# Spaces Beyond Ballroom

The impact of drag subculture on New York City's public space (1920-1990)

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Chantal Regnault, "House of LaBeija", 1989.

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**Abstract:**

During the 1970s in New York, queer people of color consolidated a queer subculture commonly known as *ballroom* as a response to spatial and social oppression. At a time when problems such as the spread of AIDS, homelessness, drug abuse, and prostitution were heavily portrayed as inherently related to the queer community, trans people of color were specifically and disproportionately affected by this political climate. In combination with the lack of security they faced in public spaces, this community was forced to use ballrooms to shape their own places of encounter away from the public eye. Drag shows became an escape and a support system through the creation of *Houses*, intangible structures of kinship, that hosted the grad shows and occasionally provided physical shelter to queer homeless teenagers. However, beyond the hidden ballrooms, part of this community remained in the public eye appropriating parks, piers, and whole streets in unconventional ways. The informality, and often illegality, of these ephemeral spaces resulted in a lack of documentation of the presence of this community in urban and architectural systems and their relation to the city as a whole. Consequently, there is a missing piece in both black and queer history and their relationship to the built environment. This historical research uses the work of queer theorists of the 20th century such as George Chauncey and Laud Humphreys, whose discourse focuses almost exclusively on gay white men, to expand the narrative to transgender women of color. Additionally, with the support of historical photographic material, such as the work of Chantal Regnault and Leonard Fink, it analyzes how this community related to public space and how it shaped discretely the urban uses of Manhattan. It exposes the duality of the queer public space, on one hand, related to the secrecy of *ballroom,* and on the other, to the public development of queer life. It explains how these two realities existed in the city simultaneously and intertwined.

**Introduction**

During the 1970s in New York, queer people of color consolidate a queer subculture commonly known as *ballroom* as a response to physical and psychological oppression. Throughout the twentieth century, the queer community is publicly portrayed as inherently related to problems such as AIDS, homelessness, drug abuse, and prostitution. On top of enduring the challenges of being queer, trans people of color face wider discrimination and alienation, even from their own community, due to the color of their skin. For many people, walking down the street seems like a mundane and safe activity. However, in a city where cisgender heteronormative men do the planning while portraying their needs as the ones of the default user, any citizen that doesn't fit the mold risks their safety, and in some cases even the chance of imprisonment, by simply walking out their house.

As Joel Sanders, an architect who focuses on inclusive architecture, argues in his book *Stud* that architecture is not gender-neutral. The practice is heavily linked to western architectural theorists and practitioners, such as Le Corbusier and Vitruvio, which have created a non-inclusive way of creating cities.[1] Due to the lack of security faced in public spaces, this community uses ballrooms to shape their places of encounter away from the public eye. Nonetheless, contrary to popular belief, part of this community has historically remained unhidden. By appropriating parks, piers, and whole streets in unconventional ways, trans people of color challenge the conventional divide between public and private. The informality, and often illegality, of these ephemeral uses results in a lack of documentation of the urban and architectural systems this community puts in place. Consequently, there is a missing piece in both black and queer history and their effect on the built environment, as well as comprehensive and inclusive academic historical discourse about their relation to the city as a whole.

Following the prohibition law implemented in the state in 1920, the government tries to eradicate queer citizens from the streets.

[1] Joel Sanders, *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity* (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 4.

Nonetheless, they do not disappear from public space, as the political climate of the time suggests they should. Instead, they challenge the use of public space. Transgender people of color were no exception to this phenomenon. Segregated into specific neighborhoods, particularly Harlem and the Greenwich village, this community creates a system beyond the well-known drag balls and the club scene in which they took place. Thus, consolidating an important part of the street life of New York. Consequently, the question arises, what was the presence of this community in public space, and what was their influence on public space? In which ways did the ballroom community appropriate and influence public space in Manhattan? How were they using it and where was this public space located within the city?

After the first ball for *colored* people in 1962, documentaries such as “Paris is Burning” and the popularization of voguing propel this ignored community into a worldwide phenomenon. Thus, this paper researches the behavior of trans people of color and their relationship to public space in NYC between 1920 and 1990, just before their popularization in the media. First, it explains the political climate of the era starting with the introduction of ballrooms and drag balls. Then, it goes into the governmental policies linked to the community and the effort to eradicate their presence from the public eye. Additionally, it goes into the media portrayal of the community and the demonization of their existence on the streets. Later it looks particularly at transgender people of color and the paradigm shift in the use of public space that came with the creation of drag ballroom. It explores the role of parks as safe havens for queer teens and how they were essential for the development of the community. As a result, it showcases an underlying dualism in queer citizens and the city while highlighting the development of that same dynamic.

The paper recreates this undocumented story with the support of images of historic photographs by Chantal Regnault and Leonard Fink, two photographers that were insiders to the community during the 1970s and 1980s. Additionally, it draws from queer literature, especially George Chauncey's 1994 book *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Men World, 1890-1940* which focuses on gay white men. Thus, expanding the discourse to transgender women of color.

Furthermore, it lies in the thesis of Malcolm Rio called “Drag hinge: ‘reading’ the scales between architecture and urbanism” and fills in the gaps by taking a deeper look at public space with particular case studies. Finally, the research draws from previous interviews with famous drag queens at the time who share their experiences and situates their stories within the academic context, such as popular drag queens Hector Xtravaganza, Chichi Valenti, and Dominique Jackson. However, the research has a limitation related to the access to highly detailed archival information due to the lack of documentation that is a consequence of the informal essence of the spaces analyzed. Furthermore, due to the difficulty of contacting people that lived through the creation of ballroom, the information is drawn from interviews that have already been conducted, ergo failing at posing questions more related to the focus on public space. Regardless, it showcases a big picture of the urban network and dynamics created by the ballroom community and explains further the unofficial and ignored impact they had on New York.

**Queer vs. Straight Public Space**
Ballroom and the City

The culture of drag balls in New York City can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century. This Harlem institution was inaugurated in 1869 and annually provided hundreds of gay men from the East Coast with a hidden public event in the Hamilton Lodge.[2] By the 1920s, the balls became more visible as they gained popularity during Harlem's renaissance. At this point, the events evolve and introduce drag queens in costumes and the concept of competition. Thus, the 'Parade of the Fairies", which consists of drag participants sashaying through the auditorium in preparation for a costume contest, became the main attraction. By the 1960s the balls were structured primarily as beauty pageants for men dressed as women to compete and win prizes. Nonetheless, the beauty standards held by the judges create a racial division within the community. Black queens were expected to "whiten up" their faces if they wanted to have a chance at winning, and even then, their chances of being crowned were very slim compared to the ones of white queens. As a response, the first black ball appeared in 1962.[3] Later on, in 1972, Lottie and Crystal LaBeija created the first drag *house* while co-promoting a ball.

The drag *houses* are organized groups of queens that compete together in the balls as a team and simultaneously provide each other with a support system. Almost immediately, multiple *houses* appeared and everyone wanted to host their own balls. As a result, during the 1980s the number of balls increased exponentially up to the point when there was one at least every month. During this period of growth, thematic competitions named *categories* for *walking* were fully implemented.[4] In 1981, as Kevin Omni says, Paris Dupree hosted the first

[2] Sam See, "'Spectacles in Color': The Primitive Drag of Langston Hughes," PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America 124, no. 3 (2009): pp. 798-816, https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.3.798.

[3] Tim Laurence, " A History of Drag Balls, Houses and the Culture of Voguing," in *Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene of New York City 1989-92*, ed. Stuart Baker (London: Soul Jazz Books, 2018), pp. 3-4.

[4] *Walking* could represent the evolution of the "Parade of the Fairies." As it consists of contestants walking down in front of judges while competing for prizes. The competition involves *categories* which are the main ones for each walk that must be represented by the contestant to win.

ball and fully implemented this concept. He argues the idea was always there but was quite restrictive in requirements for contestants until Dupree's ball expanded the *categories* and thus appealed to a larger group of participants.[5]

The Imperial Elks Lodge, the Uptown Social Club, the Golden Terrace Ballroom, and Club Constellation were recurrent spots for the ballroom scene during the 1980s. The ephemeral condition of these spaces and the everchanging organizers for the events created a lack of formal documentation on the spatial configuration. However, as Malcolm Rio mentions, the venues were often large rooms, conventionally banquet halls, that due largely to their open floor plan, provided the opportunity for adaptability in combination with the use of foldable furniture.[6] Despite the ephemeral nature of the events, the common arrangement depicted in photographs, documentaries, and stories, reveals a recurring structure. As analyzed by Jonathan Jackson, the recurring layout during the events resembles a "T" shaped composition (fig.1). A runway lies in the middle, positioning the audience on both sides, for participants to walk towards the raised platform that hosts the judges' table. Additionally, he mentions that in the second half of the eighties, a wooden runway was commonly rented or constructed raised from the floor, but never taller than the judge's platform.[7] The performance space thus created an axis through the room with a symmetrical layout. The height difference suggested a sense of hierarchy within the event and a principle that was adapted to the different locations around the city, thus arguably establishing a typology for the ballrooms.

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[5] Laurence, "A history of Drag Balls," pp. 3-4

[6] Malcolm Rio, "Drag hinge: 'reading' the scales between architecture and urbanism," DSpace@MIT (1135865843-MIT), 2019, pp. 105-106.

[7] Jonathan Jackson, "The Social World of Voguing," *Journal of the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* Vol.12, No.2 (2002), 26–42, https://jashm.press.uillinois.edu/12.2/index.html, (accessed February 24, 2022).

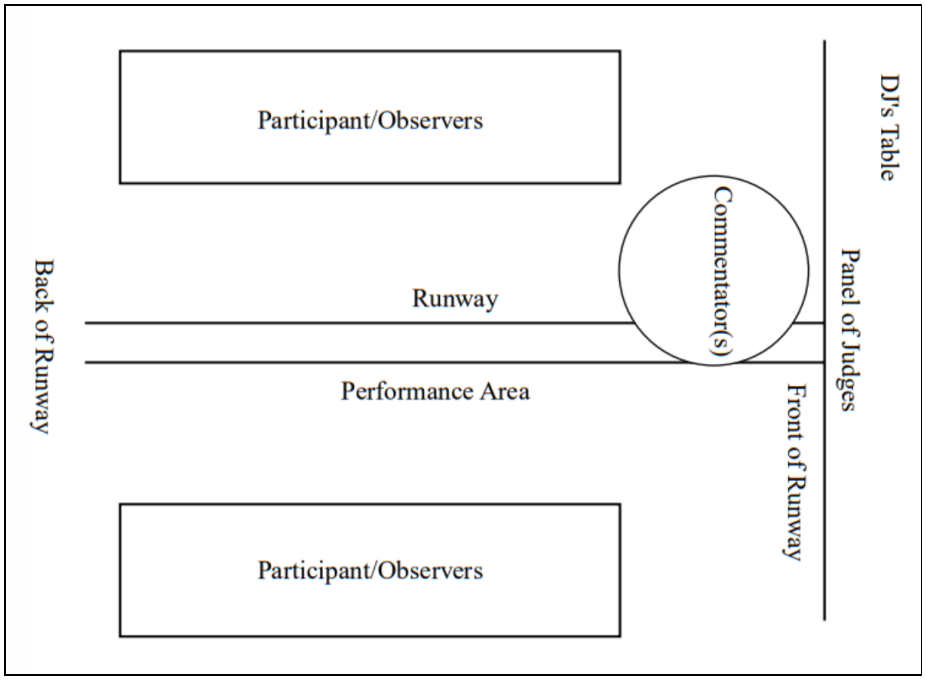


Fig.1. Diagram of the ballroom typology layout. Marlon M. Bailey, in "Engendering space: Ballroom culture and the spatial practice of possibility in Detroit," Gender Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography 21(2014): 500. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.786688.

As central as the balls were for the social life of the queer people of color in New York, they represented a small fraction of this community's social activities. Other recreational spaces such as gay clubs, restaurants, and parks were part of the *qpoc*'s[8] occupation of public spaces. The most prominent locations for this community debatably showcase an unofficial zoning of uses in the city. When it comes to the nightlife, during the 1970s, drag houses organized the majority of the balls in Harlem, while most of the regular nightlife developed in the gay bars in midtown. However, by the 1980s, Greenwich Village became a secondary location for the balls and in 1987 Pat Field created the first downtown house to walk in the upper town balls.[9] When it comes to parks, the most popular ones among the drag community were located in midtown despite Harlem's proximity to Central Park. Over time, urban spaces in the area, such as the Piers on the Hudson and Christopher Street, became predominantly and publicly occupied by trans citizens and acquired a reputation for being a place to encounter one another. As a result, shops, bars, and restaurants in the area turned into regular spots for trans people

[8] QPOC- abbreviation for queer people of color.
[9] Laurence, "A history of Drag Balls," p. 5.

to visit. Specifically, located in the area of Christopher street, establishments such as the Stonewall Inn received regular customers such as famous trans activist Silvia Ray Riviera. Other places such as the Tyffany restaurant became a popular hang-out spot for drags, where people would hang out all night and even have breakfast after the balls.[10]

**Eradicating Homosexuals Through Regulations**

During World War I, newspapers generally portrayed soldiers as innocent and naive farm boys, “innocents abroad”, and depicted New York City as a place of vice and sodomy. Moralist and conservative organizations argued that *innocent* soldiers would inevitably be corrupted by the city, and consequently bring home venereal diseases and *unwholesome city ways*. Thus, their new vices would wreck the lives of innocent women and children and inevitably degenerate North American society. Under the political climate of the war, the prohibition laws portrayed a definite rational solution and secured their enforcement in 1919, which lasted for almost five decades.[11] The changes sparked by Prohibition aimed to criminalize and eradicate the existence of vice, which by definition at the time directly included displays of homosexuality in the public space, targeted particularly gay men's relationships. QPOC were the most affected. Passing unnoticed as straight is easier for white masculine cisgender looking gay men, but for black transgender citizens that is hardly an option. However, it was the intention of limiting their visibility that ended up developing even further already existent strategies for hiding in plain sight.

Despite already fighting for their presence in public space as part of the queer community, the added intersection of being black introduced another layer of discrimination towards trans people of color, one that even came from within the LGBTQI community. As gay men found their way through the criminalization of their existence to gather unapologetically in public, certain businesses became known for their

[10] Dominique Jackson, “Dominique Jackson’s Story,” Defying moments with OZY, *HULU* video, 34:00, November 12, 2020.

[11] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994),pp. 142-143.

acceptance of queer customers. Places such as *Stewart's* and *Life Cafeteria*, both in the Village, pose an example of spaces that held a gay spot reputation for years. Unfortunately, the same reputation that encouraged gay people to visit those establishments, encouraged the police to occasionally raid these spaces. As a result, the patronage of queer people was generally allowed as long as they masked any behavior that might denounce their sexual orientation.[12] Consequently, both establishment owners and the queer clientele unofficially defined these places as white queer public spaces. Thus, the discrimination inside ballrooms toward black queens also emerges in the use of public space within the city.

*I been scared and battered*
*My hopes the wind done scattered.*
*Snow haz friz me, sun has baked me.*
*Looks like between 'em*
*They done tried to bake me*
*Stop laughin', stop lovin', stop livin' -*
*But I don't care!*
*I'm still here![13]*

The poem "I'm Still Here" by African American poet Langston Hughes accurately captures the resilience within the black community. Qpoc were not indifferent to this desire to fight back and persevere. In 1980, the general campaign to reform the image of the city targeted 42nd street, which included inevitably Times Square, as the objective area to eradicate prostitution and drugs. The iconic center of New York, in the words of Lynne Sgalynne, had acquired a bad reputation and five main symbolic images. The fourth, also defined by Lynne as "the testing ground", related to the boundaries being pushed against conventional values and rooted in the close relationship between theater and vice.[14] The risky and socially considered inappropriate practices of the area were arguably part of the essence and richness of Times Square. Similarly, the

[12] Chauncey, *Gay New York,* pp. 174-175.
[13] Langston Hughes, "I'm Still Here," in Poetry for Young People: Langston Hughes, ed. David Roessel and Arnold Rampersad (S.I., NY: STERLING PUB CO, 2021), p. 39.
[14] Lynne B. Sagalyn, *Times Square Roulette: Remaking the City Icon* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2003), pp. 50-51.

visibility of the ballroom subculture created the same value for other neighborhoods in Manhattan by imposing their existence in the public realm. Paradoxically, the targeted policies put in place to erase vice from the city, commonly in the same neighborhoods where queer people predominantly lived, had the opposite effect. Instead of eradicating queer visibility, it re-shaped how the community used public space. As a result, the queers shifted towards parks, predominantly Central Park, and multiple locations in the area of the Village.


Fig.2. Diagram of historically relevant transgender public spaces, focusing on cruising and social gatherings in Manhattan. NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, n.d., accessed January 17, 2022, https://www.nyclgbtsites.org .

Open spaces and the difficulty for the authorities to control them due to their large scale offered an alternative for gay public life to develop. As depicted by Photography Leonard Fink, locations such as the Hudson River piers were openly used by the community. Particularly during a time when most businesses, such as bars, restaurants, and theaters, were threatened with sanctions if they served queer customers. Even though gay street life was a phenomenon on its own, it was enabled by the working class. Given the crowded character of most working people's living arrangements, a big part of their social life took place on the streets. This constant crowd helped gay street life by acting as a curtain to mask their presence.[15] To an extent, the public communal use of public spaces of the middle class, allowed queer citizens to use the same physical space for activities that would be more conventionally private, such as sex. As Laud Humphrey argues in his research *Tearoom Trade*, it is the presence of agents of social control and the quality of illegality that defines the rules of the game and the use of these spaces, while making the game exciting.[16] Humphrey's research exposes in detail a kind of ritual gay men went through in these spaces in order to engage in sexual relations without being too obvious. They developed a set of signs as a form of language. Eventually, these spaces were no longer just hosting vices, they led to communication and the opportunity for engagement. This was essentially crucial for the ballroom community, who created their structures of kinship upon those principles and, contrary to popular belief, used public spaces as places to create a community without hiding.

[15] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, pp. 179-180.

[16] Laud Humphreys, *Tearoom Trade: impersonal sex in public space*, ed. Howard Bekker (Chicago,IL: Aldine, 1970), p. 90.

Fig.3. Photograph of gay men sunbathing at the Morton Street's Pier no.42 showing how after the piers were no longer used as a heavily transited port, they were almost exclusively a queer space. Leonard Fink, "Kyraikos – popcorn 'T' shirt (39)," 1977. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Comunity Center's Archive, accessed February 18,2022, https://gaycenter.org/archives .

## A New Visibility

> *A subway car on the number 6 train to Brooklyn Bridge. As the train pulls into the station, five latin boy queens pile on. Giggling and squealing, they begin to work the crowded car, as their leader claps out a rhythm and calls, "One two-three pose".*[17]

With this short descriptive scenario, Chichi Valenti introduces the House of Extravaganza in his article titled *Nations*. This journalistic piece, published in 1988 for the October issue of Details magazine, represents one of the first to document the culture of ballroom in a national media outlet. The general content of the essay introduces to the reader the intricacies and the structure of the balls and houses. However, it adequately starts by contextualizing queens *voguing* in a crowded metro car. As people observe the performance another group of queens engages and a dance battle takes place. Through its narration, Valenti shows that the community was visible in the public space while simultaneously attesting that their presence was unequivocally and fundamentally an essential part of Manhattan's street life at the time. However, the visibility on the streets did not come easy to qpoc. In order to merely exist in the public eye in a safe manner, the ballroom community had to rely on their own structures of kinship.

During the 1970s, street gangs multiplied in various areas of Manhattan, thus particularly jeopardizing the safety of transgender women. In the face of a police system that actively pursues them while penalizing their existence, queens had to turn to their own community. The concept of *houses* rapidly evolved beyond the mere organization of ballrooms and became both an orphanage for displaced kids and an organized unconventional opposition. Members would protect each other up to the point where, as Muhammad Omni puts it, they functioned as gangs. He explains that anybody who might try to assault or commit a hate crime against a queen would have to meet opposition from people

[17] Chichi Valenti, "Nations," *Details*, October 1988, p.170.

from rough neighborhoods who were accompanying these feminine creatures.[18]

In spite of the use of the term *houses*, many of these groups did not necessarily imply the occupation of a physical space. And even when it did, much of the social life took place on the streets. As Hector Xtravaganza mentions in his interview with Chantal Regnault, "(...) through going to clubs, sleeping in streets, fending for oneself, we created a little family".[19] As such, streets become catalysts for community and places to shamelessly exist and connect with one another and in some cases acquired the status of safe havens.

As Dominique Jackson recalls, " When you came to New York, you only knew one place. Going down to Christopher Street (...) and this is where we survived."[20] Christopher Street, located in the Village, is thus one of the most relevant streets in trans history. In 1969 the Stonewall Riots[21] set a precedent as drag queens finally and collectively fought back the continuous structure of oppression enforced by police. As a result, Liberation Day in 1970 initiated the annual march for LGBTQI rights commonly known in the present day as Pride. Ballroom got involved with queer activism as both had a parallel exponential growth. In the next two decades multiple movements and protests, such as the ones organized by the ACT UP organization against AIDS, took the streets of the Village. Subsequently, the hundreds of posters that covered the public sphere, together with the increased visibility of the members of the community, shifted the confidence to be out as a queer person and move through urban space.[22] This sense of visibility and community highlighted the importance of a queer person's presence on the street built on their

[18] Muhammad Omni, by Chantal Regnault, *Voguing and the ballroom scene of New York City 1989-92* (2011), p. 141.

[19] Hector Xtravaganza, by Chantal Regnault, *Voguing and the ballroom scene of New York City 1989-92* (2011), p. 30.

[20] Dominique Jackson, "Dominique Jackson's Story."

[21] The StoneWall Inn was a bar located in Christopher Street commonly visited by drag queens. The owners of the bar bribed policemen to look the other way. The Stonewall Riot was sparked in 1969 as a fight back from the queer clientel during one of the occasional raids that happened despite the bribes.

[22] Tara Burk, "Let the Record Show: Mapping Queer Art and Activism in New York City, 1986-1995," *CUNY Academic Works,* 2015, p. 19.

defiance of societal norms and shifts the main goal of *pasing*[23] into one of claiming.

Inevitably, there was simultaneously a shift in the behavior of qpoc in other urban elements, most notoriously in parks. The housing conditions of drag queens, similar to the regular working class, consisted of numerous people living in small, cramped apartments. As a result, they turned to parks for much of their social activities. As an example, big family reunions in the form of picnics were organized periodically by the different *houses*. Even though the main activity of the previous decades established *cruising* as predominant in these open spaces. Gradually, places like the Hudson River waterfront shifted from a center for clandestine encounters into a place for building connections, particularly within the ballroom community. Muhannad Omni, recalls in his interview with Chantal Regnault how he was dancing in the streets and in clubs, particularly one of his earliest teenage memories is one of him spending time with his friends at the piers impersonating his drag heroes.[24]

[23] The term *passing* is used to express the idea of looking and acting seemingly like a cisgender woman.

[24] Omni, by Chantal Regnault, *Voguing and the ballroom scene*, p. 138.

Fig.4. House of LaBeija at Central Park. Chantal Regnault, “House of LaBeija,” 1989, in *Voguing and the ballroom scene of New York City 1989-92* (2011), p.150.

At the beginning of the 20th century the piers on the west side of Manhattan, currently known as the Hudson River Park, were a hectic and lively port. In the first half of the century, the piers became a famous place for *cruising* due to the continuous and daily flow of seamen. However, by the second half of the century, the shift to aviary transport of people and goods rendered the waterfront obsolete and the piers were abandoned by the port authorities. Inevitably, this reinforced the identity of the piers as a queer space, which can be defined fundamentally as a space in the process of literally taking place through claiming territory.[25] In the 1960s gay men began appropriating this space by turning the piers into popular places for nude sunbathing. Then in the 1970s murals and art emerge alongside the waterfront and the piers become a safe haven for the queer community. The ballroom community was not excluded from the use of the piers. Voguing appeared in the 1980s as a way of

[25] Christopher Reed, “Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment,” Art Journal Vol. 55, No. 4 (1996), 64.

battling through dance while basing the movement on poses familiar to the ones in vogue magazine. The spirit of the practice is to be seen and to stand out from the crowd. With the appearance of voguing parks are the place to practice and have dance battles. They were visible in parks before they were popularized in the cubs.


Fig.5. Photograph of Morton Street's Pier no.46 showing how after the piers were no longer used as a heavily transited port, they were almost exclusively a queer space. Leonard Fink, "Pier 46," 1971. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Comunity Center's Archive, accessed February 18, 2022, https://gaycenter.org/archives

## Conclusions

Throughout the twentieth century, the North American media constructed a narrative that not only linked queer citizens to *vice* but even went as far as to portray them as one of the main threats to the integrity of their society. Particularly during World War I, newspapers and conservative organizations in New York City campaigned against the visibility of the queer community. The discourse claimed that the presence of homosexual behavior in the city would corrupt the numerous soldiers that docked daily for short periods of time and thus destroy the lives of countless women and children as they would carry these degenerate practices back home. As a result, the vilification of the community played an important part in the implementation of the Prohibitions laws in 1919. The new policies successfully suppressed the visibility of the queer citizens on the streets but failed to banish them from public space. For the next five decades, the new laws clearly criminalized any display of homosexual behaviors and inadvertently established a collective understanding that gay life could exist as long as it was done privately.

Consequently, during the first half of the twentieth century, new establishments and urban infrastructures developed to support the blossoming of gay culture as an underground system. Gay men challenged the boundaries and the mere definition of public and private space. During the day, public spaces such as parks, steam rooms, and restroom facilities were used for traditionally private activities such as cruising and a variety of sexual encounters. During the night, private facilities such as bars, restaurants, speakeasies, and particularly the Harlem balls, provided safe spaces for encounters and the development of collective public life. Queer life in New York was essentially a constant routine of finding places that offered an escape from the daily routine of hiding their queerness on the streets. However, additional layers of identity highlighted stark differences in how queer citizens experienced Manhattan. The intricacies of intersectionality created a contrasting reality for people of color. On one hand, unlike white gay cisgender citizens, black transgender people could not easily pass as straight. Thus, for them, the mere act of walking down the street was an act of bravery and

resistance. On the other hand, they were not only persecuted in public spaces but also discriminated against within their own LGBTQ community.

The Harlem balls, up until the 1970s, welcomed queens of color but held them up to a white queen standard. The tipping point for the community came in the second half of the twentieth century. Transgender people, frustrated with having to *whiten up* their faces and the slim chances of being selected as winners, started hosting their own balls. As a result, they created their structures of kinship and developed what we currently know as drag ballroom. The queer subculture matured upon the framework set in place primarily by white cisgender people between the 1920s and 1960s. The practice of cruising had originally defined NYC's parks as queer spaces. Nonetheless, the drag community diversified the primary uses of those same urban elements upon the set foundation of specific behaviors, languages, and codes.

Transgender women of color faced challenges that were not exclusive to public spaces. Trans teenagers were thrown out of their homes by their parents as a result of the continuous social stigmatization and the social rejection reinforced by the collective discourse. Many of them moved to New York without a plan or a place to stay. For that reason, the abrupt homelessness sprung upon them increased their vulnerability to incur in the practices of prostitution and burglary. Ergo, perpetuating the stereotypes portrayed by the media and reinforcing the vulnerability and discrimination against this particular group of people. Subsequently, the categorization of public and private spaces is challenged. Thereby new unofficial zonifications are created while linking race, sexual orientation, and gender identity to the urban fabric and infrastructures of the city. Specific parks acquire a safe haven status for the youth of color, the piers become art street galleries and working hot spots for sex workers, and the prominently gay neighborhoods, such as The Village and Harlem, offer moderately safe street life for queer citizens. The ballroom community, in particular, relies largely on these spaces as they convert into an extension of their homes both figuratively and literally.

The paradigm shift in the use of public space, that resulted from the creation of drag ballroom, highlights the underlying paradoxical qualities that characterized the queer urban experience all throughout the twentieth century. First, a constant contradiction between political persecution from the government against the establishments that welcomed them by looking the other way. Then the contravention of how wide open spaces such as parks were used for highly intimate sexual practices. And finally, the dualism of how transgender citizens enjoyed the secrecy and privacy of the balls to create a community on their terms but then relied on public space for the development, and growth of that same community. Furthermore, It was through the appropriation of public space and the resistance to continue being swept under the rug, that the LGBTQ movement was born and developed. Thus corroborating the historical value of documenting and learning about this community's history.

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