

Category Is

Aaron Best

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Architecture

University of Washington

2026

Committee:

Louisa Iarocci

Julia Nagele

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Architecture





University of Washington

**Abstract**

Category Is

Reimagining a Capitol Hill Church Into A Drag Performance Space

Aaron Best

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Louisa Iarocci

Department of Architecture

This thesis explores how adaptive reuse can preserve and expand queer cultural infrastructure through the transformation of the former Westminster Presbyterian Church in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood into a drag theater, artist residency, and queer cultural center. Drawing from queer theory, Harlem ballroom culture, drag performance, and the camp aesthetic, the project investigates the relationship between ritual, performance, and architectural space. Particular attention is given to the spatial parallels between Catholic liturgy, ballroom culture, and contemporary drag performance, each of which relies upon procession, transformation, spectatorship, and collective gathering as mechanisms for producing identity and community. Organized around the interconnected programs of Live, Work, and Play, the design reimagines the church's historic sanctuary as a performance venue while providing housing, creative studios, fabrication spaces, and communal amenities that support the cultural labor behind drag. Rather than treating drag solely as entertainment, the project understands it as a broader social and artistic ecosystem sustained through mentorship, production, and collective participation. Through this intervention, the thesis argues that historic buildings can remain culturally relevant by accommodating new forms of gathering and identity formation, positioning adaptive reuse as a process of cultural continuation and transformation.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|           |                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>01</b> | <b>INTRODUCTION</b>                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>02</b> | <b>CRITICAL STANCE</b>                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>03</b> | <b>WHAT IS DRAG?</b><br>History of Drag<br>The Body in Drag                                                                                                                      |
| <b>04</b> | <b>HARLEM BALLROOM CULTURE</b><br>Introduction<br>Components of Ballroom Culture<br>Spatial Layout of a Ball                                                                     |
| <b>05</b> | <b>CONTEMPORARY DRAG</b><br>Introduction to Camp<br>Collage Explorations<br>Mapping a Drag Performance<br>Ritualized Spatial Hierarchies<br>Parallels Beyond Spatial Programming |
| <b>06</b> | <b>SEATTLE'S CAPITOL HILL NEIGHBORHOOD</b><br>Mapping Queer History of Capitol Hill<br>Mapping Site Context<br>Church Site Visit & Overview                                      |
| <b>07</b> | <b>BUILDING DESIGN PROPOSAL</b><br>Reinterpretations of Site<br>Isometrics<br>Renderings<br>Sections                                                                             |
| <b>08</b> | <b>CONCLUSIONS</b>                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>09</b> | <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>                                                                                                                                                              |

|                                                            |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Figure 1. Nightclub Scene                                  | 15 |
| Figure 2. LGBTQ+ Bars and Nightclubs Diagram               | 16 |
| Figure 3. Paris Is Burning Ballroom Community Portrait     | 17 |
| Figure 4. Wildrose Interior                                | 18 |
| Figure 5. As You Are Community Venue                       | 18 |
| Figure 6. Vogue Performance                                | 19 |
| Figure 7. The Saint Nightclub Interior                     | 19 |
| Figure 8. Drag Queens and Kings                            | 25 |
| Figure 9. Mocambo Nightclub                                | 26 |
| Figure 10. Double Header Tavern                            | 26 |
| Figure 11. Billy Porter, Sun God                           | 27 |
| Figure 12. Shelly's Leg Interior                           | 27 |
| Figure 13. The Body in Drag                                | 33 |
| Figure 14. RuPaul Portrait                                 | 34 |
| Figure 15. Landon Cider Portrait                           | 34 |
| Figure 16. Billy Porter at the Met Gala                    | 35 |
| Figure 17. Divine Portrait                                 | 35 |
| Figure 18. Ballroom Runway Performance                     | 41 |
| Figure 19. Realness Competition                            | 42 |
| Figure 20. Pepper LaBeija Portrait                         | 42 |
| Figure 21. Venus Xtravaganza                               | 43 |
| Figure 22. Spatial Layout of a Harlem Ball                 | 45 |
| Figure 23. Ballroom Fashion Competition                    | 46 |
| Figure 24. Ballroom DJ and Commentator                     | 46 |
| Figure 25. Backstage Drag Preparation                      | 47 |
| Figure 26. Ballroom Community Gathering                    | 47 |
| Figure 27. Camp and Queer Aesthetics Diagram               | 53 |
| Figure 28. Performance Collage                             | 54 |
| Figure 29. Androgyny Collage                               | 54 |
| Figure 30. Opulence Collage                                | 55 |
| Figure 31. Queer Bar Exterior                              | 56 |
| Figure 32. Queer Bar Interior                              | 57 |
| Figure 33. Queer Bar Floor Plan                            | 58 |
| Figure 34. Performer Movement Mapping                      | 59 |
| Figure 35. Public–Private Spatial Hierarchy                | 59 |
| Figure 36. Ballroom, Drag, and Catholic Spatial Comparison | 61 |
| Figure 37. Drag and Catholic Vestment Comparison           | 61 |
| Figure 38. Capitol Hill Queer History Map                  | 65 |
| Figure 39. Site Context Axonometric                        | 69 |
| Figure 40. Westminster Presbyterian Church Documentation   | 73 |
| Figure 41. Lambert House                                   | 75 |
| Figure 42. Unicorn Interior                                | 75 |
| Figure 43. Neighbours Nightclub                            | 76 |
| Figure 44. Charlie's Queer Books                           | 76 |
| Figure 45. Original Church Floor Plan and South Elevation  | 78 |
| Figure 46. Original Church Elevations                      | 79 |
| Figure 47. Massing Studies                                 | 84 |
| Figure 48. Design Development Axonometrics                 | 86 |
| Figure 49. Historic Church Integration Diagrams            | 88 |
| Figure 50. Section Axonometric                             | 90 |

# FIGURES

# FIGURES CONT.

|                                                 |     |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Figure 51. First Floor Plan                     | 92  |
| Figure 52. Ground Floor Plan                    | 93  |
| Figure 53. Performance Hall Rendering           | 96  |
| Figure 54. Drag Performance Rendering           | 97  |
| Figure 55. Live / Work / Play Building Section  | 100 |
| Figure 56. Stage Elevator Section Diagram       | 101 |
| Figure 57. Artist Residency Communal Space      | 104 |
| Figure 58. Courtyard and Communal Space         | 105 |
| Figure 59. Artist Residency Addition            | 106 |
| Figure 60. Drag Artist Studio                   | 107 |
| Figure 61. Drag Theater Interior                | 108 |
| Figure 62. Drag Ball at Webster Hall            | 111 |
| Figure 63. Escándalo Revival at Arena Nightclub | 112 |
| Figure 64. Conclusion Image I                   | 113 |
| Figure 65. Conclusion Image II                  | 113 |

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Many thanks to my thesis committee, Louisa Iarocci and Julia Nagele. Your incredible effort and support reminded me of the value of this work and your rigorous critique inspired the advancement of my ideas and explorations.

Thank you to my friends and family, especially my parents, for your endless support and encouragement. Many thanks to my partner, Michael, for your continued support throughout my Master's and thesis. Your love shaped who I am, which significantly informs this thesis.





# INTRODUCTION







# *The Original Queer Community Spaces*

The bass is the first thing I notice. It leaks through the walls and onto the sidewalk before I ever reach the door. As I step inside, the room is dark except for flashes of colored light moving across the crowd. People are packed shoulder to shoulder. Some are dancing. Others lean close to talk over the music. A drag queen crosses the room in six-inch heels while someone nearby cheers her on. The air is warm. Sweat hangs in the room. Every surface seems to vibrate with movement.

At first, it feels like a bar. Then I begin to notice everything else. Friends introduce one another. Someone recognizes a familiar face across the room. A performer steps onto the stage and the crowd shifts its attention forward. People who arrived alone are suddenly part of something larger. For many, this may be the first room where they can speak openly, flirt openly, or simply exist without explaining themselves. What happens here extends beyond drinking or dancing. Relationships begin here. Stories are exchanged here. People return week after week because they know they will see the same faces again.

For someone entering a queer nightclub for the first time, the experience can feel unfamiliar in a way that is difficult to describe. The room offers a glimpse of a different social world, one built through repetition and collective presence. The music, the performances, and the people all contribute to an atmosphere where self-expression feels possible. Long before LGBTQ+ community centers, healthcare organizations, advocacy groups, or digital networks existed, queer bars and nightclubs provided spaces where these encounters could take place.

To understand the history of queer nightlife is therefore to understand how community was built, maintained, and passed from one generation to the next.

For much of the twentieth century, bars and nightclubs served as the primary public spaces where LGBTQ+ people could gather, socialize, and exist openly in community. At a time when homosexuality was criminalized, heavily stigmatized, and largely excluded from mainstream civic life, queer bars provided rare environments where individuals could meet others like themselves, form relationships, and cultivate a collective identity.<sup>1</sup> The proliferation of queer bars and nightclubs in major cities during the early twentieth century, and especially after World War II, created some of the first sustained social infrastructures for queer life. In many cases, these venues occupied marginal urban districts characterized by inexpensive rents, aging building stock, and limited social oversight, conditions that enabled queer communities to establish themselves in spaces overlooked by dominant society. Through repeated occupation and collective use, bars became foundational institutions in the development of modern LGBTQ+ culture. These venues functioned as far more than places to drink or dance. They operated as sites of refuge, connection, cultural production, and political organizing. Within their walls, patrons exchanged information, built support networks, raised funds for mutual aid efforts, and organized resistance against discriminatory laws and policing.<sup>3</sup> Many of the institutions now associated with LGBTQ+ life, including advocacy organizations, healthcare initiatives, and community centers, emerged from social networks first established within bars





Figure 1: Dance floor at Paradise Garage, New York City, photographed by Bill Bernstein, 1979. The image documents the dense social environment of one of the most influential queer dance venues of the disco era, a space that helped establish the relationship between music, performance, community formation, and collective gathering that continues to inform contemporary queer nightlife. Source: Bill Bernstein, *Disco* (Reel Art Press, 2015).





**Figure 2:** Diagram showcases the components of impromptu nightlife spaces that defined the social backbone of the queer community for decades.

and clubs. Historians and preservation scholars have increasingly recognized queer nightlife venues as critical forms of cultural infrastructure that sustained LGBTQ+ communities during periods of exclusion and persecution.<sup>4</sup> The political significance of these spaces is perhaps best illustrated by the Stonewall Inn in New York City. On June 28, 1969, patrons resisted a police raid, sparking the Stonewall Uprising and helping launch the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement.<sup>5</sup> The fact that one of the most consequential moments in queer history emerged from a bar is not coincidental; bars were among the few spaces where queer people could gather in sufficient numbers to cultivate solidarity, collective identity, and political power.

Beyond their social and political functions, queer bars and nightclubs were also spaces of performance and transformation. They provided a threshold between the hostile conditions of everyday life and temporary environments where alternative identities and social structures could

flourish. Within these spaces, drag performance, ballroom culture, queer music scenes, and chosen-family networks emerged and evolved.<sup>6</sup> The architecture of the bar facilitated these transformations. Entry sequences, dimly lit interiors, dance floors, stages, and runways created environments where the norms of the outside world could be suspended and reimaged. These spaces offered opportunities to experiment with one's gender and self-presentation in ways that were often impossible elsewhere. In this sense, queer nightlife functioned as a form of world-making, allowing participants to collectively construct alternative social realities.<sup>7</sup>

The development of Harlem ballroom culture demonstrates the extent to which queer nightlife spaces functioned as sites of cultural production. Beginning in the early twentieth century and expanding throughout the latter half of the century, ballroom events provided Black and Latino LGBTQ+ communities with spaces to



**Figure 3:** Participants from New York City's ballroom community pose for a group portrait featured in *Paris Is Burning* (1990). The documentary shows the lives of Black and Brown LGBTQ+ individuals who participated in ballroom culture in the 1970s. *Paris Is Burning*, directed by Jennie Livingston (Miramax Films, 1990).

perform, compete, and construct alternative systems of kinship through Houses and chosen families.<sup>8</sup> Organized around runways, judges, commentators, and spectators, balls transformed ordinary spaces into highly ritualized environments centered on visibility, performance, and collective recognition. The ballroom runway became both a stage and a processional space through which participants could publicly construct and affirm identities that were often marginalized elsewhere. These traditions continue to shape contemporary drag culture and reveal how performance spaces can simultaneously function as sites of artistic production and community building.<sup>9</sup>

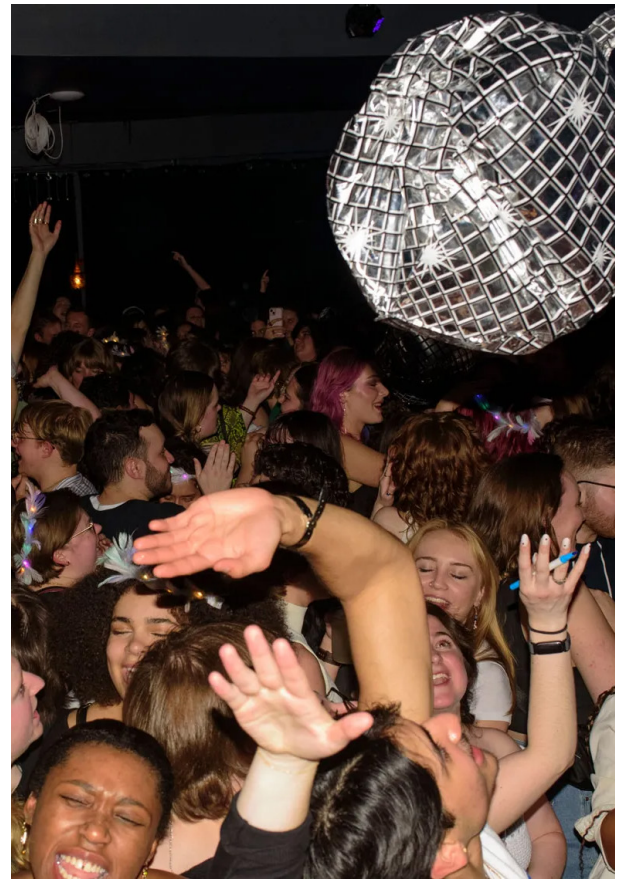
Despite their importance, many historic queer venues have disappeared through redevelopment, rising rents, changing demographics, and shifting patterns of social interaction.<sup>10</sup> As queer neighborhoods continue to evolve, questions emerge regarding how the cultural functions historically housed within bars

and clubs might be preserved and expanded through new architectural forms. If queer nightlife venues were the original community spaces of LGBTQ+ life, what might a contemporary queer cultural institution look like today? This thesis begins with that question, examining how architecture can draw upon the histories of queer nightlife, ballroom culture, and performance to create new forms of cultural infrastructure that support community, creativity, and belonging.





**Figure 4:** Interior of WildRose lesbian bar located in Seattle, Washington. Crowds fill a dance floor illuminated by colored lighting during a nightlife event. Queer/Bar. “Gallery.” Queer/Bar Seattle. <https://www.thequeerbar.com/gallery>



**Figure 5:** Patrons gather beneath suspended disco-ball installations at As You Are, a queer-owned café, bar, and community venue in Washington, D.C. Opened in 2022, As You Are represents a new generation of LGBTQ+ spaces that combine nightlife with community programming, creating environments that support both social connection and cultural expression. Sophia Moten, photograph of As You Are, Washington, D.C., 2024.





**Figure 6:** A performer takes center stage during a vogue and ballroom performance in New York City. On the Boards, WAACK! performance event, Seattle, Washington.



**Figure 7:** A patron dances within the crowded interior of The Saint, one of New York City's most influential gay nightclubs. Open from 1980 to 1988, The Saint became renowned for its immersive environment, marathon dance events, and role as a gathering place for gay men during a pivotal period in queer history.

## Endnotes

1. George Chauncey, "Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940."
2. Nan Alamilla Boyd, "Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965."
3. James N. Green, "Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil."
4. Amin Ghaziani, "There Goes the Gayborhood?"
5. David Carter, "Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution."
6. Esther Newton, "Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America."
7. José Esteban Muñoz, "Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity."
8. Marlon M. Bailey, "Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit."
9. Judith Butler, "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity."
10. Christina B. Hanhardt, "Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence."







# CRITICAL STANCE







This thesis argues that queer cultural spaces constitute a form of civic infrastructure and should be recognized and preserved as such. Throughout the twentieth century, bars, nightclubs, ballrooms, and performance venues served as some of the only public environments where LGBTQ+ individuals could gather, share knowledge, express identity, and organize politically. These spaces functioned as sites of refuge, cultural production, mutual aid, and collective memory long before formal LGBTQ+ institutions existed.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite their significance, queer cultural spaces have historically been treated as temporary, informal, or commercially expendable rather than as essential components.

This condition reveals a broader failure within architecture and urban planning. Traditional preservation frameworks often prioritize architectural authenticity, stylistic significance, and physical permanence, while the cultural value of queer spaces frequently resides in performance, occupation, ritual, and collective experience rather than in architectural form

alone.<sup>2</sup> As a result, many historically significant queer spaces have been lost despite their profound social and cultural importance. Simultaneously, contemporary approaches to LGBTQ+ design frequently focus on housing, healthcare, or social services while overlooking the role that spaces of celebration, performance, creativity, and nightlife continue to play in sustaining queer communities. This creates a false distinction between care and culture, as though spaces of joy, performance, and collective gathering are less essential than other forms of civic infrastructure.

Drawing from queer theory, ballroom culture, drag performance, and adaptive reuse, this thesis challenges the assumption that performance spaces are secondary cultural institutions. Instead, it positions drag venues, ballrooms, and queer gathering spaces as critical sites of cultural identity formation for both the individual and a community. Scholars such as Judith Butler have argued that identity is not fixed but produced through repeated acts of performance, while Marlon Bailey's work on





**Figure 8:** Collage of drag queens and kings showcasing the varied interpretations of drag and self.

ballroom culture demonstrates how performance spaces function as sites where alternative systems of kinship are actively constructed.<sup>3</sup> These spaces do not merely accommodate culture; they actively produce it.

The project further argues that architecture should move beyond the preservation of buildings as static artifacts and instead engage preservation as a process of cultural continuation. Dolores Hayden has argued that places derive meaning through the social memories and collective practices attached to them rather than through physical form alone.<sup>4</sup> The adaptive reuse of the former Westminster Presbyterian Church demonstrates how existing architecture can be reinterpreted to support new forms of occupation while maintaining continuity with its original function. Through an examination of the spatial parallels between Catholic ritual, Harlem ballroom culture, and contemporary drag performance, the thesis reveals that churches and drag venues share a common architectural language rooted in procession, performance, spectatorship, and gathering. The conversion

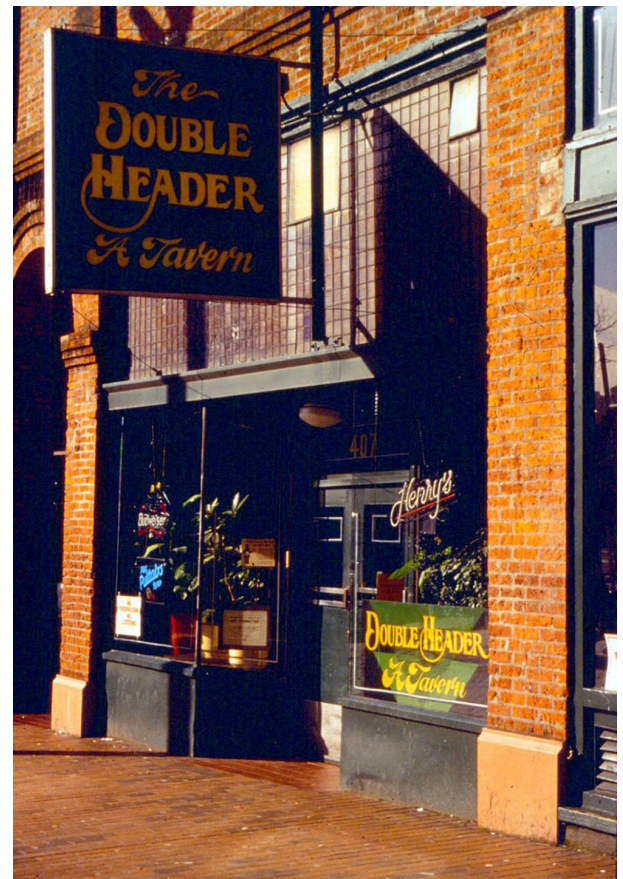
of a church into a drag theater is therefore not a symbolic contradiction, but an architectural translation of one ritualized space into another.

Ultimately, this thesis contends that the future of queer preservation lies not in memorializing lost spaces, but in creating new ones. As cities continue to evolve and historic queer venues disappear, architecture must play a more active role in sustaining the cultural infrastructures that support community. Amin Ghaziani's work on the changing nature of the gayborhood suggests that queer communities are not disappearing, but are instead being reshaped by shifting economic and spatial conditions.<sup>5</sup> Queer spaces should therefore be understood not as niche amenities, but as vital spaces worthy of long-term investment and protection. Historic preservation, I argue, is not simply the conservation of buildings. It is the preservation of the communities, rituals, and cultural practices that give those buildings meaning.





**Figure 9:** Exterior view of The Mocambo nightclub in Pioneer Square. During the mid-twentieth century, the venue became a significant gathering place within Seattle's queer nightlife scene and contributed to the concentration of LGBTQ+ establishments in Pioneer Square prior to the migration of queer life toward Capitol Hill. The club's eventual closure reflects the transient nature of many early queer spaces, which often operated under economic, legal, and social pressures. HistoryLink, Mocambo Restaurant, Pioneer Square LGBTQ+ History Tour.



**Figure 10:** The Double Header Tavern in Pioneer Square, widely regarded as one of the oldest continuously operating gay bars in the United States. Established in 1934, the venue occupied a central role in Seattle's early LGBTQ+ history and contributed to Pioneer Square's emergence as the city's first recognizable gay neighborhood. The bar closed in 2015 following decades of demographic and economic shifts that gradually relocated Seattle's queer community from Pioneer Square to Capitol Hill. Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project, The Double Header Tavern, Seattle.



**Figure 11:** Billy Porter wearing “Sun God,” a custom ensemble designed by The Blonds for the 2019 Met Gala exhibition “Camp: Notes on Fashion.” Featuring a bejeweled catsuit, monumental gold wings, and a ceremonial entrance carried on a litter, the outfit exemplifies Susan Sontag’s understanding of camp as artifice, exaggeration, theatricality, and stylization. The performance blurred distinctions between fashion, costume, ritual, and architecture, transforming the red carpet into a processional stage. The look has become one of the most iconic contemporary examples of camp aesthetics within popular culture. *Seattle Gay News*, R Place Seattle, 2021.



**Figure 12:** Interior photograph of Shelly’s Leg, one of Seattle’s most influential gay bars. Located in Pioneer Square, the venue became known for openly identifying itself as a gay establishment during a period when many LGBTQ+ spaces remained hidden from public view. Beyond serving as a nightlife destination, Shelly’s Leg functioned as an important site of community formation, visibility, and political organizing within Seattle’s LGBTQ+ community. Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project, Shelly’s Leg, Seattle.

## Endnotes

1. Christina B. Hanhardt, "Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence."
2. Dolores Hayden, "The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History."
3. Judith Butler, "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity."
4. Marlon M. Bailey, "Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit."
5. Dolores Hayden, "The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History."
6. Amin Ghaziani, "There Goes the Gayborhood?"





# WHAT IS DRAG?







# “We’re all born naked, the rest is drag!”

-RuPaul <sup>10</sup>

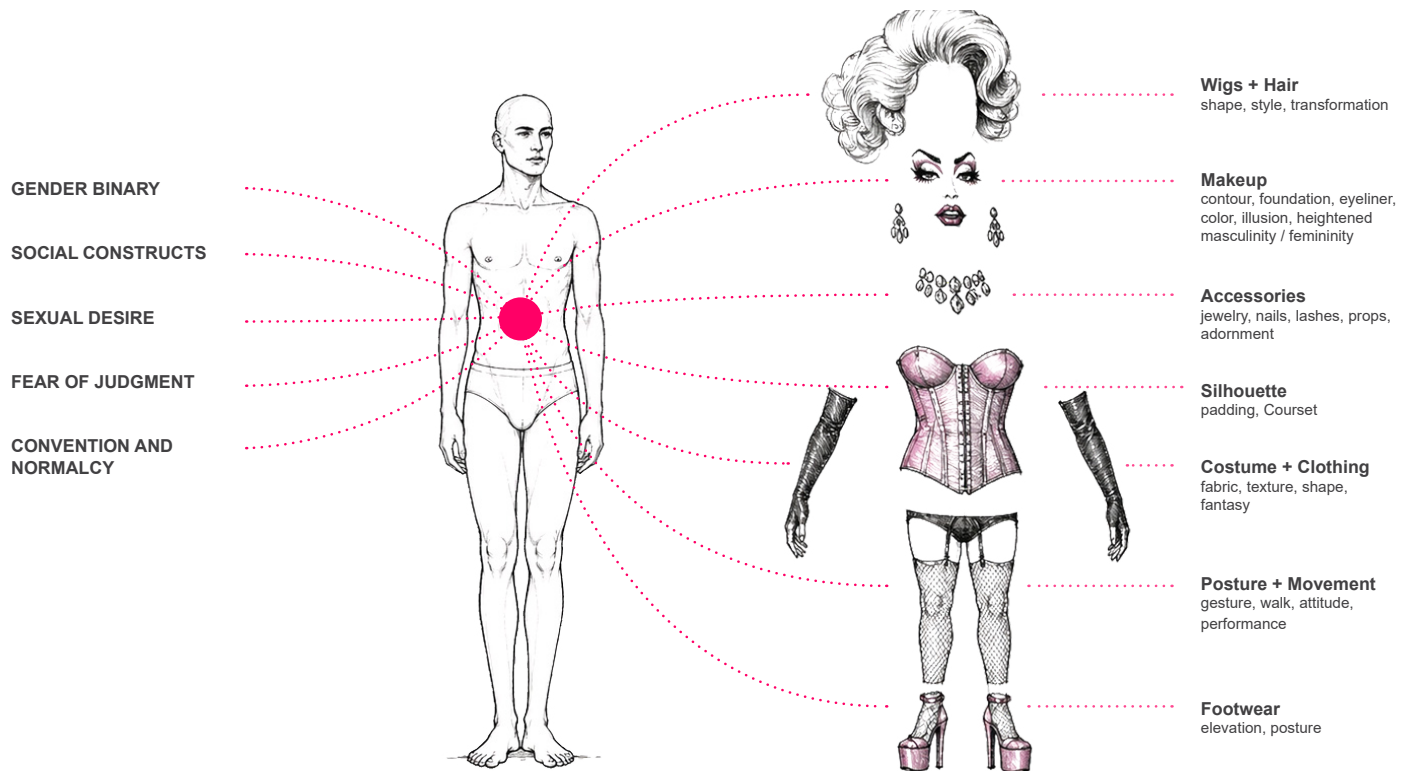
Drag is an art form centered on the transformation of the body through performance, costume, gesture, and fashion. While often associated with entertainment, drag extends far beyond the stage. It is a creative practice through which performers construct alternative identities, challenge social expectations, and explore the fluidity of gender. Through the deliberate manipulation of appearance and behavior, drag reveals that many of the qualities society associates with masculinity and femininity are themselves performed, learned, and culturally reinforced rather than innate.<sup>1</sup>

The accompanying Figure illustrates this process of construction. Beginning with the “neutral” body, layers of wigs, makeup, accessories, clothing, silhouette, posture, movement, and footwear are added to produce the drag persona. These elements do not merely decorate the body; they actively reshape how it is perceived and experienced. Makeup alters facial structure through contour and illusion, corsets and padding transform bodily proportions, while clothing, gesture, and movement create an entirely new visual and social identity. The drag body is therefore not discovered but assembled,

exposing identity itself as something that can be consciously designed and performed<sup>2</sup>.

This understanding of identity as constructed rather than fixed has deep roots in queer theory. Philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler famously argued that gender is not something one inherently is, but something one continually does through repeated acts, gestures, and behaviors. Rather than expressing a preexisting identity, these performances actively produce the appearance of a stable gendered self. Butler describes gender as a “stylized repetition of acts” through which social expectations become embodied and normalized<sup>3</sup> Drag becomes significant within this framework because it makes these mechanisms visible. By exaggerating, parodying, or reassembling the codes of gender, drag exposes the performative nature of identities that are often perceived as natural.<sup>4</sup>

Importantly, drag is not simply about impersonating another gender. Throughout its history, drag has served as a vehicle for artistic experimentation, political critique, and community formation. Within queer communities,



**Figure 13:** The body in drag diagram

drag performers have historically acted as leaders within their respected communities.<sup>5</sup> Drag emerged as a particularly important form of expression within underground queer spaces, bars, and ballroom culture, where performers could experiment with identity outside the constraints of mainstream society. In these environments, drag became a means of claiming visibility, creating chosen family, and imagining alternative ways of being in the world.<sup>6</sup>

The transformative process represented in the diagram extends beyond the physical body. On the left side of the figure, concepts such as the gender binary, social constructs, sexual desire, fear of judgment, and cultural expectations of normalcy are shown as forces acting upon the individual. Drag responds to these constraints not by accepting them, but by manipulating and reimagining them. Through performance, the drag artist demonstrates that identities are neither fixed nor inevitable; they are negotiated, constructed, and continually remade.<sup>7</sup>

For this reason, drag can be understood as a ritual of transformation. Like many ritual practices, it involves a series of actions whose

outcomes alter our experience as a viewer. The performer enters a process of becoming, emerging from backstage spaces transformed into a new persona before an audience. The act of drag therefore operates simultaneously as artistic production, social commentary, and personal expression. It creates a temporary space where identities can be questioned, exaggerated, celebrated, and reconstructed. In doing so, drag reveals that the body is not simply a biological object but a cultural and political site through which meanings are constantly performed and contested.



**Figure 14:** Portrait of RuPaul, whose career helped transform drag from a largely underground cultural practice into a globally recognized form of entertainment. Catherine McGann, photograph of RuPaul, c. 1980s.



**Figure 15:** Portrait of drag king Landon Cider, whose performances challenge the assumption that drag is exclusively feminine. Through the exaggeration of masculine aesthetics, drag kings reveal gender to be a constructed and performative condition. The Boulet Brothers' Dragula Season 3 promotional image, 2019.





**Figure 16:** Billy Porter arrives at the 2019 Met Gala in a custom gold ensemble by The Blonds, carried into the event as a winged sun god inspired by ancient Egyptian iconography. Mike Coppola/Getty Images for The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Vogue, 2019 Met Gala.



**Figure 17:** Portrait of Divine, whose performances helped define the relationship between drag, camp, and queer culture in the late twentieth century. The exaggerated makeup, sculpted hair, and theatrical expression reject conventional standards of femininity in favor of deliberate artifice and excess. Greg Gorman, portrait of Divine.

## Endnotes

1. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
2. Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).
3. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.
4. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
5. Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom 5 5 Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
6. Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
7. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
8. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969).
9. Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013).
10. RuPaul, *Lettin' It All Hang Out: An Autobiography* (New York: Hyperion, 1995)







# 1970'S HARLEM BALLROOM



# ***Introduction to Harlem Ballroom Culture***

Harlem ballroom culture emerged in the early and mid-twentieth century as a response to the racism, homophobia, and exclusion experienced by Black and Latino LGBTQ+ communities within both mainstream society and predominantly white gay spaces. While drag balls had existed in New York since the late nineteenth century, contemporary ballroom culture took shape in Harlem during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly after performers such as Crystal LaBeija challenged racial discrimination within existing drag pageants. Ballroom events became spaces where queer people could create their own systems of recognition, beauty, status, and belonging.<sup>1</sup> Scholars such as George Chauncey and Marlon Bailey describe ballroom as both a cultural institution and a survival strategy, providing community for individuals who were often excluded from traditional family structures and public life.<sup>2</sup>

At the center of ballroom culture is the concept of the House. Houses function as chosen families led by “Mothers” and “Fathers,” typically experienced members of the community who mentor younger participants.<sup>3</sup> House members, often called “children,” receive emotional support, housing assistance, artistic guidance, and protection from discrimination. Marlon Bailey argues that these kinship networks represent an alternative family structure that responds directly to the social vulnerabilities faced by many queer and trans people of color.<sup>4</sup> Famous houses such as the House of LaBeija, House of Xtravaganza, and House of Ninja became cultural institutions in their own right, developing reputations through decades of competition and community leadership.

Ballroom events themselves are highly structured competitions organized around



**Figure 18:** A performer walks the runway during a ballroom competition, using stylized poses, arm movements, and fashion-forward presentation derived from the tradition of voguing. House Lives Matter, Latex Ball..

specific categories. Participants “walk” categories that challenge them to embody particular identities, aesthetics, or skills. Categories such as Executive Realness, Schoolboy Realness, and Military Realness judge how convincingly a contestant can perform a social role that may be inaccessible to them in everyday life. Other categories focus on beauty, fashion, body presentation, or performance. According to Bailey, “realness” should not be understood simply as imitation; rather, it is a critical performance that exposes how race, gender, and class are socially constructed.<sup>5</sup> Through competition, participants simultaneously critique and appropriate the power structures that often marginalize them.

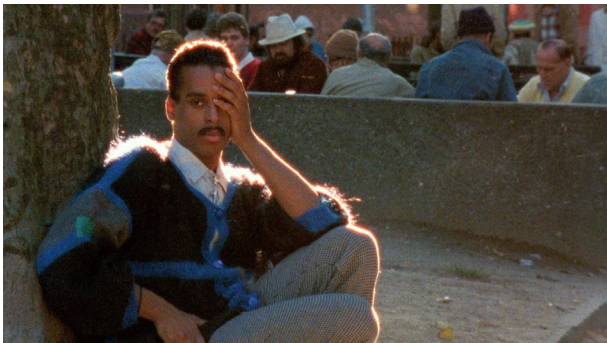
One of ballroom culture’s most recognizable contributions is voguing, a dance form that developed within Harlem ballrooms during

the late twentieth century. Inspired by fashion photography, magazine poses, martial arts, and dance traditions, voguing transformed the runway into a site of athleticism and self-expression. Over time, several styles emerged, including Old Way, New Way, and Vogue Femme. Scholars note that voguing is not simply a dance but a performative language through which participants communicate confidence, resilience, and identity.<sup>6</sup> While mainstream audiences became familiar with voguing through Madonna’s 1990 song *Vogue*, historians emphasize that the dance originated within Black and Latino queer communities long before its commercial popularization.<sup>7</sup>





**Figure 19:** Ballroom participant competing in a “realness” category during a Harlem ballroom event. Realness categories challenged participants to convincingly embody identities often inaccessible to them in everyday life, including executives, students, military personnel, or members of the fashion elite. Chantal Regnault, *Voguing and Ballroom Culture of New York City*, c. 1980s.



**Figure 20:** Portrait of Pepper LaBeija, legendary House Mother of the House of LaBeija and one of the most influential figures in ballroom culture. Featured prominently in *Paris Is Burning*, \*LaBeija helped establish the house system that became central to ballroom culture. Houses functioned as alternative family structures, providing mentorship, support, housing, and community for LGBTQ+ youth who were frequently excluded from traditional family networks. Still from *Paris Is Burning* (1990), directed by Jennie Livingston.

The ballroom has often been described as a ritual space. Bailey characterizes balls as highly choreographed communal events where identity is performed, judged, and celebrated.<sup>8</sup> The structure of a ball contains many elements that resemble ceremonial gatherings: processions down a runway, designated commentators who guide the event, judges who confer status, and symbolic trophies that recognize achievement.<sup>9</sup> For participants, the ballroom creates a temporary world where social hierarchies can be reimagined and where marginalized identities become sources of prestige and power.<sup>10</sup> This ritualized environment is one reason ballroom culture has remained resilient despite the challenges of poverty, homelessness, violence, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

At the center of ballroom culture is the concept of the House. Houses function as chosen

families led by “Mothers” and “Fathers,” typically experienced members of the community who mentor younger participants. House members, often called “children,” receive emotional support, housing assistance, artistic guidance, and protection from discrimination. Bailey argues that these kinship networks represent an alternative family structure that responds directly to the social vulnerabilities faced by many queer and trans people of color.<sup>11</sup>

Ballroom events themselves are highly structured competitions organized around specific categories. Participants “walk” categories that challenge them to embody particular identities, aesthetics, or skills. Categories such as Executive Realness, Schoolboy Realness, and Military Realness judge how convincingly a contestant can perform a social role that may be inaccessible to them in



**Figure 21:** Film still of Venus Xtravaganza from *Paris Is Burning* (1990). Venus became one of the documentary's most memorable figures through her discussions of femininity, aspiration, and the pursuit of acceptance within mainstream society. Source: *Paris Is Burning* (Miramax Films, 1990).



**Figure 22:** Participant performing during a ballroom competition in the late twentieth century. Ballroom events transformed ordinary community halls, gymnasiums, and rented gathering spaces into temporary worlds of performance, competition, and collective recognition. Source: *Paris Is Burning* (Miramax Films, 1990).

everyday life. Other categories focus on beauty, fashion, body presentation, or performance. According to Bailey, “realness” should not be understood simply as imitation; rather, it is a critical performance that exposes how race, gender, and class are socially constructed.<sup>12</sup> Through competition, participants simultaneously critique and appropriate the power structures that often marginalize them.

One of ballroom culture's most recognizable contributions is voguing, a dance form that developed within Harlem ballrooms during the late twentieth century. Inspired by fashion photography, magazine poses, martial arts, and dance traditions, voguing transformed the runway into a site of athleticism and self-expression. Over time, several styles emerged, including Old Way, New Way, and Vogue Femme. Scholars note that voguing is not simply

a dance but a performative language through which participants communicate confidence, resilience, and identity.<sup>13</sup>

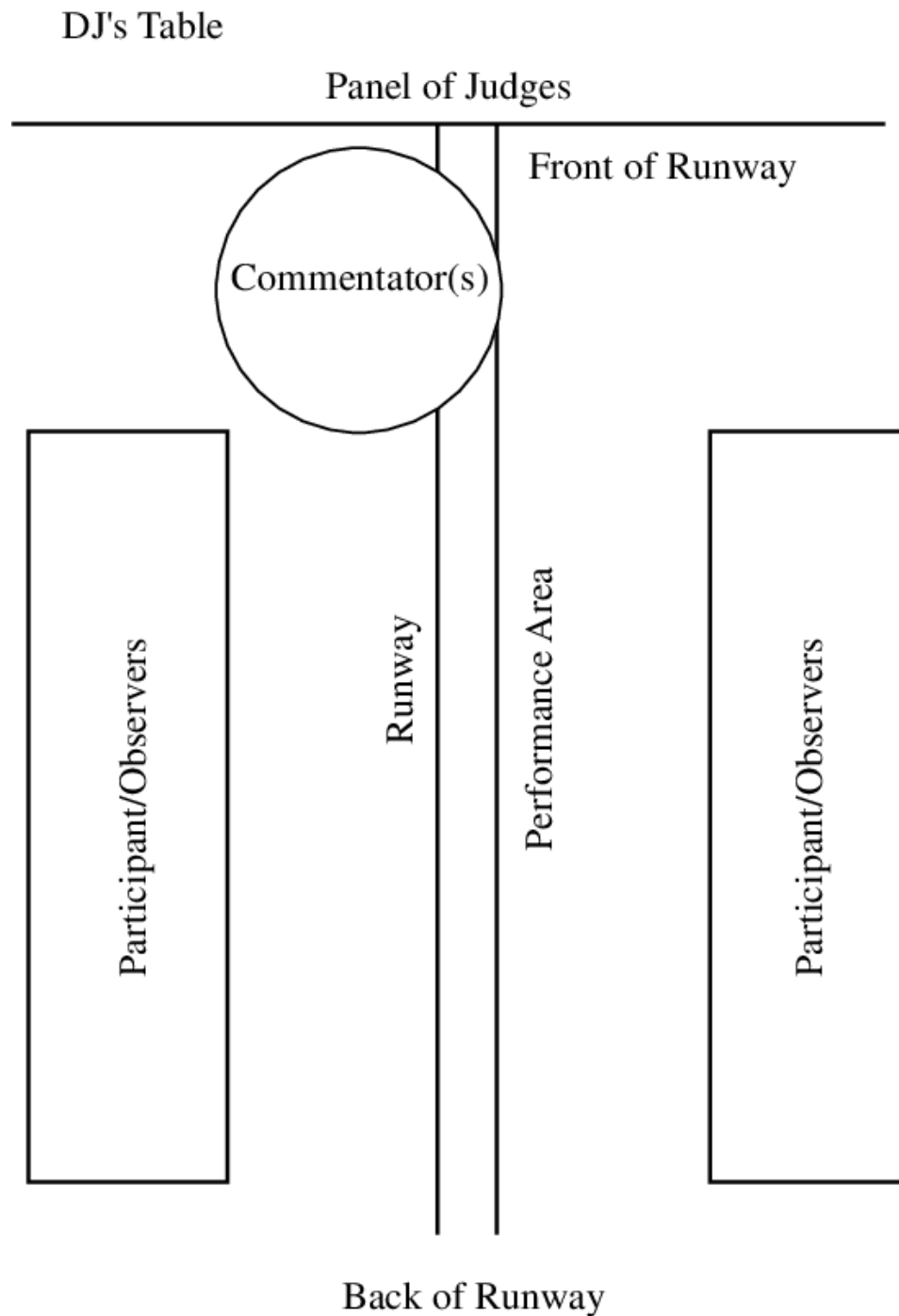
# ***Spatial Layout and Components of a Ball***

Harlem ballroom culture developed as an alternative social and cultural infrastructure for Black and Latino LGBTQ+ communities who were often excluded from both mainstream society and predominantly white gay spaces. Balls functioned as highly organized performance events where participants competed across a variety of categories while simultaneously building networks of support through chosen families known as Houses. Although ballroom culture is often discussed through fashion, dance, and identity, it is equally defined by its spatial organization.<sup>14</sup> The physical layout of a ball establishes clear relationships between performers, judges, commentators, and spectators, creating a stage for both competition and community formation.

At the center of a typical ball is the runway, the primary performance space where participants present themselves before the judges and audience. Unlike a conventional theater stage, the runway acts as a linear procession route that allows performers to move directly through the crowd while remaining visible from multiple vantage points. This spatial arrangement emphasizes movement, visibility, and personal expression. Contestants enter from the back of the runway and advance toward the judges, transforming the act of walking into a ritualized performance in which identity, confidence, fashion, and skill are evaluated.<sup>15</sup> The runway serves as both a stage and a social threshold where private preparation becomes public presentation.

Supporting the runway are several key spatial components that structure the event. A panel of judges occupies the front of the runway, acting as the primary authority within the competition. Nearby, the MC or commentator provides narration, encouragement, and critique, while the DJ controls the music and rhythm that drive the performances. Along both sides of the runway, participants and observers gather in close proximity to the action. This arrangement intentionally blurs the distinction between audience and performer, as spectators frequently become competitors and competitors return to the audience after their category concludes.<sup>16</sup> The resulting environment is highly participatory, generating energy through constant interaction between performers and the community surrounding them.

Behind the scenes, green rooms allow performers to change into their performance personas. These spaces are essential to ballroom culture because they accommodate the collective nature of performance. Members of a House often arrive, prepare, compete, and celebrate together, reinforcing bonds that extend beyond the event itself. The spatial sequence from House space and green room, to runway, to judging table creates a progression from private identity formation to public recognition<sup>17</sup>. In this way, the architecture of the ball reflects one of ballroom culture's central ideas: the transformation of self through performance and community.



**Figure 23:** . Ballroom culture ground plan illustrating the spatial organization of a ballroom competition, including the runway, judges, commentator, DJ, and spectators. Adapted from Bailey, “Engendering Space: Ballroom Culture and the Spatial Practice of Possibility in Detroit” (2014).





**Figure 24:** Participant competing in a ballroom fashion category in *Paris Is Burning* (1990). The costume transforms the performer's body into a highly constructed visual object through scale, ornament, and material excess. The enlarged shoulders and reflective surfaces extend beyond the body's natural boundaries, creating a temporary architecture that reshapes the participant's presence within the room. Source: *Paris Is Burning* (Miramax Films, 1990).



**Figure 25:** DJ Larry Levan performing at Paradise Garage, New York City, c. 1980s. Photograph by Catherine McGann.



**Figure 26:** Drag performer preparing backstage prior to a performance. The image captures a moment often hidden from audiences: the labor of transformation. Costumes, makeup, wigs, and styling are carefully assembled through hours of work before a performer ever reaches the stage. Source: Diana Davies. Untitled (Drag performer backstage), c. 1970s.



**Figure 27:** Participants gathered during a ballroom event in New York during the 1980s. While ballroom culture is often remembered through runway performances and voguing competitions, much of its significance emerged through the social networks that developed around these events. Ballroom gatherings provided spaces where LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly Black and Latino queer communities, could meet, exchange knowledge, form relationships, and cultivate chosen families. Drag performers at the Pyramid Club, New York City, late 1980s. Photograph by Chantal Regnault.

1. Marlon M. Bailey, "Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit"
2. George Chauncey, "Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940";
3. Marlon M. Bailey, "Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit"
4. Marlon M. Bailey, "Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit"
5. Marlon M. Bailey, "Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit"
6. José Esteban Muñoz, "Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics"
7. Tim Lawrence, "Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980–1983"
8. Marlon M. Bailey, "Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit"
9. Victor Turner, "The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure"
10. Marlon M. Bailey, "Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit"
11. Marlon M. Bailey, "Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit"
12. Marlon M. Bailey, "Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit"
13. José Esteban Muñoz, "Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics"
14. Marlon M. Bailey, "Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit"
15. Erving Goffman, "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life"
16. Richard Schechner, "Performance Studies: An Introduction"
17. Victor Turner, "The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure"







# CONTEMPORARY DRAG



# *Defining the Camp Aesthetic*

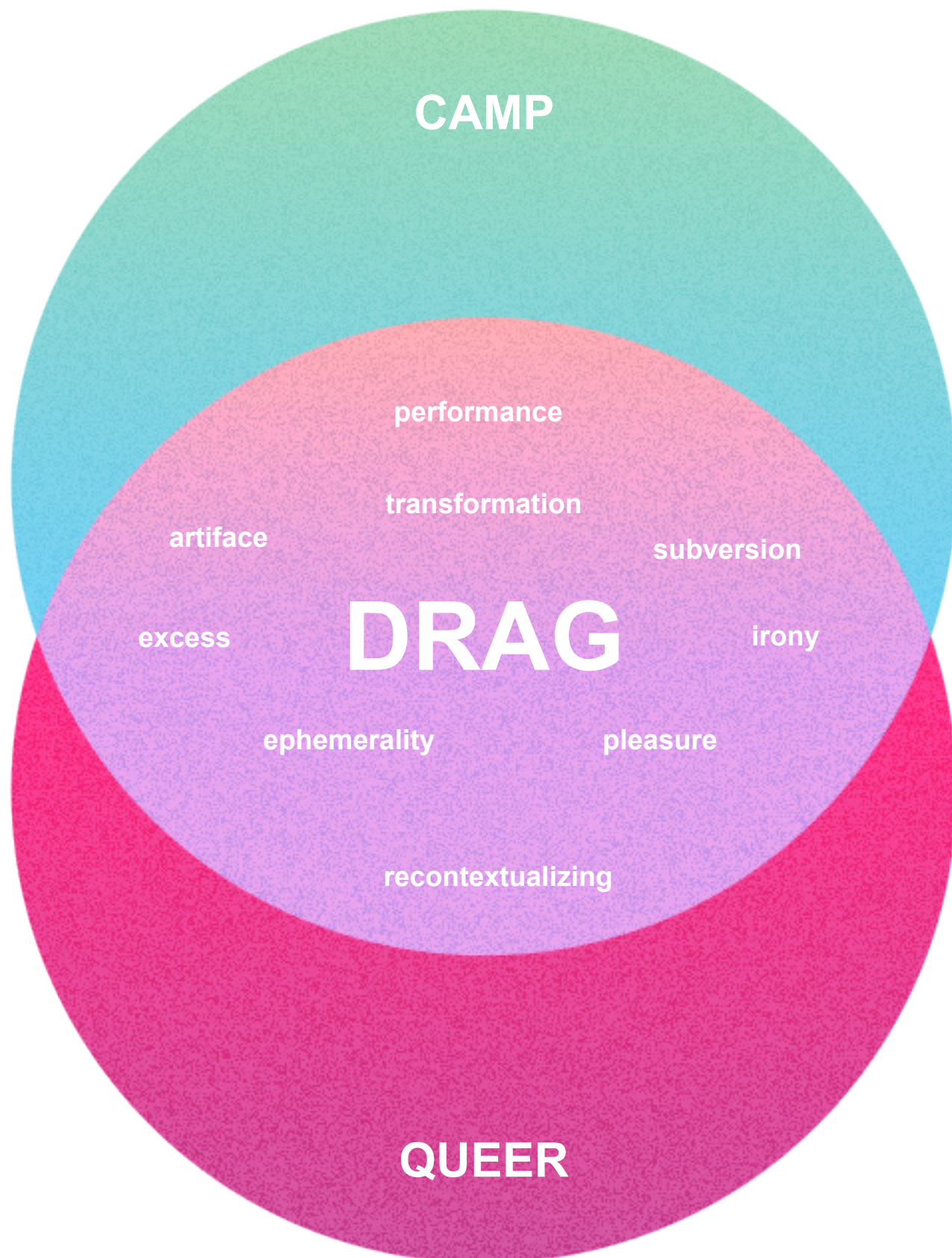
Camp provides a critical framework for understanding contemporary drag culture and its relationship to architecture. In Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" camp is described not as a fixed style, but as a sensibility: a way of seeing the world through artifice, theatricality, stylization, exaggeration, and excess. Sontag argues that camp privileges the "unnatural" and the deliberately constructed, valuing surface, ornament, and performance over claims of authenticity.<sup>1</sup> This is especially important for drag, which does not hide its artificiality but instead makes construction visible. Wigs, makeup, padding, costume, gesture, lighting, and persona all become tools through which identity is assembled and performed. In this sense, drag does not simply imitate gender; it reveals that gender, beauty, glamour, and social authority are already produced through repeated acts of presentation.

The Venn diagram positions drag at the intersection of camp and queer culture. Camp contributes the languages of artifice, excess, irony, theatricality, pleasure, and stylization, while queerness contributes a critical relationship to identity, normativity, visibility, and social belonging. Drag exists in the overlap between these two conditions. It is camp because it embraces exaggeration, ornament, spectacle, and surface. It is queer because it uses those strategies to question the stability of gender, taste, respectability, and social order. The diagram's central terms, including performance, transformation, subversion, pleasure, ephemerality, and recontextualization, describe

the ways drag operates as both aesthetic practice and cultural critique.

Sontag's essay is foundational, but it is also limited. While she defined camp through artifice and style, later queer theorists argued that camp cannot be separated from queer experience. Esther Newton's *Mother Camp* reframes camp within the world of drag performance, showing how humor, exaggeration, and theatrical femininity function as survival strategies as well as aesthetic choices.<sup>2</sup> Moe Meyer later critiques readings of camp that detach it from queer politics, arguing that camp operates as a specifically queer mode of cultural production.<sup>3</sup> Read through these later interpretations, drag becomes more than an exaggerated style. It becomes a method for exposing the constructed nature of identity and for producing alternative ways of being seen, recognized, and celebrated.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further clarifies drag's critical power. Butler argues that gender is not an innate truth expressed from within, but a repeated set of acts, gestures, and signs that come to appear natural over time.<sup>4</sup> Drag makes this repetition visible by exaggerating and re-staging gender codes. A drag queen's heightened femininity or a drag king's intensified masculinity does not simply copy an original; it exposes the fact that the supposed original is also constructed. This is why drag belongs within both camp and queer aesthetics. Its theatrical excess is pleasurable and spectacular, but it also destabilizes the categories it performs.



**Figure 28:** Venn Diagram illustrating the overlay of camp and queer aesthetics as outlined in Susan Sontag's, *Notes on Camp*





**Figure 29:** Collage exploring performance as a central component of drag culture. A solitary figure stands upon a runway beneath a constellation of fragmented eyes, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between performer and audience.

The three collages develop these ideas visually through the themes of performance, androgyny, and opulence. The first collage, Performance, depicts a figure standing on a runway beneath a field of fragmented eyes. The image emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between performer and audience. The performer is watched, but also empowered by visibility. The runway becomes a site where identity is produced through public display, recognition, and repetition. The many eyes suggest surveillance, judgment, and desire, but they also represent the collective gaze that validates performance. This collage connects directly to ballroom culture and drag performance, where the runway is not only a stage but a social space where identity becomes legible through movement, gesture, and audience response.



**Figure30:** Collage investigating androgyny through the combination of masculine and feminine facial features into a fragmented composite portrait

The second collage, Androgyny, presents a fragmented composite face assembled from masculine and feminine features. Rather than resolving into a stable identity, the portrait remains visibly constructed. Its seams, overlaps, and mismatched fragments resist the idea that identity must be whole, natural, or binary. This collage visualizes drag’s ability to destabilize fixed categories of masculinity and femininity. It also reflects camp’s love of artifice: the image does not conceal its assembly, but foregrounds it. The face becomes a constructed surface, much like drag makeup or costume, where identity is layered, edited, exaggerated, and reimaged.

The third collage, Opulence, centers a crowned figure framed by a luminous gold halo. The



**Figure 31:** Collage examining opulence as a form of empowerment within drag culture. A crowned figure is positioned before a luminous gold backdrop, invoking associations with religious iconography, glamour, and spectacle.

image draws upon religious iconography, glamour photography, and drag spectacle at once. Ornament, shine, and excess are presented not as superficial decoration, but as forms of power. Within drag culture, opulence often operates as a refusal of scarcity, shame, and invisibility. It allows performers to inhabit identities larger than those permitted by everyday life. The collage therefore connects camp's love of extravagance with queer world-making: the creation of temporary, heightened realities where beauty, pleasure, and self-invention become forms of resistance.

Together, the Venn diagram and collages establish camp as an architectural strategy for the thesis. Camp is not used merely as a decorative style, but as a way of thinking about

transformation, layering, spectacle, and reveal. These ideas later appear in the design proposal through the stained-glass-inspired façade, the theatrical runway inserted into the church nave, the exposed relationship between backstage labor and public performance, and the brightly colored intervention emerging from the historic masonry shell. In this way, camp becomes a spatial practice. It allows the project to reinterpret the church not as a fixed historical object, but as a building capable of transformation, performance, and renewed queer occupation.



# *Mapping Drag Performance at Seattle Queer / Bar*

Located in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood, Queer/Bar has become one of the city's most prominent LGBTQ+ nightlife venues. Since opening in 2017, it has hosted drag shows, dance parties, viewing events, and community gatherings that draw patrons from across the region. The venue occupies an important position within Capitol Hill, a neighborhood that has long served as the center of queer life in Seattle. At a time when many LGBTQ+ venues have closed due to rising rents and changing demographics, Queer/Bar remains a heavily used gathering place where queer culture is experienced in person.

What makes Queer/Bar particularly relevant to this thesis is the way performance shapes the organization of the space. The venue is not simply a bar with a stage attached to it. Instead, the stage, runway, dance floor, and seating areas work together to drive interaction between performers and audience members. A drag show at Queer/Bar rarely remains confined to a single location. Performers move through the room, engage directly with patrons, and occupy spaces that might otherwise function as circulation. Because of this, the architecture plays an active role in shaping the event. Examining the floor plan reveals how the

venue supports these patterns of movement and how spatial relationships influence the experience of drag performance.

The floor plan of Queer/Bar reveals that contemporary drag performance is fundamentally shaped by architecture. While the venue functions as a nightclub and bar, its spatial organization reflects a lineage that can be traced back to Harlem ballroom culture, where performance and audience shape the usage of the space. The venue is organized around a series of zones including the green room, main stage, runway, audience seating, and bar. Together, these elements establish a framework that supports both spectacle and social exchange. Rather than acting as a backdrop to performance, the architecture actively structures relationships between performers and audience members.

Mapping the movement of performers throughout the venue demonstrates that drag performance extends far beyond the boundaries of a conventional stage. The accumulated movement paths reveal a repeated pattern in which performers circulate between backstage areas, the main stage, and the runway while continuously engaging audience members.





**Figure 32:** Exterior shot of Queer / Bar, a prominent gay bar and drag venue in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood that opened in 2017. Photograph by author, 2025.



**Figure 33:** Interior shot of Queer / Bar, showcasing the organization of seating around the central runway, with the main stage back towards the rear of the building. Photograph courtesy of Queer/Bar.

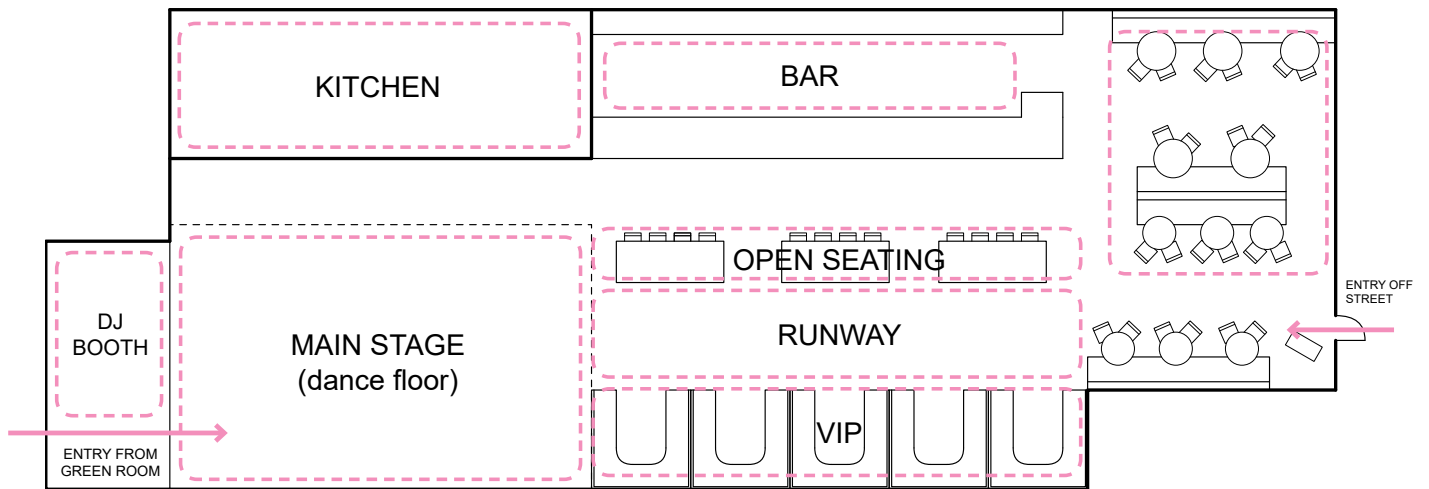


Unlike traditional theater, where a proscenium establishes a fixed separation between performer and spectator, drag performance relies upon mobility and proximity. The performer moves through the audience, transforming circulation into an act of performance. As movement traces overlap, the runway emerges as the primary site of interaction, suggesting that the social exchange between performer and audience is as important as the performance itself.

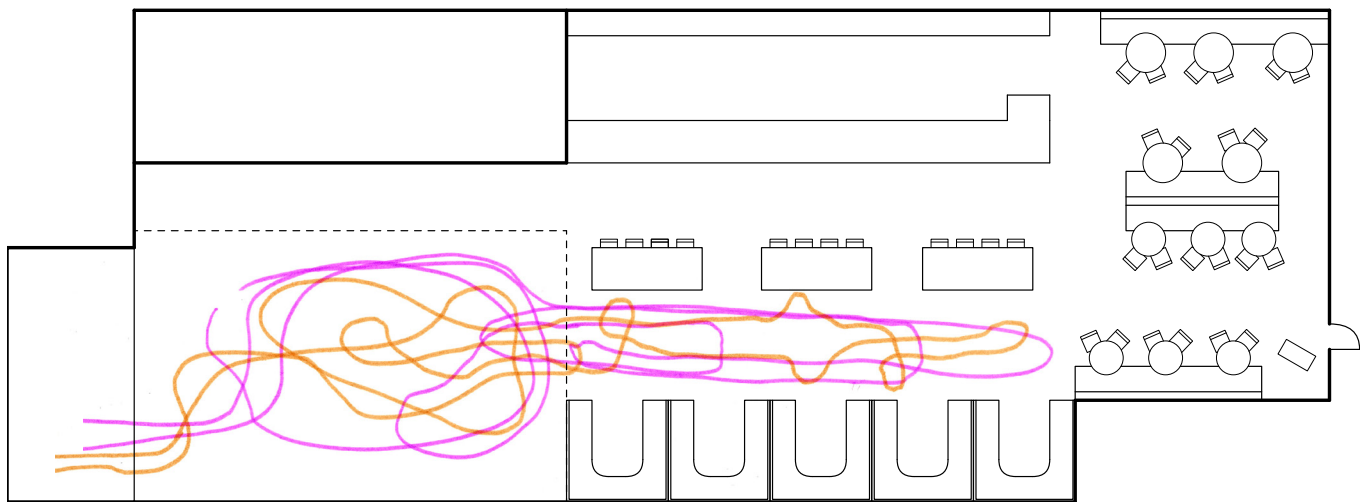
The resulting diagrams reveal a hierarchy of spatial importance within the venue. While the stage serves as a point of visibility and presentation, the runway functions as the central performative space. Historically, the runway has occupied a similar role within ballroom culture, operating as a site where identity displayed predominantly. Contemporary

drag venues continue this tradition by positioning the runway as a zone of direct engagement. Here, the boundaries between performer and spectator become increasingly blurred as performers move into the audience and audience members become active participants in the event.

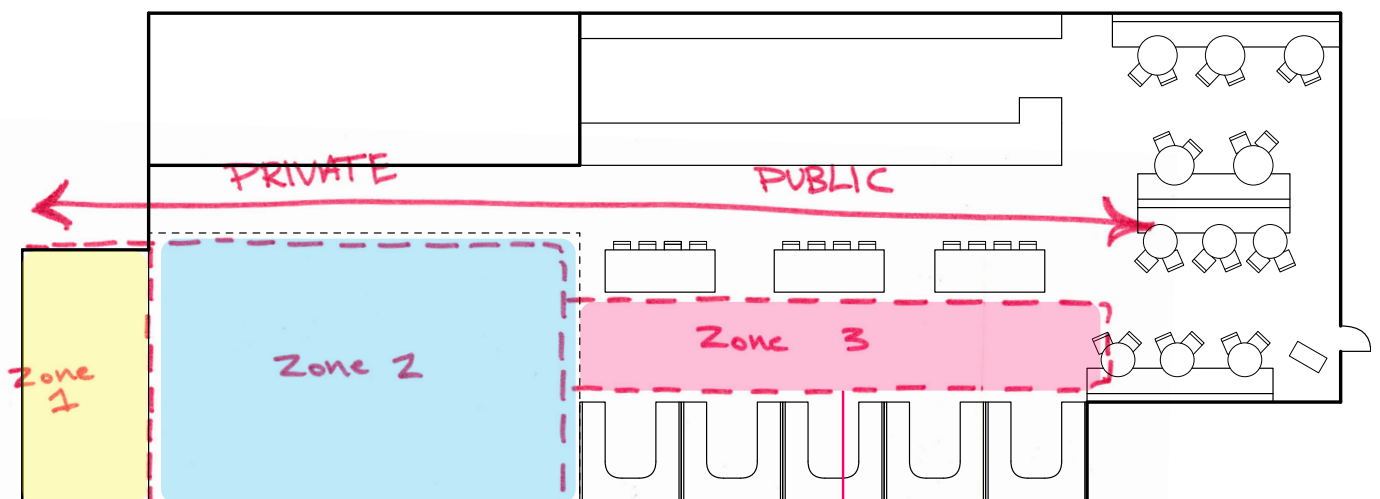
The venue can be understood as a sequence of three spatial zones that organize a gradual transition from privacy to publicity. The first zone, located within the green room and backstage areas, functions as a space of preparation and transformation. Hidden from public view, this environment allows performers to construct the identities that will later be presented to an audience. Similar to Goffman's conception of the backstage, this space serves as a realm where performance is assembled before becoming visible.



**Figure 34:** Floor plan of Queer/Bar in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood illustrating the primary spatial components of a contemporary drag venue. The organization of the green room, main stage, runway, audience seating, bar, and DJ booth demonstrates how contemporary drag venues continue spatial traditions established within Harlem ballroom culture.



**Figure 35:** Diagram tracing the movement of multiple performers through Queer/Bar. The overlapping circulation paths reveal that drag performance extends beyond the boundaries of a conventional stage



**Figure 36:** Diagram illustrating the progression from private to public space within a drag venue.

# *Comparing Ritualized Spatial Hierarchies*

The spatial organization of contemporary drag venues does not emerge in isolation. Many of the relationships observed at Queer/Bar can be traced to earlier traditions of queer performance, as discussed earlier in Harlem ballroom culture. These spatial patterns reveal unexpected parallels with the organization of Catholic worship. Although ballroom competitions, drag performances, and religious ceremonies serve different cultural purposes, each relies upon a carefully choreographed sequence of spaces that guide participants through sequential acts of gathering, procession, performance and observation.

Figure 37 compares the floor plans of a Harlem ballroom, a contemporary drag venue, and a traditional Catholic church. Read side by side, these plans reveal a recurring architectural framework. Each contains a primary axis that organizes movement through the space. In ballroom culture, this axis takes the form of the runway. In contemporary drag venues, it appears as the stage-runway sequence. Within the church, it is expressed through the nave and central aisle leading toward the altar. These elements establish a processional route through which participants become visible to a gathered audience.

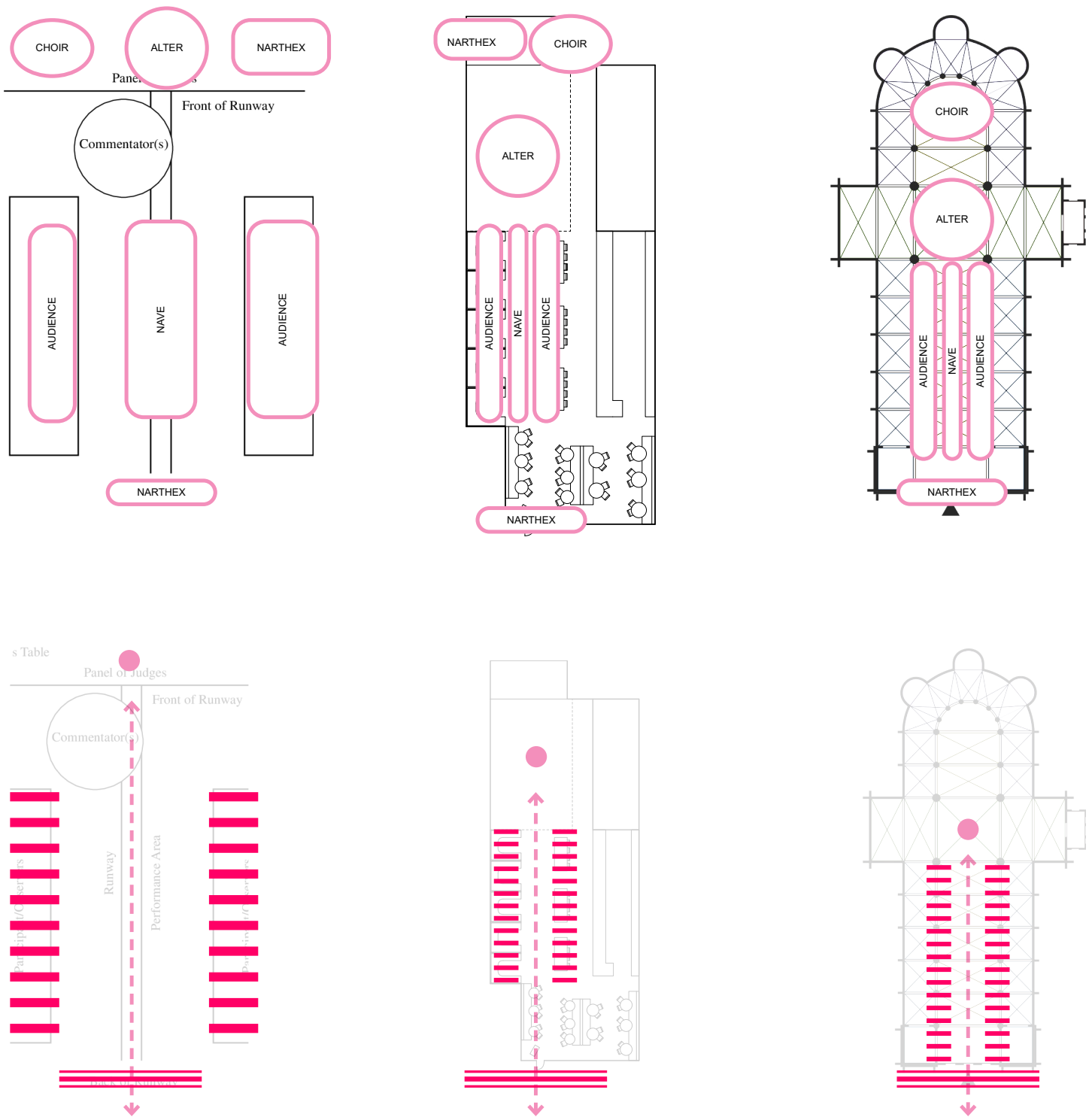
Beyond the central axis, each plan contains a hierarchy of supporting spaces that reinforce the significance of the ritual taking place. Audience members occupy the perimeter of the performance area, framing the event through collective spectatorship.

Spaces dedicated to music, narration, or ceremony occupy positions of prominence, whether in the form of a DJ booth, commentators, choir, or clergy. Threshold spaces mediate entry into the event, separating everyday life from a distinct social environment. Architectural historian Thomas Barrie argues that ritual spaces derive meaning not only from symbolic form but from the patterns of movement and participation they produce.<sup>1</sup> Examined through this lens, the similarities between ballroom culture, drag performance, and Catholic worship become less surprising. Each relies upon architecture to organize attention, direct movement, and establish a shared experience among participants.

The comparison suggests that the relationship between drag culture and religious architecture extends beyond visual symbolism or questions of appropriation. Rather, both traditions rely upon comparable spatial strategies to support collective rituals. Understanding these parallels provides the foundation for the adaptive reuse explored in this thesis and raises a larger question: if churches have historically served as spaces for ritual performance and community formation, might they also provide an architectural framework capable of supporting contemporary queer rituals?

The significance of this sequence extends beyond the performer alone. The diagrams suggest that audience members also undergo a form of transformation through their movement into the venue. Just as performers cross the





**Figure 37:** Comparative diagram of spatial organization in Harlem ballroom culture, contemporary drag performance, and Catholic worship. Despite differences in cultural context and historical origin, all three systems are organized around a central processional axis that directs movement toward a focal point of performance or ritual.

threshold between everyday identity and drag persona, spectators cross a threshold between ordinary social space and the performative environment of the drag venue. Victor Turner describes such transitions as liminal experiences in which participants temporarily occupy a condition outside normal social structures.<sup>5</sup> Through lighting, music, costume, spectacle, and collective participation, audience members enter a space where everyday norms are suspended and alternative identities become possible. The drag venue therefore functions as a liminal environment in which both performer and audience participate in a shared process of transformation.

These observations become particularly significant when compared to the spatial organization of Harlem ballroom culture and Catholic worship. Although separated by history, geography, and cultural context, all three systems rely upon remarkably similar architectural structures. The ballroom runway, drag runway, and church nave each establish a central axis of movement through which ritual unfolds. The panel of judges in ballroom culture occupies a position analogous to the altar within the church, serving as the focal point toward which movement is directed. Commentators, DJs, and choirs each shape the atmosphere of the event through sound, narration, and collective participation. Audience members line the edges of the performance space much as congregants occupy pews within a church nave, creating a framework of spectatorship that reinforces the significance of the central procession. The narthex functions in each case as a threshold between everyday life and a space of ritual encounter.

This comparison reveals a shared spatial logic rooted in procession, hierarchy, and collective performance. Mircea Eliade argues that sacred architecture distinguishes itself through the creation of thresholds separating ordinary space from spaces of heightened meaning.<sup>6</sup> Although drag venues are not sacred in a religious sense, they similarly establish environments in which social norms are suspended and alternative identities can be publicly enacted. José Esteban

Muñoz describes such environments as forms of queer world-making, spaces where participants collectively imagine and perform alternative futures.<sup>7</sup> Ballroom culture, drag performance, and Catholic ritual each rely upon architecture to support these acts of transformation, visibility, and communal participation.

This shared spatial logic provides the conceptual foundation for the adaptive reuse of the former Westminster Presbyterian Church. Churches are already architectures of ritual, performance, and collective gathering. Their spatial systems were designed to choreograph movement, focus attention, frame spectacle, and facilitate communal participation. The nave functions as a processional space, the sanctuary establishes a focal point for performance, the choir contributes atmosphere and sound, and the narthex mediates the transition between everyday life and ceremonial experience. These characteristics closely align with the spatial requirements of ballroom and drag performance. The proposed conversion therefore does not impose an entirely new program onto the building; rather, it reveals latent relationships already present within the architecture. The church's processional axis becomes a runway. The sanctuary becomes a stage. The congregation becomes an audience. The ritual of worship becomes a ritual of performance. Through this transformation, the building continues to function as a space of collective gathering and identity formation while accommodating new cultural practices and communities. Adaptive reuse becomes not an act of replacement, but an act of translation.



**Figure 38:** Comparison between the attire of drag performer Jinx Monsoon and Pope Benedict XVI in ceremonial attire. Both traditions utilize costume, ornament, and symbolism to transform individuals from everyday identities into public ritual figures.

## Endnotes

1. Barrie, *Spiritual Path, Sacred Place: Myth, Ritual, and Meaning in Architecture*
2. Schechner, *Performance Theory*
3. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*
4. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*
5. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*
6. Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*
7. Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*







# **SEATTLE'S CAPITOL HILL NEIGHBORHOOD**



# *Mapping the LGBTQ+ History of Seattle's Capitol Hill Neighborhood*

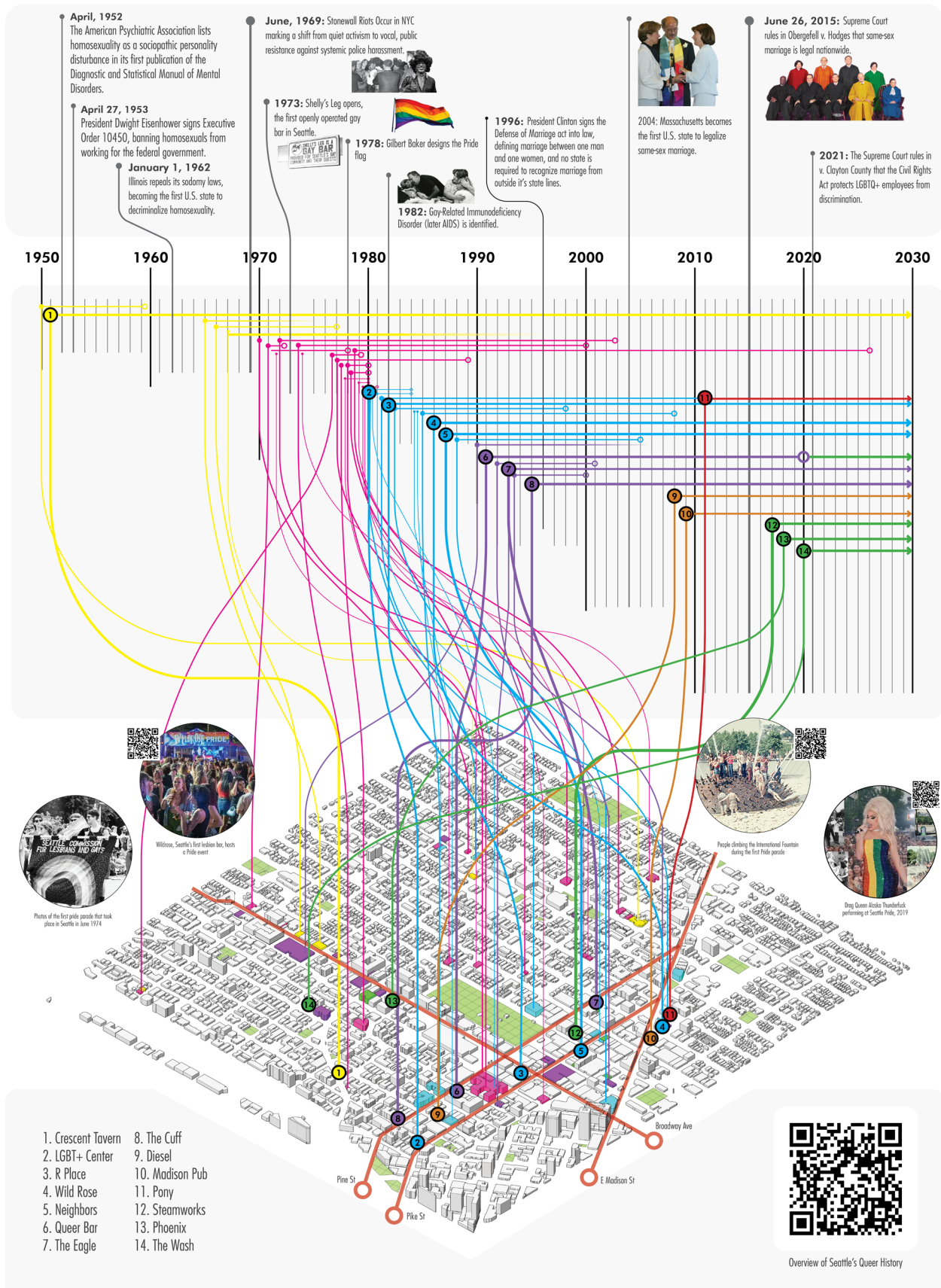
Pioneer Square is often understood as Seattle's first recognizable gayborhood, emerging during the mid-twentieth century when queer life was largely confined to marginal, surveilled, and economically precarious urban spaces.<sup>1</sup> As in many American cities, LGBTQ+ communities frequently established themselves in neighborhoods characterized by aging building stock, lower rents, transient populations, and limited social oversight.<sup>2</sup> Pioneer Square provided these conditions. Its proximity to the waterfront, rail yards, hotels, and entertainment venues created a landscape where anonymity was possible and where queer social networks could develop outside the scrutiny of dominant social institutions.<sup>3</sup> Bars, taverns, rooming houses, and informal gathering places became critical sites of connection, offering opportunities for community formation at a time when same-sex relationships and gender nonconformity were heavily stigmatized and often criminalized.

These spaces were neither stable nor secure. Throughout much of the twentieth century, queer establishments in Seattle operated under constant threat of police raids, liquor control enforcement, public morality campaigns, and discriminatory licensing practices.<sup>4</sup> Many venues changed names, relocated, or disappeared entirely as operators attempted to navigate shifting legal and social pressures. Yet despite their vulnerability, these spaces collectively established a recognizable geography of queer life. Through repeated occupation and everyday social practices, Pioneer Square became one of the city's earliest centers of LGBTQ+ visibility and community building.<sup>5</sup> The neighborhood demonstrates how marginalized groups have historically transformed overlooked urban environments into sites of cultural production, social support, and identity formation.

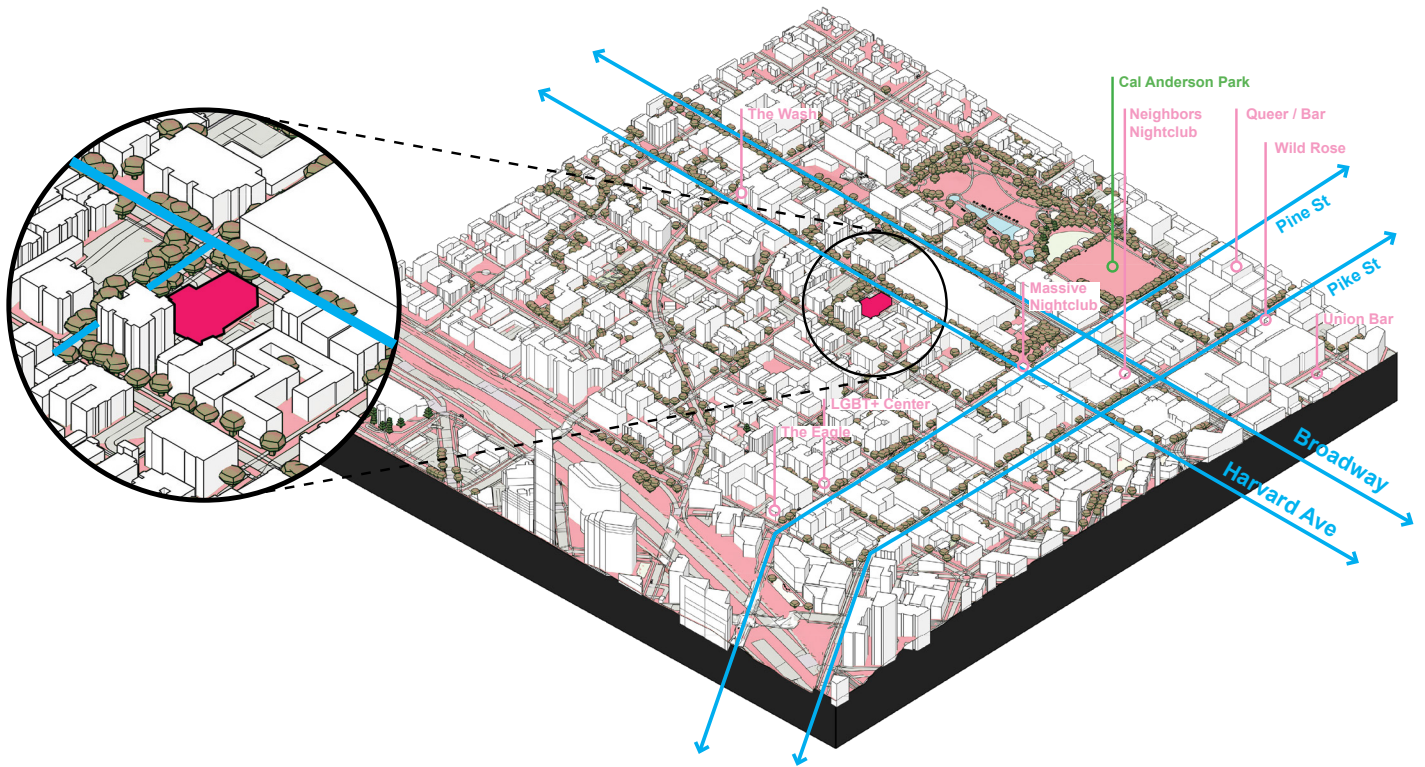
Beginning in the 1960s and accelerating throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Seattle's queer community gradually migrated north toward Capitol Hill.<sup>6</sup> This transition was driven by a combination of economic, political, and spatial factors. Urban renewal initiatives and redevelopment pressures increasingly reshaped Pioneer Square, raising property values and intensifying regulatory oversight. At the same time, Capitol Hill offered a different urban condition that was particularly attractive to emerging queer communities. Its dense residential fabric, proximity to downtown employment centers, and concentration of students, artists, and politically progressive residents fostered an environment conducive to alternative lifestyles and community formation.<sup>7</sup>

The neighborhood's stock of early twentieth-century apartment buildings, converted single-family homes, and shared housing arrangements supported both affordability and communal living. These spatial conditions allowed LGBTQ+ residents to develop support networks while establishing businesses, bars, bookstores, healthcare organizations, and advocacy groups throughout the neighborhood.<sup>8</sup> By the 1970s, Capitol Hill had become an increasingly visible center of queer political organizing during the Gay Liberation Movement, and during the 1980s the neighborhood played a crucial role in responding to the AIDS crisis through grassroots healthcare initiatives, mutual aid networks, and activist organizations.<sup>9</sup> Capitol Hill's significance therefore extended beyond nightlife. It became an important cultural, political, and social infrastructure that supported multiple dimensions of queer life.





**Figure 39:** Mapping study of Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood that shows the opening and closing of various queer establishments dating back to the 1950's to present day 2026. Study includes venues that historically served queer patrons and hosted drag performances.



**Figure 40:** Isometric of the Capitol Hill neighborhood outlining our building site in relation to Cal Anderson Park, Broadway, and the series of gay bars and nightclubs along Pike and Pine street.

The migration from Pioneer Square to Capitol Hill reflects a broader pattern observed throughout queer urban history. Scholars have noted that queer neighborhoods often emerge within marginal urban areas where lower rents, social diversity, and flexible building stock create opportunities for community formation.<sup>10</sup> Through collective cultural production, these neighborhoods become vibrant centers of identity, creativity, and social life. However, the same cultural vitality that makes these districts desirable frequently contributes to rising property values, redevelopment pressures, and eventual displacement. As neighborhoods become economically successful, the communities that helped establish them often face increasing barriers to remaining in place.<sup>11</sup>

Capitol Hill itself has experienced many of these pressures over the past several decades. Rising housing costs, redevelopment, changing demographics, and the commercialization of queer identity have contributed to the closure or transformation of many spaces that once supported everyday LGBTQ+ life.<sup>12</sup> These

changes demonstrate that queer neighborhoods do not disappear because queer culture fades. Rather, they disappear when the spatial conditions that support community formation are systematically eroded. Preserving queer culture therefore requires more than commemorating historic venues or celebrating symbolic milestones. It demands architectural, planning, and policy strategies that protect affordability, encourage adaptive reuse, support cultural institutions, and enable queer communities to continually reshape their environments. In this sense, queer neighborhoods should be understood not as static historic artifacts but as living cultural infrastructures that require ongoing care, flexibility, and intentional stewardship in order to endure.<sup>13</sup>

## ***Building Site***

Located at 1729 Harvard Avenue in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood, the former Westminster Presbyterian Church occupies a prominent position within one of the most historically significant queer districts in the





**Figure 41:** Exterior shot of the Seattle Presbyterian Church located in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood at 1729 Harvard Ave. Source: archival photograph.

Pacific Northwest. Constructed in 1923 and designed by architects Robert Hall Orr and C.A. Paige, the building stands as an example of early twentieth-century Protestant ecclesiastical architecture characterized by Gothic Revival influences, masonry construction, and a congregation-centered spatial organization.<sup>1</sup> Although once an important religious institution within the neighborhood, the building has remained largely vacant and underutilized for several years, existing today as a substantial but dormant piece of Capitol Hill's architectural fabric.<sup>2</sup>

The selection of this building as the site for intervention is significant not only because of its physical characteristics, but because of its cultural and urban context. Situated within walking distance of Capitol Hill's historic LGBTQ+ institutions, nightlife venues, community organizations, and cultural spaces, the church occupies a unique position at the intersection of Seattle's religious, social, and queer histories. As queer communities have historically relied upon the adaptive reuse of

existing buildings to create spaces of gathering, performance, care, and resistance, the transformation of an underutilized church into a contemporary queer cultural venue continues a longstanding tradition of spatial adaptation and reinvention.<sup>3</sup>

The building's architectural character is defined by a collection of Gothic-inspired elements that communicate monumentality, ritual, and collective gathering. The primary façade is organized around a large central gable and monumental traceried stained-glass window that establish a strong vertical emphasis and reinforce the building's ecclesiastical identity. Pointed arch openings, recessed brick detailing, and buttress-like corner masses create a rhythmic composition that references historic Gothic precedents while remaining restrained in ornamentation. Constructed primarily of red brick masonry with a stone base, the building possesses a sense of permanence and civic presence that continues to anchor the surrounding streetscape.<sup>4</sup>

Internally, the church is organized around a traditional nave and sanctuary configuration. A strong central processional axis extends from the primary entrance through rows of pews toward the raised altar, establishing a clear hierarchy of movement and visual focus. Above, an exposed timber truss roof structure spans the sanctuary, creating a dramatic interior volume defined by rhythm, repetition, and verticality. Decorative stained-glass windows filter natural light into the space, transforming illumination into an atmospheric and symbolic element. Together, these architectural features create a spatial sequence centered on procession, collective assembly, performance, and ritual.<sup>5</sup>

While originally designed to support religious worship, many of the building's defining spatial qualities possess remarkable potential for contemporary reinterpretation. The large-volume sanctuary, processional organization, elevated platform, and emphasis on spectacle closely

parallel the spatial requirements of performance environments. The building therefore presents a unique opportunity to investigate how an architecture originally intended for one form of collective ritual can be adapted to support another. Rather than erasing the site's ecclesiastical history, this thesis seeks to engage it directly, exploring how the existing architecture can be transformed into a contemporary drag theater and queer cultural center that celebrates performance, community, and collective identity. In this way, the project positions adaptive reuse not simply as a strategy of preservation, but as a means of extending the cultural life of a historic building through new forms of occupation and meaning.



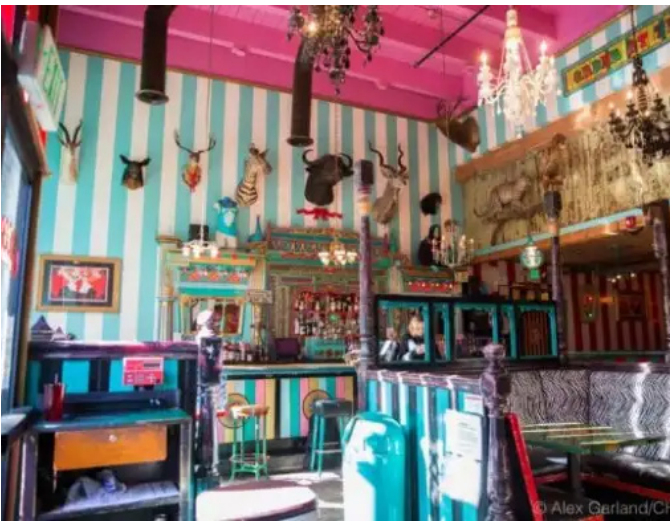


**Figure 42:** Exterior and interior shots of the building site





**Figure 43:** Exterior of the Lambert House, an LGBTQ+ youth community shelter in Seattle’s Capitol Hill neighborhood. Source: Lambert House.



**Figure 44:** Interior of the Unicorn, a prominent circus themed gay bar located in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle, Washington. Source: Unicorn Bar.



**Figure 45:** Exterior of “Neighbors”, one of the oldest running gay bars and clubs in the Capitol Hill neighborhood with pride flags out front. Wikimedia Commons, June 2023.



**Figure 46 :** Exterior of Charlie’s Queer Bookstore located in the Fremont neighborhood of Seattle. Source: Charlie’s Queer Books.

## Endnotes

1. James N. Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*
2. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940*
3. Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*
4. Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*
5. Amin Ghaziani, *There Goes the Gayborhood?*
6. Amin Ghaziani, *There Goes the Gayborhood?*
7. Christina B. Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*
8. Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots*
9. Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS*
10. Amin Ghaziani, *There Goes the Gayborhood?*
11. Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*
12. Christina B. Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*
13. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*
14. Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, *Shaping Seattle Architecture: A Historical Guide to the Architects*
15. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*
16. Betsy, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*
17. Thomas Barrie, *Spiritual Path, Sacred Place: Myth, Ritual, and Meaning in Architecture*



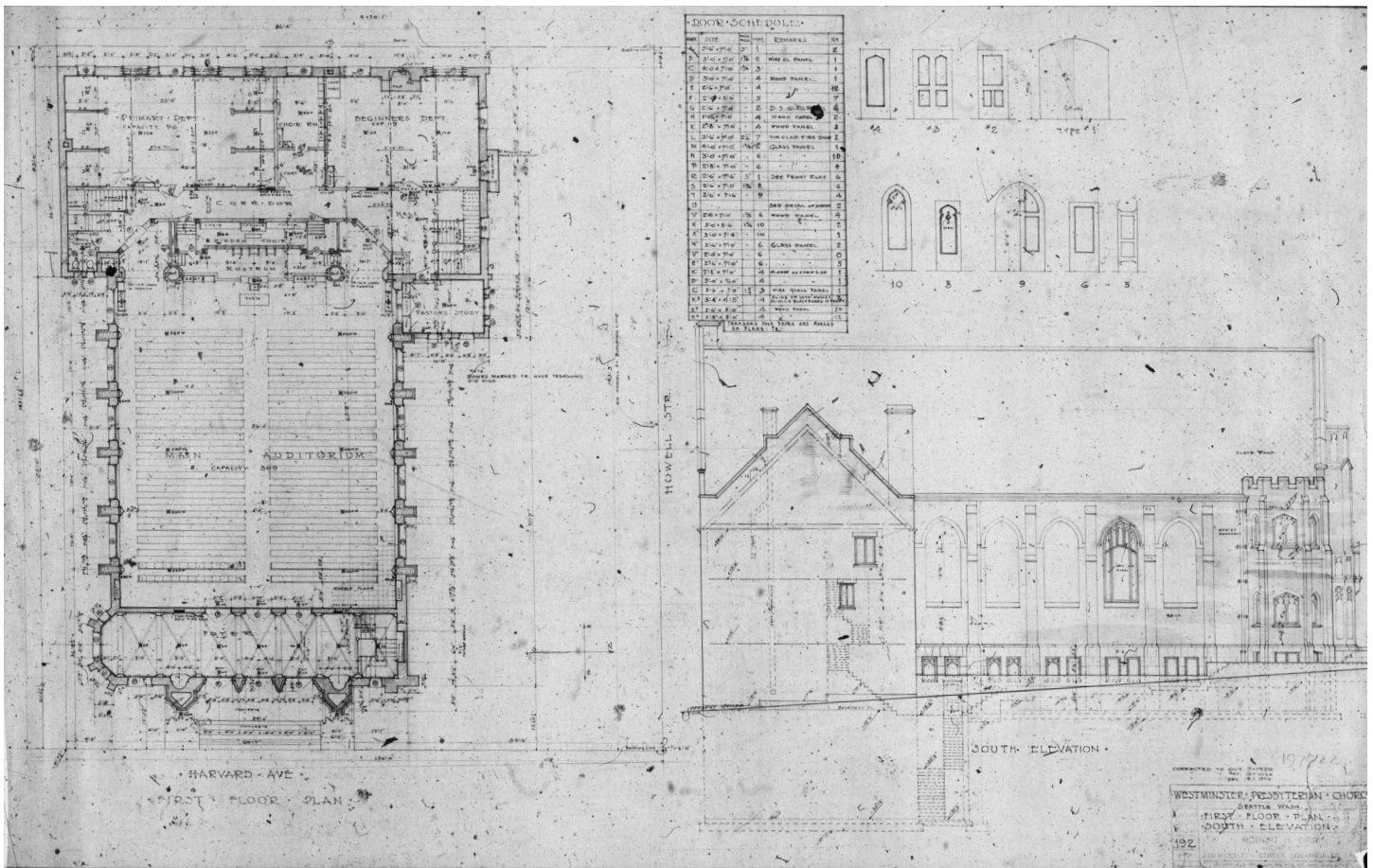




# THE CHURCH DRAG VENUE





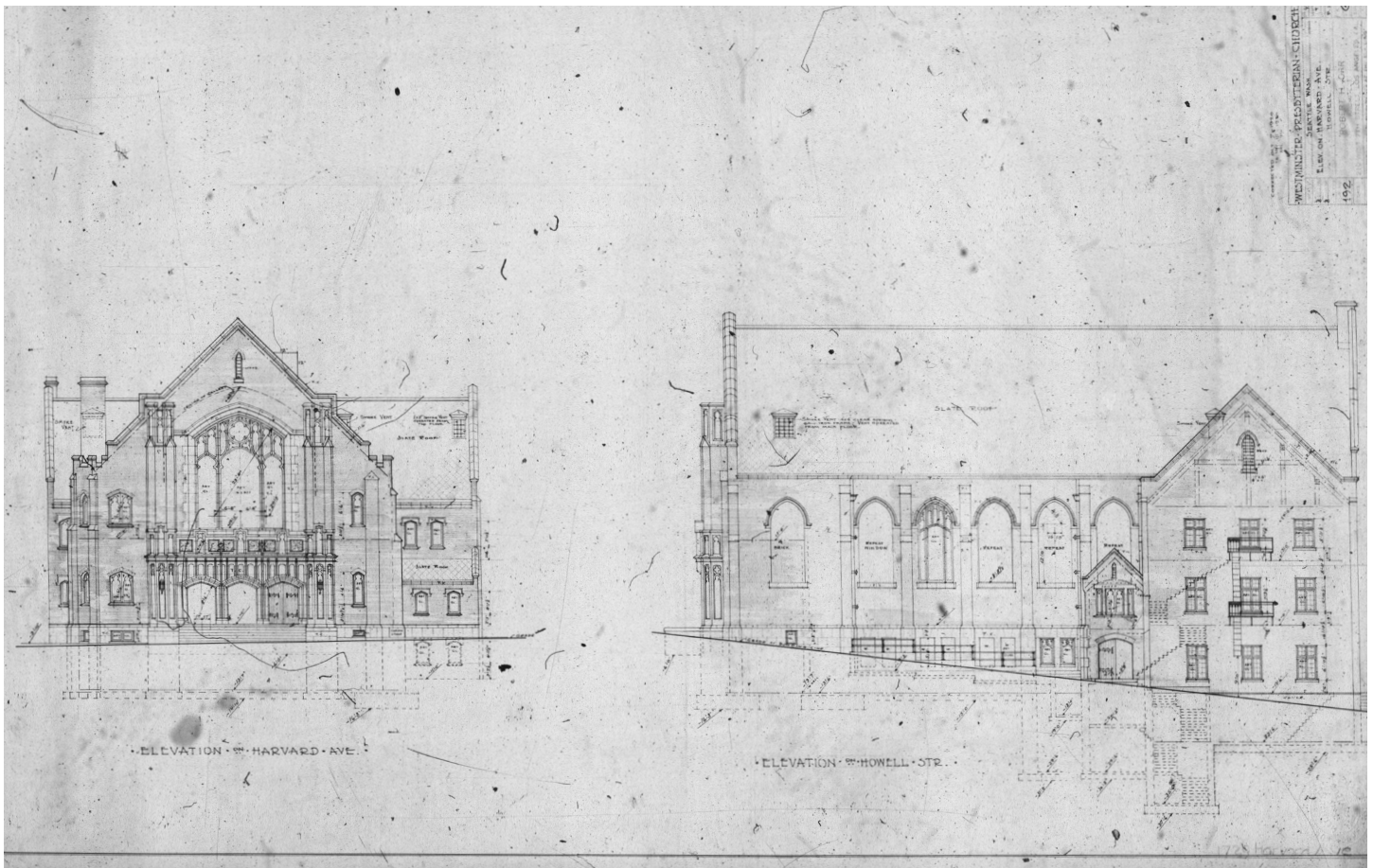


**Figure 47:** Original first-floor plan and south elevation of Westminster Presbyterian Church (1923). The drawing illustrates the church's original spatial organization, centered on a large sanctuary arranged around a central processional aisle leading to the chancel. Source: Seattle Department of Construction & Inspections Archives.

The Church Drag Venue proposes the adaptive reuse of the former Westminster Presbyterian Church in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood as a hybrid drag theater, artist residency, and queer cultural center. Situated within one of the most historically significant queer neighborhoods in the Pacific Northwest, the project responds to the ongoing disappearance of LGBTQ+ cultural spaces by establishing a permanent institution dedicated to performance, artistic production, mentorship, and community life. Rather than treating drag as entertainment alone, the project understands drag as a cultural practice sustained through networks of labor, education, housing, and collective gathering. The proposal therefore seeks to create an architectural framework capable of supporting the full ecosystem of drag culture. The existing church plans and elevations

(Figures 45 and 46) reveal a building already organized around ritual procession, collective assembly, and hierarchical spatial relationships, providing the foundation for the project's transformation.

The project begins with the observation that contemporary queer nightlife and historic religious architecture are organized around remarkably similar spatial rituals. Research conducted throughout the thesis identified parallels between Catholic worship, Harlem ballroom culture, and contemporary drag performance. Each relies upon procession, spectatorship, transformation, hierarchy, and collective participation. The processional aisle of the church, the ballroom runway, and the drag catwalk all operate as ceremonial pathways



**Figure 48:** Original Harvard Avenue and Howell Street elevations of Westminster Presbyterian Church (1923). The elevations document the building's Gothic Revival character, including its prominent stained-glass windows, ceremonial entrance sequence, and large sanctuary volume. Source: Seattle Department of Construction & Inspections Archives.

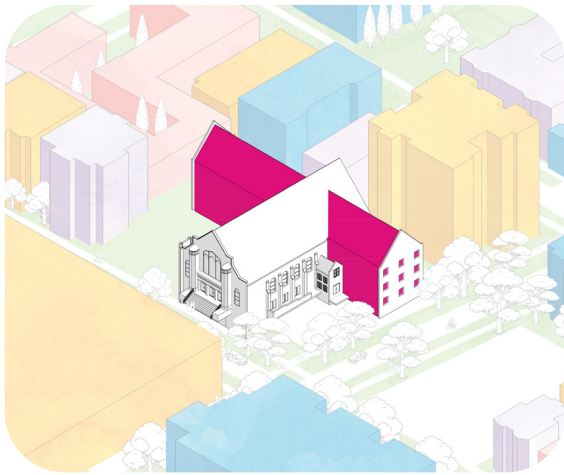
through which identity is publicly enacted. Likewise, the altar, judging panel, and performance stage function as focal points that concentrate attention and establish systems of social meaning. Drawing from Victor Turner's understanding of ritual as a process of collective transformation, the project argues that ecclesiastical architecture already contains many of the spatial conditions necessary to support drag performance. This idea directly informed the formal development of the proposal, visible in the progression of massing studies (Figure 47) and the design diagrams (Figure 48), which preserve the church as the primary spatial figure while inserting new programs around it.

Rather than overwhelming the historic structure, the proposal concentrates new construction at

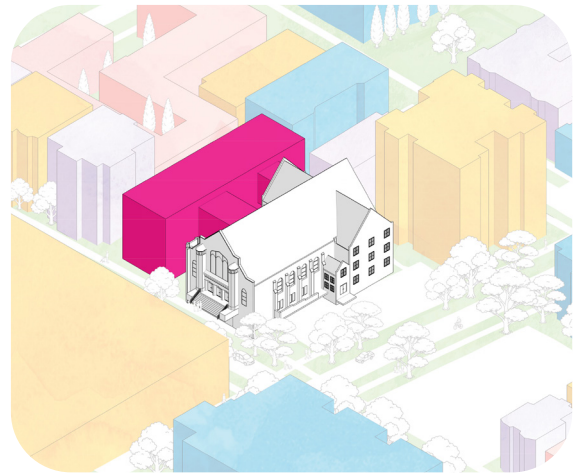
the rear of the site. The massing studies shown in Figure 47 explore multiple strategies for intervention, including parallel additions, front additions, and fragmented insertions, before arriving at a scheme that maintains the church's presence along Harvard Avenue while expanding its capacity. Figure 49 illustrates the resulting architectural expression, where a contemporary stained-glass-inspired addition emerges from the rear of the church. The addition remains visually distinct from the original masonry structure while extending the church's historic relationship to color, light, and symbolism through a queer lens.

The organizational framework of the project is structured around Live, Werk, and Play. As illustrated in the design development diagrams (Figure 48), these categories correspond to

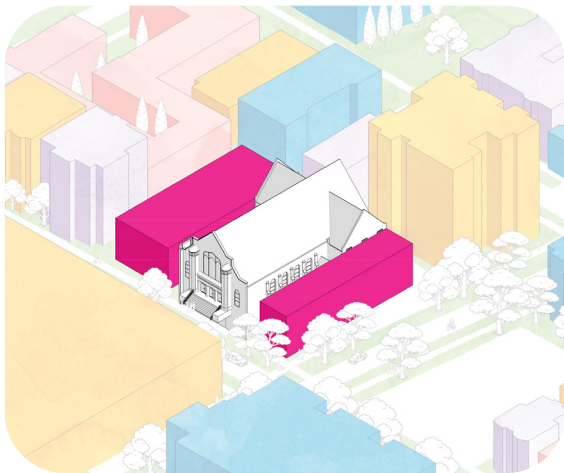




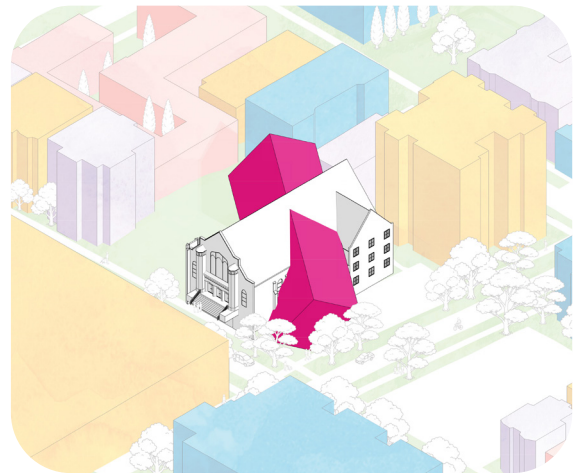
Expansion



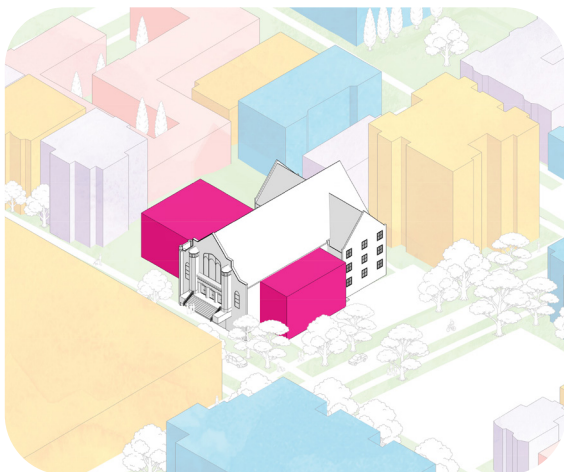
Parallel



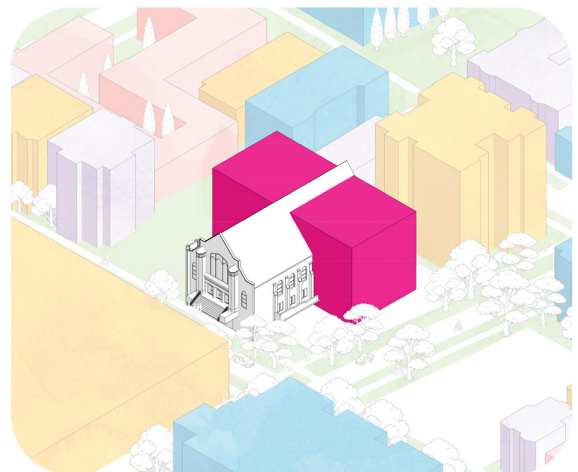
Maximize Floor Box



Fracture



Front Addition



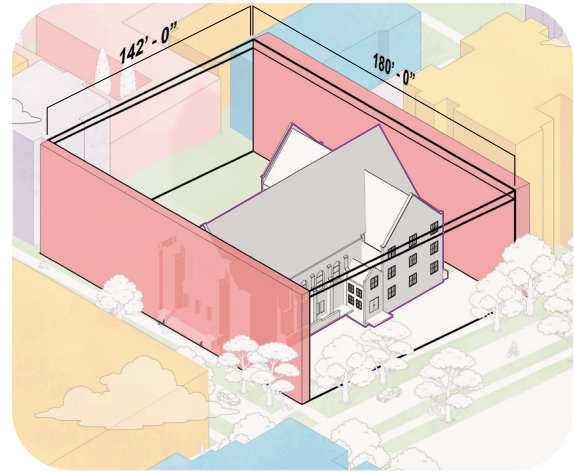
Box

**Figure 49:** A series of axonometric studies investigating alternative strategies for expanding the existing church structure. The diagrams test different approaches to addition, subtraction, and organization, exploring how new construction could engage the historic building.

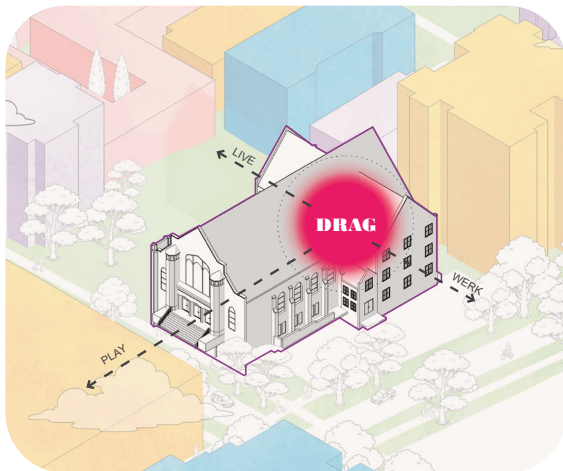




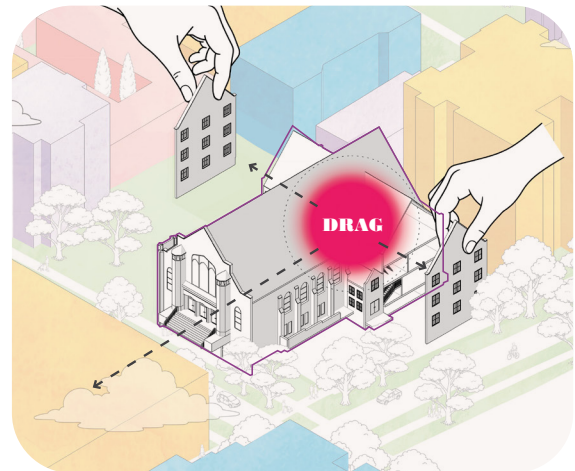
Building Site



Zoning



Drag Program



Expansion



Building Program



Live + Work + Play

**Figure 50:** A sequence of axonometric diagrams illustrating the development of the final design proposal. Beginning with site and zoning conditions, the diagrams progressively introduce key architectural moves, including program insertion, building expansion, and the organization of live, work, and performance spaces.



**Figure 51:** The diagrams illustrate the insertion of a contemporary addition within the historic church, using vivid color and a stained-glass-inspired façade to express themes of transformation, visibility, and performance derived from drag culture.

the primary activities that sustain drag culture and collectively organize the building. Play occupies the historic sanctuary and contains the public-facing performance venue. Werk houses fabrication studios, photography spaces, rehearsal rooms, makeup facilities, and storage. Live provides temporary housing and communal amenities for resident drag artists. Together these components establish a continuous relationship between private preparation, creative production, and public performance. The section axonometric (Figure 50) demonstrates how these programs are vertically and spatially intertwined rather than isolated from one another.

This relationship becomes particularly evident in the theater itself. The first-floor plan (Figure 51) shows how visitors enter through the historic church entrance and are immediately directed into a transformed nave organized around a central runway. The runway extends the logic of

the church aisle while simultaneously referencing the traditions of Harlem ballroom culture. Rather than functioning as a conventional stage, it acts as the primary social and performative space within the building. The theater renderings (Figures 53 and 54) further demonstrate how the architecture supports this relationship. In the unoccupied rendering, the runway establishes a strong processional axis through the center of the room. When populated, that same space becomes activated through the movement of performers and the participation of the audience, illustrating how drag performance relies upon proximity and interaction rather than separation.

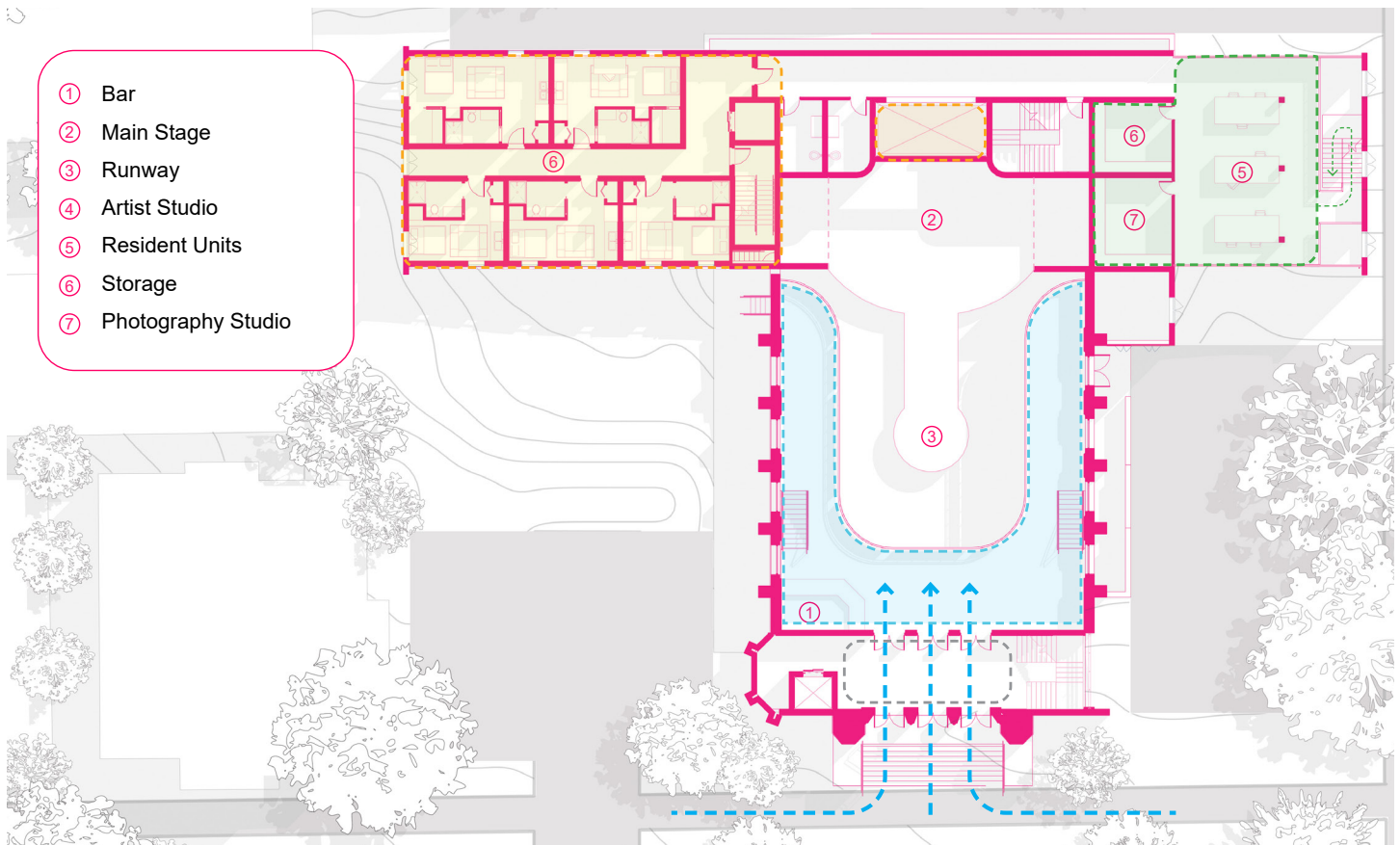
The project extends beyond performance to address the forms of labor that make drag possible. Historically, much of the work associated with drag has occurred within private apartments, backstage dressing rooms, and improvised workspaces. Costumes are sewn, wigs are styled, performances are rehearsed,



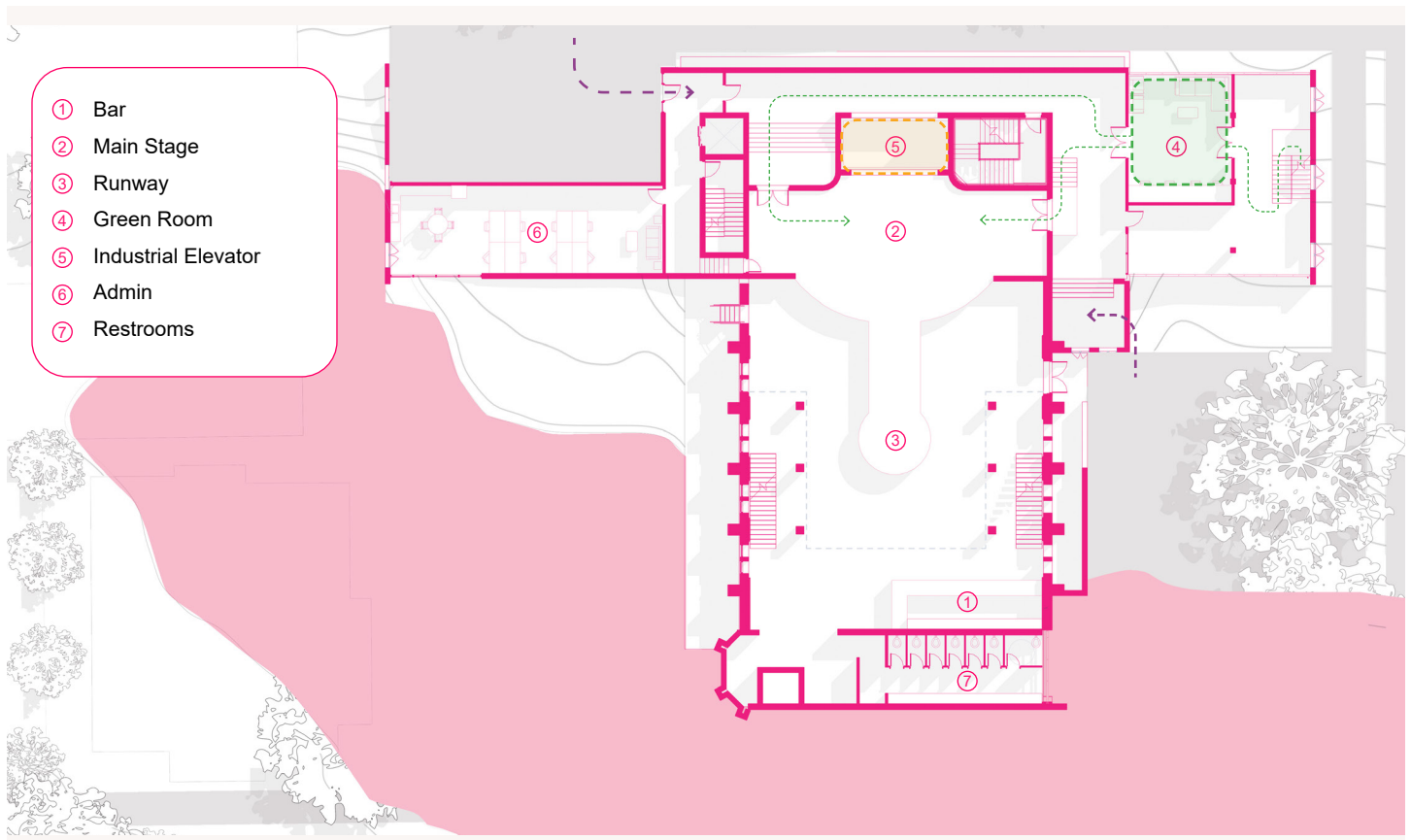


**Figure 52:** Section axonometric illustrating the spatial organization of the project within the existing church and contemporary addition. The cutaway reveals the primary performance hall, elevated stage, runway, and stage lift, along with backstage support spaces and basement storage located beneath the performance venue.





**Figure 53:** First floor plan illustrating the primary public level of the project and the principal point of entry from Harvard Avenue. Visitors enter through the historic church narthex and move directly into the transformed nave, where the bar, main stage, and central runway organize the performance experience.



**Figure 54:** Ground floor plan showing the backstage and operational infrastructure that supports the drag venue. Located beneath the primary performance level, this floor contains the green room, administrative offices, industrial stage elevator, restrooms, and support spaces required for performance operations.



**Figure 55:** Rendering of the main performance hall showing the architectural transformation of the church interior. The design reinterprets the spatial hierarchy of the sanctuary through a central runway, layered balconies, theatrical lighting, and stained-glass-inspired interventions, establishing a permanent framework for drag performance and public gathering.





**Figure 56:** Rendering of the performance hall during a drag show. The audience fills the nave and balconies while performers occupy the runway, demonstrating how the architecture becomes activated through spectacle, participation, and collective experience.

and communities are maintained largely outside public view. Building upon Esther Newton's observation that drag culture is sustained through networks of mentorship and collective labor, the project dedicates substantial architectural space to these activities. The drag artist studio (Figure 60) positions fabrication and costume production within a dedicated environment organized around communal worktables, natural light, and collective making. By giving these activities architectural presence, the project argues that the labor of drag deserves the same recognition as its public performance.

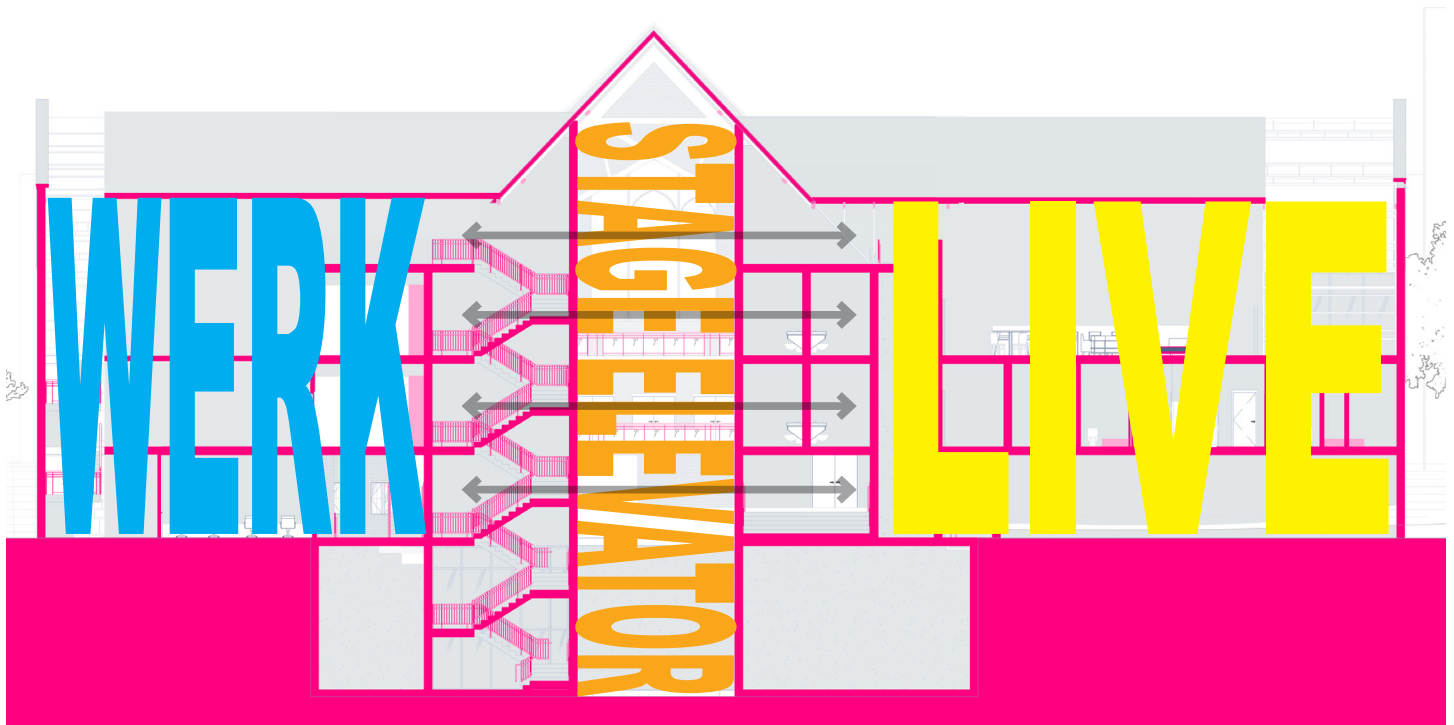
The relationship between living and working is reinforced through the organization of the artist residency. The sectional studies (Figures 55 and 56) reveal how the project creates visual and spatial connections between the Live and Werk zones through a central stage elevator. Functionally, the elevator supports the movement of costumes, scenery, materials, and performers throughout the building. Conceptually, it becomes a spatial representation of transformation itself, linking private spaces of preparation with public spaces of performance.

This relationship is further expressed through the communal living environments shown in Figures 57 and 58, where shared kitchens, dining spaces, and outdoor gathering areas support the social networks that sustain queer culture beyond the stage.

The architectural language of the proposal draws heavily from theories of camp and queer aesthetics. Susan Sontag described camp as a sensibility rooted in artifice, exaggeration, theatricality, and performance. These ideas appear throughout the project in the use of saturated color, oversized graphic interventions, reflective surfaces, and stained-glass reinterpretations. The exterior addition shown in Figure 59 demonstrates this approach most directly. Rather than concealing the intervention, the design embraces visibility and difference, creating a contemporary architectural expression that remains legible against the historic church. Similar strategies appear throughout the project's interior spaces, where colored light and decorative surfaces transform everyday spaces of living and working into environments that celebrate self-expression.



**Figure 57:** Building program section illustrating the spatial relationship between performance, production, and residency functions.



**Figure 58:** Sectional diagram illustrating the stage elevator as the organizational core of the project. Positioned between the Werk and Live programs.



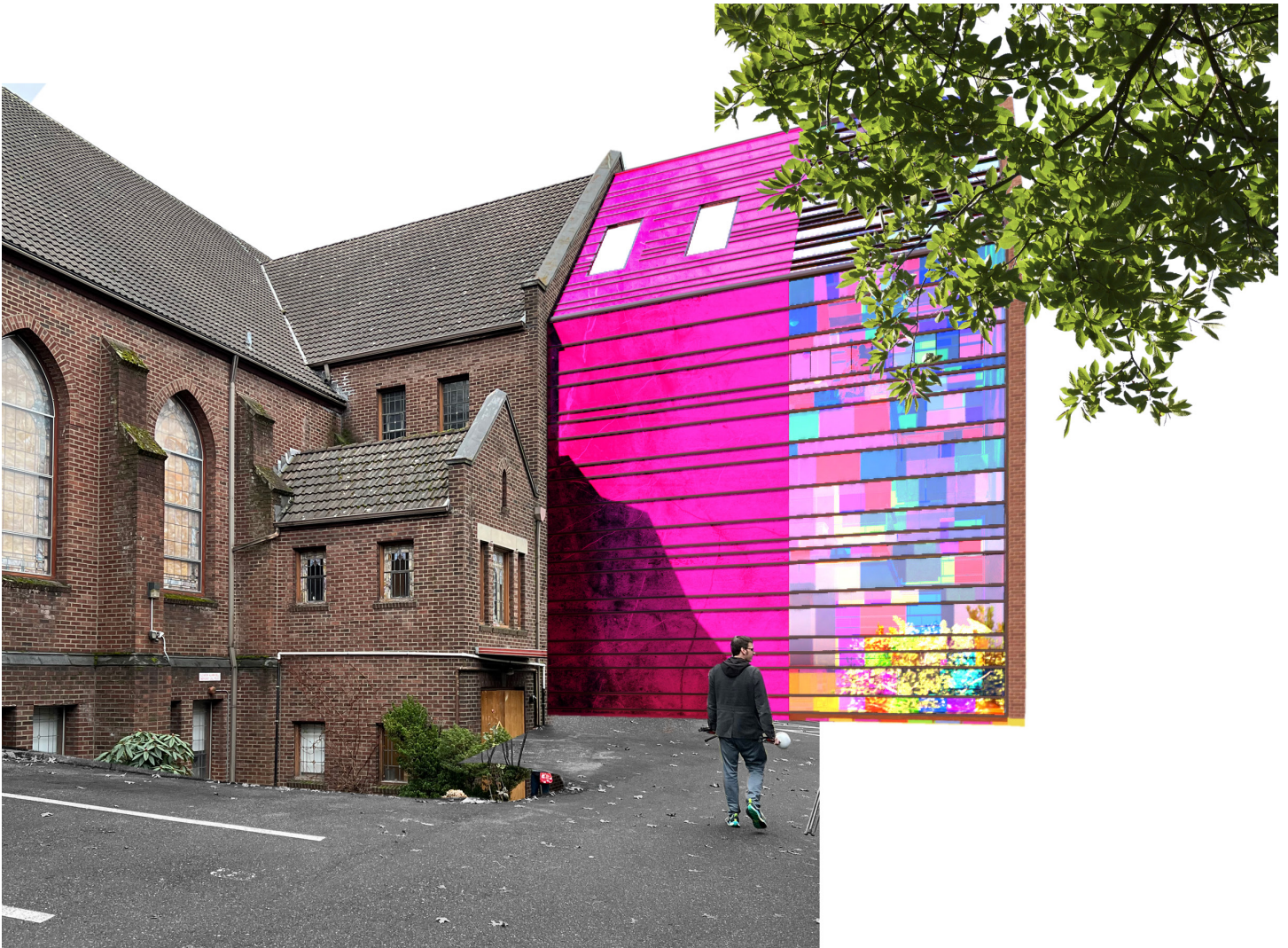


**Figure 59:** Rendering of the primary communal space within the artist residency. The open-plan interior combines a shared kitchen, dining area, and living room beneath a vaulted roof structure, creating a central gathering space for resident artists. Colorful finishes, floral patterns, and abundant natural light establish an atmosphere that embraces camp aesthetics while supporting everyday activities such as cooking, conversation, and informal collaboration.



**Figure 60:** Rendering showing the relationship between the shared interior and adjacent outdoor gathering space. A stained-glass-inspired canopy filters colored light across the dining area and terrace, extending communal activity beyond the building envelope. The preserved brick wall of the historic church remains visible alongside the contemporary intervention, illustrating how the project brings together collective living, social interaction, and adaptive reuse within a single architectural environment.





**Figure 61:** Rendering of the proposed “work” addition attached to the historic church. A luminous pink façade and large-scale stained-glass-inspired curtain wall mark the insertion as a contemporary layer distinct from the original masonry structure, allowing the new intervention to remain legible while preserving the historic fabric. The addition houses the drag artist residency and communal spaces, with the projecting volume expressing the expansion of the building beyond its original footprint.





**Figure 62:** Rendering of the primary studio space within the drag artist residency. Inserted within the former church volume, the studio preserves the existing roof geometry while introducing new stained-glass-inspired interventions that cast colored light across the interior. Large communal worktables organize the room around collective production, supporting costume design, sewing, fabrication, and collaboration.





Ultimately, the project argues that adaptive reuse can function as an act of cultural continuation rather than preservation alone. The church is neither frozen as a historical artifact nor stripped of its identity through redevelopment. Instead, its existing spatial logic is translated into a new cultural framework. The sanctuary becomes a theater. The processional aisle becomes a

runway. Stained glass becomes a medium for queer expression. The congregation becomes an audience. The final atmospheric renderings (Figures 54 and 61) visualize this transformation most clearly, depicting a space where architecture, performance, and collective participation merge into a single experience. Through these transformations, the project





**Figure 63:** Atmospheric rendering of the proposed drag theater during a performance taken from the stage facing towards the audience.

demonstrates how historic architecture can remain relevant by supporting emerging communities and evolving cultural practices.

At a time when many queer bars, nightclubs, and community spaces continue to disappear due to redevelopment, rising costs, and shifting patterns of social life, The Church Drag Venue proposes

a new form of queer cultural infrastructure. By bringing together housing, production, education, and performance within a single building, the project positions drag not as a temporary occupation of space but as a legitimate civic institution worthy of permanent architectural support.



## Endnotes

1. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969).
2. Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*
3. Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).
4. Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966).



# CONCLUSIONS

A grayscale photograph of a church interior. The image shows a high, vaulted wooden ceiling with exposed beams. Several large, arched windows with intricate glass patterns are visible on the left wall. Rows of wooden pews are arranged in the nave, leading towards the altar area in the background. In the foreground, a wooden podium stands on a raised platform, next to a music stand. The word "CONCLUSIONS" is overlaid in a bold, red, serif font across the center of the image.







**Figure 64:** Drag Ball at Webster Hall, New York City, c. 1920s. Webster Hall became one of the most prominent venues for drag balls during the 1910s and 1920s. Source: New York Public Library Digital Collections.

This thesis began with the recognition that many of the spaces that historically sustained LGBTQ+ communities are disappearing. Bars, nightclubs, performance venues, and informal gathering spaces have long served as critical sites of identity formation, cultural production, political organizing, and collective care. Yet despite their importance, these spaces are often treated as temporary or expendable within contemporary processes of urban development. As queer neighborhoods continue to experience redevelopment, rising property values, and cultural displacement, questions emerge regarding how architecture might contribute to the preservation and evolution of queer cultural life.

Through an examination of queer urban history, Harlem ballroom culture, drag performance,

camp aesthetics, and adaptive reuse, this thesis argues that queer cultural spaces should be understood as a form of civic infrastructure. Like libraries, theaters, churches, and community centers, these spaces support social networks, collective memory, cultural expression, and community formation. Their significance lies not only in their physical form, but in the practices, relationships, and rituals they enable. Preserving queer culture therefore requires more than commemorating historic venues or documenting their histories. It requires creating new spaces capable of supporting the evolving needs of contemporary queer communities.

The adaptive reuse of the former Westminster Presbyterian Church proposes one possible response to this challenge. Rather than preserving the building as a static artifact of the





**Figure 65:** Escándalo Revival at Arena Nightclub, Hollywood, 2002. Patrons gather beneath theatrical lighting and a central disco ball during Escándalo, a prominent Latino gay dance night held at Arena Nightclub in Los Angeles. Photograph by Mario Sandoval. Courtesy of the artist.

past, the project reimagines it as a living cultural institution dedicated to performance, creativity, mentorship, and collective gathering. Through the integration of artist housing, creative workspaces, and a drag theater, the proposal expands the historical role of the queer bar into a broader model of cultural infrastructure. The project acknowledges that drag is not merely an act of entertainment, but a complex social practice involving labor, community, transformation, and care. By providing spaces for living, making, and performing, the building supports the full ecosystem through which drag culture is produced and sustained.

At the same time, the project demonstrates the potential for adaptive reuse to operate as a form of cultural translation. Throughout the thesis, parallels were drawn between the spatial

organization of Catholic ritual, Harlem ballroom culture, and contemporary drag performance. Each relies upon procession, performance, spectatorship, and collective participation to create meaning. By transforming the church's nave into a runway, the sanctuary into a stage, and the congregation into an audience, the proposal reveals relationships already embedded within the existing architecture. The project suggests that historic buildings remain relevant not by preserving their original functions indefinitely, but by accommodating new forms of occupation that continue their traditions of gathering, ritual, and community.





# **BIBLIOGRAPHY**



- Bailey, Marlon M. *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.
- Boyd, Nan Alamilla. *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Carter, David. *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004.
- Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940*. New York: Basic Books, 1994.
- Ghaziani, Amin. *There Goes the Gayborhood?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.
- Green, James N. *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Hanhardt, Christina B. *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.
- Hayden, Dolores. *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.
- Lawrence, Tim. *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980–1983*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Livingston, Jennie, dir. *Paris Is Burning*. New York: Miramax Films, 1990.
- Meyer, Moe, ed. *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- . *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Newton, Esther. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- Ochsner, Jeffrey Karl. *Shaping Seattle Architecture: A Historical Guide to the Architects*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014.
- RuPaul. *Lettin' It All Hang Out: An Autobiography*. New York: Hyperion, 1995.
- Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.
- Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969.
- Weston, Kath. *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- Barrie, Thomas. *Spiritual Path, Sacred Place: Myth, Ritual, and Meaning in Architecture*. Boston: Shambhala, 1996.



Betsky, Aaron. *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*. New York: William Morrow, 1997.

Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959.

Ochsner, Jeffrey Karl, ed. *Shaping Seattle Architecture: A Historical Guide to the Architects*. 3rd ed. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.