practices, spatial typologies, and narrative themes related to LGBTQ places. Dubrow emphasizes the usefulness of this approach, "There is a need to identify previously undesignated properties significant in gay and lesbian history by undertaking thematic surveys, both nationally and locally, that generate new nominations to landmark registers and, potentially, by conducting campaigns to protect the most significant properties."²⁴ Context studies can illustrate relationships between sites that might otherwise be difficult to connect because of their disperse locations, differing typologies, and varying degrees of significance and notoriety. Such studies' most valuable contribution to understanding LGBTQ and other minority group's heritage in the built environment may be their ability to illustrate a cultural territory by zooming out from the building or district to look at interconnections between sites across a broader geographic area.

²² http://default.sfplanning.org//Preservation/lgbt_HCS/FinalLGBTQ_HCS_March2016.pdf, Last Accessed April 27, 2018.

²³ <http://sf-planning.org/lgbt-historic-context-statement> , Last Accessed April 27, 2018.

²⁴ Dubrow, Gail. "Lavender Landmarks Revisited: Advancing an LGBT Preservation Agenda." In *Queering Planning: Challenging Heteronormative Assumptions and Reframing Planning Practice*, 68.

Preserving in Place

The National Register also provides for the designation of Traditional Cultural Properties (TCPs). TCPs are places that possess “traditional cultural significance”.²⁵ This program is broadly applicable to ethnographic landscapes where physical integrity is not present or cannot convey the place’s significance. National Register Bulletin 38 gives one example as, “an urban neighborhood that is the traditional home of a particular cultural group, and that reflects its beliefs and practices.”²⁶ One urban TCP is Bohemian Hall, in Astoria Queens. The 1911 building has been a cultural touchstone for generations of the local Czech-American community. Its ongoing relevance to the community and physical adaptations over time were signs of its vitality and made it eligible for nomination.²⁷ This model would not work in a lost landscape like Pioneer Square but could be considered in Capitol Hill. A TCP approach could proactively preserve cultural relevance in a time when development pressures are remaking the demographics of Seattle’s neighborhoods.

In San Francisco, LGBTQ preservation practices are employed to hold on to the businesses so that neighborhood character and cultural practices are kept in use. This might be considered *preserving in place*. The City of San Francisco runs the Legacy Business Registry. The program provides incentives for landlords to extend favorable lease agreements to businesses that have been in operation for over 30 years and have made a demonstrable cultural impact on their neighborhood, “The City intends that the Registry be a tool for providing educational

²⁵ *National Register Bulletin 38*, “Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties,” <https://www.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb38/>, Last Accessed April 25, 2018.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ American Folklore Society, “Bohemian Hall and Park: A Traditional Cultural Property in New York City,” <http://www.afsnet.org/?page=FHPBohemianHallStudy>, Last Accessed April 25, 2018.

and promotional assistance to Legacy Businesses to encourage their continued viability and success.”²⁸ Many LGBTQ spaces, especially bars, have qualified.

San Francisco is also establishing a Transgender Cultural District. The District is conceived of as a public-private partnership that will receive financial support from a property developer who will, "pay \$300,000 into a fund that will be used to establish a transgender community center, to create a transgender historic and cultural district, and to support transgender-serving businesses and nonprofits in the district."²⁹ Taken together, these two approaches provide forward-thinking alternatives to preserving culture where it lives.

CONCLUSION

Pioneer Square’s urban form, from its street grid to its late-Victorian architecture, testifies to the aspirations and achievements of the city’s founders and those that came after them. In those same spaces, LGBTQ people connected with one another in the bars and bath houses when there were few other means of connection. The rise of the Dorian Society and activist LGBTQ rights groups in the last 1960s produced new ways of socializing in the neighborhood and beyond. The established gayborhood in Capitol Hill, with its LGBTQ-owned businesses, social services, and rainbow crosswalks, is founded upon the lost cultural landscape of Pioneer Square.

²⁸ City and County of San Francisco Planning Department, “Legacy Business Registry,” <http://sf-planning.org/legacy-business-registry> , Last Accessed April 25, 2018.

²⁹ Dineen, J.K., “Mid-market Project a Step Closer with Mid-Maret Transgender District Deal,” <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Mid-market-project-step-closer-with-transgender-10895410.php> , Last Accessed April 25, 2018.

The origins of the Seattle LGBTQ community's heritage reside in the usage and activation of space, not physical fabric. This is a challenge for the field of preservation and its understanding of significance. An expanded notion of significance and alternate methods of documenting and revealing heritage are necessary for protecting the place memory of urban minority groups. It means nothing less than valuing a community.

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