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## From the Church of Disco to Waterfront Ruins: An Analysis of Gay Space

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**From the Church of Disco to Waterfront Ruins:  
An Analysis of Gay Space**

**Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of the Arts  
of Bard College**

**by  
Liam Nolan**

**Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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And finally, I dedicate this project to the gay men who came before me, who fought for the right to be unashamedly queer, and who created a world that continues to inspire me.



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## Introduction

Growing up in a suburban neighborhood on Long Island, there was always an expectation to blend in. Catholic school was my first exercise in this activity where I wore a uniform, and was forced to fit into the traditional gender norms of an elementary school: boys play with boys, girls play with girls. I broke that rule on the first day. This feeling of being different as “the other” in class defined me and how I viewed myself within an academic setting. Immediately, I was labeled as “gay,” not really knowing what it meant, except that it felt like a punishment every single time it was spat at me. This represented my life Monday through Friday, but on Saturday I was able to escape the Catholic school bubble to go to Ukrainian school in the East Village where I learned about my heritage and began to understand and embrace the qualities that made my identity different from the kids back in Long Island.

In high school, I started to understand the personality behind spaces and how I fit into them. At my all-boys school, in Mineola, NY, I recognized and accepted my sexuality, and I came to understand what it meant to live under the radar in a space that would otherwise ostracize me if I lived openly. Oppositely, traveling to the city every weekend became a reprieve from the closet that was my life. In Manhattan, I didn’t have a secret. I could check out a guy without hesitation. Everyone was anonymous and I found freedom in that.

The first time I went to a gay bar was in Dublin, I had just come out to my parents the summer before, and we recently celebrated the legalization of gay marriage. I went with my two straight brothers and their girlfriends at the time. Two men were standing outside smoking cigarettes like bodyguards defending the portal to a world I was ready, but apprehensive to discover. Little did I know 7:00 pm was early for gay nightlife, and my hetero entourage paid for



drinks and sat to the side while the rest of the bar was still setting up for the night. After a drink, we jumped on the city bus, and I was overcome by so many thoughts: “Was it too early? Where was everyone? I can’t believe I just did that. Did I look cute? I’m ready to go again.”

Even though my first adventure into the realm of gay space was rather dull, the exhilaration of going to a place where my gay identity was not secondary, but rather shamelessly on display was liberating. I was intrigued by how the confines of a 1,200 square-foot bar could change the social landscape of someone’s life. The more I ventured out into this world, the more I realized that gay space not only existed in the club, but everywhere, some explicitly sanctioned as gay and others hidden by the anonymity of public space.

I began to stray away from gay space’s contemporary state and I became entranced by the history of gay sites in the golden age of club culture during the 1970s and 80s. From Fire Island summers to the St. Marks Baths, it’s within these two decades that gay space conquered the built environment and exploded with popularity, but also saw its demise due to AIDS and the “cleaning up” of the city, which became a signature issue for Mayor Ed Koch who was at the pinnacle of this transition between 1978-1989.

I wanted to illustrate the spectrum of gay space in my thesis, so I began to look at clubs, bars, parks, gyms, bathrooms, and I happened to discover the Saint, a gay superclub that had existed in the center of the Ukrainian neighborhood between 1980-1988. It was referred to as the “Vatican of Disco,” and was architecturally like no other club in New York. It had a planetarium dome that could fit over a 1,000 men and it was a place embedded with ritual and community. As I wrote this chapter, I began to comprehend one side, one-half of gay New York. In response, I chose to write my second chapter on the west side piers which geographically, communally, and

spiritually was opposite to the Saint. It wasn't a clean, private space, but an open free-for-all where adults could adventure into the beautiful ruins of abandoned piers, where artistic intervention could be had, and where one could experiment with the thrill of public sex. By studying these two sites, I have been able to grasp some of the dynamics of gay space, the dialogue between private vs public, the relationship between community and sexual-expression, and ultimately how gay spaces' histories have been remembered, memorialized, and forgotten over time.

During the researching process, I went to NYU Fales Library to look at the Tim Smith Collection which holds the Saint's archive. I examined the original architectural plans of the dome, studied the promotional posters that were passed around the city, and held the actual membership cards of previous Saint-goers in my hand. I was transported by the material I found in the archive, and I began to tease apart the nickname that had branded the Saint as a church. My entire life I had grown up in Catholicism and anything that contradicted its beliefs was seen as sacrilege, so the idea of a gay church was too exciting. Examining the Saint, I used my history as a Catholic school student to help me conceptualize and frame how gay culture and its spaces fulfill the characteristics of spirituality, belief, ritual, community, and tradition of a place of worship. Using this method of classifying gay sites within a genre of architecture became a useful procedure to understand them within a greater architectural lineage. With the piers, I talked to Russell Sharon, an artist and gay man who frequented the piers and was part of the East Village art scene. In our conversations, Sharon painted the romantic landscape of Pier 34 with his stories and described how unbelievably beautiful and wild New York was at this time. Eventually, through my conversations and further research, the piers became an easy comparison

to the stereotype of the ruin which represents reverie, melancholy, a bygone time, a persistence to exist, and a place recontextualized and divorced from its original function.

By placing these typologies as frames by which to analyze gay space, it links these sites to a greater cultural narrative that has dismissed and ignored these places. I argue that these sites, the Saint and the piers, along with its hundreds of counterparts are culturally significant and have been crucial to forging a gay identity and community in the form of claiming space in the built environment. It's important to study, remember, and understand the dynamics of gay space because they have greatly disappeared in their scale and presence in the built environment. As gay space has been transferred to the virtual realm, these material spaces become relics of an era that used to value the need to escape to a physical site.

As a gay man today, I feel as though I am tasked with the job of trying to understand the history of these spaces, the social landscapes they contained, and the communities that existed. At a recent lecture by artist Matthew Leifheit, he talked about *Fire Island Night*, his project dedicated to documenting the culture of Cherry Grove and the Pines. In a triptych, he positions two photographs of the architectural features of the Belvedere, a gaudy, over-embellished, clothing-optional hotel, alongside a photograph, resembling a frieze, of older gay men looking over the balustrade of what looks to be a Grecian villa (Figure 0.1). They look down at the photographer as if to be the rulers of an empire that is on the brink of extinction. Leifheit proposes that as gay men we get to choose what we want to inherit from this culture, addressing the panel of naked men defending their space. With this project, "From the Church of Disco to Waterfront Ruins: An Analysis of Gay Space," I'm on both an academic and personal journey. On one side, I'm invested in establishing the cultural importance of these spaces, and on the

other hand, I'm trying to understand where I belong in this narrative in which urban sites have been replaced by the screen, the present and future landscape of exploring gay identity.

## Introduction: Illustration



**Figure 0.1.** Triptych addressing the culture and aesthetics of the Belvedere. 2018.

<https://www.matthewleifheit.com/fire-island-night>

# Chapter 1



## The Saint: Heaven on Earth

## Introduction

As a kid, I passed by 105 Second Avenue hundreds of times. To me, it was a three story brick building with an Apple Savings Bank on the first floor that was sandwiched between NYU Tisch School for the Arts, a supermarket notorious for its tiny aisles, and a BBQ restaurant that smelled amazing on a Saturday afternoon. It blended into the urban landscape like any other building. In 1980, 105 Second Avenue wasn't just any address in the East Village, rather, it was the site of the superclub<sup>1</sup> called the Saint. It started its days as a Yiddish theater, then changed into a Depression-era movie theater; in the 1960s, it became the premiere rock-and-roll venue called the Fillmore East, and finally it was transformed into the gay dance mecca in the 1980s. After a gut renovation, the abandoned rock theater was recreated as the church of disco. It went from velvet seats and a proscenium stage to a high tech planetarium dome and an expansive dance floor. The Saint perfected the visual and architectural language of the disco, and it offered an experience like no other.

One of the earliest discos in New York was the Loft, started by David Mancuso in 1970. Every weekend he transformed his home into a nightclub hosting private parties.<sup>2</sup> Streamers and balloons hung from the ceiling and there were tables covered with pitchers of fruit punch and snacks, much like a birthday party you might have gone to as a kid.<sup>3</sup> As the decade progressed, clubs came and went, like Flamingo, 12 West, and the Sanctuary. Many of these took the Loft as a model for their interpretation of the discotheque, but the Saint, opening its doors in September

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<sup>1</sup> A **superclub** is a very large or superior nightclub, often with several rooms with different themes. "Superclub definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary," *www.collinsdictionary.com*, Collins, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Lawrence, "Disco and the Queering of the Dance Floor," *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 2 (2011): 231.

<sup>3</sup> Vince Aletti, "Soho vs. Disco: the story of the 'Loft'," *Village Voice*, June 16, 1975.

of 1980, constructed a space based not on the modesty of the Loft, but rather, it took the institution of disco as a whole and designed a shrine to gay culture.

Originally, the Fillmore East offered a traditional way of listening and dancing to live music with a classic proscenium configuration and a clear separation between stage and audience. The multi-million dollar renovation was funded by Bruce Mailman<sup>4</sup>, owner of the New St. Mark's Baths, between twenty to thirty investors, and architect/business partner Charles Terrel (Figure 1.1).<sup>5</sup> The renovation reoriented the space to no longer separate the performance and the audience. Instead, the audience was part of the performance, and the stage was the dance floor. On a typical night, as one entered the Saint, one would walk into the lobby which opened up onto the coat rooms, and on either side were the old marble staircases which led to the dance floor (Figure 1.2). Also on the first floor, straight ahead, was a bar and lounge with two industrial mesh-enclosed spiral stairways that also led to the dance floor.<sup>6</sup> The bar and lounge were on the old Fillmore East stage with ramps that connected the old with the new and offered a view of the classical architectural embellishments of the theater which stood in stark contrast to its high tech counterparts.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce Mailman was an East Village entrepreneur who owned two off-broadway theaters, The New St. Mark's Baths, and The Saint. He died of AIDS in 1994. From "Bruce Mailman, 55, Owner of Businesses In the East Village," *New York Times* (New York, NY), June 12, 1994, [Page #], accessed November 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/12/obituaries/bruce-mailman-55-owner-of-businesses-in-the-east-village.html?sq=%22Bruce+Mailman%22&scp=1&st=cse>.

<sup>5</sup> In an interview with Steve Casco, project manager of the Saint, he doesn't call Charles Terrel the architect, rather a designer who helped Bruce Mailman conceptualize his ideas. Even though in *Stardust*, they paint Terrel as the architect behind the Saint. Steve Casco was also one of the twenty to thirty people who invested in the Saint, and he also helped Mailman renovate of the St. Marks Baths. From Steve Casco, telephone interview by the author, Red Hook, NY, November 30, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> "1980: THE SAINT ARRIVES," LOSING ALEXANDRIA, accessed October 11, 2018, <http://www.nycnotkansas.com/LosingAlexandria.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Mel Cheren, "A New Decade," *Keep on Dancin: My Life and the Paradise Garage*, (New York, NY: 24 Hours for Life Inc., 2000), 277.



Before entering the dance floor, one could see the metal skeleton of the dome and hear the roar of music (Figure 1.3). Mailman came up with the idea of a planetarium after waking up from a dream, or so the story goes, and he was fascinated by the idea of reproducing projections of heaven and earth on its surface.<sup>8</sup> Once one entered the dome, one could see that in the center of the dance floor was a pedestal with lights and projectors (Figure 1.4), and the DJ booth was on an elevated platform that hugged the side of the dome, overlooking the crowd (Figure 1.5). The transition from the industrial frame of the planetarium to the milky and magical projections on the aluminum skin of the dome transformed the discoers' experience by deconstructing reality and replacing it with the heavens above. Mel Cheren, the founder of Paradise Garage, describes Mailman opening the doors for the first time on September 20th at 11:30 pm: "When the boys poured in, you could actually hear the gasps of astonishment above the pounding music."<sup>9</sup> Mailman and Terrel conjured a sense of magic and awe that no man had ever felt entering a disco. They transformed a dance floor from a one-dimensional plane into a vast universe.

The balcony, which was formerly the mezzanine, was situated right above the dome, and unintentionally became the place for euphoric orgies (Figure 1.6). Bruce Mailman commented, "that wasn't meant to be [sex in the balcony]. The Saint, you know, was a place for dancing--- that's what it was designed for. The balcony was a place to watch the dancing."<sup>10</sup> Instead, the balcony became the "back room" of the disco in which men could engage in sex away from the public eye of the dance floor. Mel Cheren says on a typical night you spend a couple hours dancing, and then high as a kite, you'd go up to the balcony for a quickie. After feeding your

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<sup>8</sup> Darrel Yates Rist, "A Scaffold to the Sky and No Regrets," *New York Native*, May 2, 1988, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Cheren, 278.

<sup>10</sup> Rist, 18.

appetite “in heaven,” and snorting some coke you would go back to the dance floor for another round.<sup>11</sup> The balcony, therefore, sitting above the artificial stars, was the apex of bliss for many gay men where bodily desire was consumed and where the discotheque morphed into the bathhouse.

Ultimately, the Saint takes on many spatial identities. First, there are the ideas of the church and the disco. Ritualistically, there was a habitual movement of the body through space: taking off your excess clothing upon entering, grabbing a drink at the bar, dancing under the celestial dome, ascending to the balcony for carnal and spiritual desire, and resurrecting back onto the dance floor after the physical exhilaration of sex. There is also the architectural lineage of the building itself, as a mecca and place of pilgrimage for rockers in the 1960s and discoers in the 1980s. Christened the “Vatican of Disco” by *After Dark*, the Saint blurred the lines between church and gay club, dance and sex, religious devotion and desire, the celestial and terrestrial, and reality and dream. It was a transcendent space that captured the spirituality of gay men, and transformed gay life from a profane sexual culture in the eyes of the church, into something sacred deserving of worship and idealization.

### **Dizzying, Dazzling and Amazing: A Disco Like No Other**

*“The difference between the Saint and any other space is that I was always aware of where I was...In the Saint, there is no physical limit to where that space can transport you --- in the heavens, underground, outdoors, in the Parthenon.”*<sup>12</sup>

- Joseph Spencer, Spencer Designs

The Saint, as stated by Joseph Spencer, was like no other club in New York, for its design surpassed any kind of general classification. It offered a place to dance, escape, and explore

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<sup>11</sup> Cheren, 278.

<sup>12</sup> George Finley, "A Star is Born in the Man-Made Environment," January 1981, 30.

one's existence or lack of existence all under an artificial universe called "the dome." The Saint whetted the appetites of gay men with a hedonistic and sensory experience, which offered a distraction from daily oppression such as physical and verbal harassment in the streets.<sup>13</sup> The former Fillmore East was lost in time without a purpose after it closed, and it wasn't until the Saint and its technological advances and design did they reinvent the way one could forget about reality by going to the club (Figure 1.7).

Bruce Mailman and Charles Terrel took two years to find a building that could accommodate the planetarium. When they first looked at the Fillmore East, they had to cut the chains off the doors, and the interior was dark, with snow covering the stage. In that moment, Terrel describes Mailman asking him, "do you really want to do this," and he replied without a doubt, "yes!"<sup>14</sup> It took nine months to create the "Vatican of Disco," and they began by repairing the roof, paying six months in back taxes, and stripping the entire theater for construction.<sup>15</sup> They took a space that had been forgotten and refurbished its spatial identity from rock venue to gay dance mecca.

The threshold between reality and dream was at the four entrances of the dome. When one entered, one was met with a vast 4,800 square foot dance floor, and a dome that was bigger than the Hayden Planetarium, reaching 36 feet high and 76 feet wide, with no corners to hide in.<sup>16</sup> Immediately, the dancer was encapsulated by the vastness of the "night sky," and his existence entered a new galaxy of possibility. The vinyl clad dome was made out of perforated

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Dambach, "Under the Pleasure Dome: the Saint," *MANDATE*, November 1987, 10.

<sup>14</sup> "Profile: Charles Terrel," *StarDust*, November 1982, 8. *StarDust* was the Saint's newsletter, and it featured stories and interviews on key figures and upcoming events.

<sup>15</sup> Dambach, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Finley, 30.

aluminum and acted as a blank canvas for the projection of planets and stars.<sup>17</sup> Mark Ackerman, the light designer for the Saint, manually controlled 350 lighting instruments and orchestrated the projections on the dome. He states that the collaboration between the lighting person, the D.J., and the crowd was vital to the mood of the night.<sup>18</sup> When these two systems met, light and sound, before, “a limitless, starry sky...Dance and dancer become united.”<sup>19</sup> This unification only happened because of the collaboration between Robbie Leslie, the renowned DJ of the the Saint, and Ackerman (Figure 1.8):

There is a great deal of cooperation and a great deal of mutual feedback going on all night long. We [him and Mark Ackerman] exchange facial expressions for almost every song because he can hear what I am cueing up...The Saint is the only club where the light person is equally acknowledged as a talent, as a personality, as opposed to other clubs.”<sup>20</sup>

Essentially, each individual had a role to play: the discoer provided the mood, Robbie translated that into his track for the night, and Mark visualized it in the sky. (Figure 1.9).

The dance floor, Terrell's most admired structure, was an independent table with its own support system going down twenty feet into the floor of the building. It was strong enough to hold up a 60 story building, and it laid on rubber pads to soften the surface for dancing.<sup>21</sup> Within the center of the dance floor was a “tree of light”<sup>22</sup> crowned by the planetarium projector which was 10 times brighter than any other light, so its full effect could be experienced (Figure 1.10). Around the projector were several rings of lights, and the 12 pin beams mounted around the

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<sup>17</sup> The dome was like a one way mirror. When you were inside, you could only see the projections, and when you were in the balcony, above the dome, you could see everything that was happening inside it.

<sup>18</sup>John Duffy, "Changing Scene: Power Behind the Dome," *Blueboy*, December 1981, n.p.

<sup>19</sup> William Avis, "The Saint: Vatican of Clubs," *After Dark*, May 1981, 66.

<sup>20</sup> "Interview: Robbie Leslie," *StarDust*, May 1983, 5.

<sup>21</sup> "Profile: Charles Terrel," 8.

<sup>22</sup> A common nickname used to describe the lighting apparatus in the center of the dance floor.

dome were able to have their color and beam spread altered at the flip of a switch (Figure 1.11).<sup>23</sup> The “tree,” in the disco garden of Eden, could also be lifted up and down by hydraulics which brought life to the mechanical structure.

The sound system was 26,000 watts and was considered to be the most powerful per square foot for any entertainment complex in existence. The design was to reproduce sound as recorded using the distributed concept, meaning the sound system was spread across the dome and not in one centralized apparatus. The music went over 14 channels of amplification, and speakers were mounted outside the dome pointing directly at the dancers. The intensity of music reached 146 decibels, and to put it into perspective, the average orchestra reaches only 100.<sup>24</sup> The Saint’s sound system was loud, pure, and struck the dancers’ bodies like lighting.

Lastly, the climax of the night was the unveiling of the mirrored ball. Hidden above the dome, the disco ball was mechanically released over the dance floor through an octagonal opening (Figure 1.12). Charlie, a discoer, describes this experience in an article from *Metro Source*: “It was fabulous...Up until then, we were dancing in the Hayden Planetarium and that was cool. But the ball made it a Disco! Simply dizzying, dazzling and amazing...”<sup>25</sup> The disco ball was like the cherry on top of an already extravagant sundae. It gave the Saint a disco identity, but with a twist.

Ultimately, the sensory experience transported the gay man outside of his own reality, and into a different universe. One discoer explains his transformation as a journey, “It was a trip that started around midnight and didn’t reach its destination until 2:00 the next afternoon.”<sup>26</sup> The

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<sup>23</sup> Finley, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan McEwan, "The Saint Goes On," *MetroSource*, Autumn/Winter 1994, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 39.

ability to transport an individual without physically changing their location was magical. The Saint provided an experience where one could lose oneself within the sensorial bliss of a cosmic view and sensual beat. The dome could reach a capacity of 1200 people which inspired a sense of collectivity via the gyrating body that could not be felt outside the walls of the Saint. Mailman stated, “the design and concept is still more advanced than anything around. I think that when it works it works better than any place in the world. It has all of that magic.”<sup>27</sup> This magic permeated the Saint, and its technology allowed one to forget all notions of reality and explore a dimension where time and oppression didn’t exist.

### **Take Me to Church**

*“But to the celebrants of its special religion, it’s the Vatican of their faith.”*

- William Alvis, *After Dark* May 1981.

The Saint, just like every place of worship, gave a community of congregants a place to celebrate their beliefs, disco acting as the framework to celebrate the religion of being gay. The club’s design clearly articulated a relationship to church architecture with the implementation of a dome, oculus, and partition of space by ritualistic function. These distinct features date back as early as the Pantheon, a Roman temple that hosted many different religious traditions from the celebration of pagan gods to Christianity, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, an early Christian church that was erected at the presumed site of Jesus’ resurrection. Even though all three of these churches come from different types of religions, periods, and practices, they have a common visual language of the dome and oculus construction, and an ability to translate divinity and worship into a physical structure.

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<sup>27</sup> Dambach, 11.

The Pantheon, constructed between 118 to 128 A.D, presents itself as a classic Roman temple with Corinthian columns, a portico, and a detailed pediment (Figure 1.13). Both the Saint and Pantheon exhibit an unraveling of space from exterior to interior. As one enters the Pantheon, one is in awe of the beauty of the coffered dome, and the bright eye of an oculus. Surrounding the rotunda are Roman sculptures, variegated stone walls, and faux windows framed by classical post and lintel ornament (Figure 1.14). Within the dome itself, there are four areas of privacy in which the visitor can leave the center of the dome for a moment of reflection, a feature subtly mimicked in the four entrances to the dance floor of the Saint.<sup>28</sup> The dome, although stone, looks as if it's floating over the temple, and its effortlessness is punctuated by the oculus, a circular cut in the center of the dome, a place where one expects the structure to meet.

The dome is also implemented in the rotunda of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Instead of a coffered geometric design, the attention of the viewer is brought upwards by multiple concentric arches that line the dome, beginning from the floor of the church and rising to the height of the dome. At the top, the dome's oculus is encircled by sculptural rays of light like a halo surrounding the head of a saint, with additional stars around its perimeter (Figure 1.15). Due to the oculus, there is a clear delineation between natural light and candlelight, which allows for a visual separation of the heavens (the dome) and the tomb of Christ, a monument anchored to the earth. In other words, the oculus serves as the figurative eye of God, streaming light onto the site where Jesus was believed to be resurrected. By having the sepulchre in the

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<sup>28</sup> The four door design happens to be a coincidence in the Saint. Yet, in both spaces, they offer two highly important functions to the ritual. More specifically, in the Saint the entrances act as the threshold between reality and heaven, and stepping through them initiates your performance and movement in the dome. In a way, it warranted a moment of reflection before surrendering your body to the music.

center of the room, its position activates a circumambulatory experience that instructs the participant to process around the monument.

In the Saint, the dome was a vinyl tiled blank canvas, an ersatz of the coffered Pantheon (Figure 1.16). The heavens were subsequently projected onto its skin, similar to the sculptural elements at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, as well as Orthodox churches all over Eastern Europe. For example, when the disco ball projected gleaming streams of light across the dome, it was as if the stars of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre were mobilized, creating a living cosmic kingdom of heaven, hinting at Orthodox tradition. Moreover, the Saint used this concept of decorating its “kingdom” with celestial bodies to create the effect of worshipping under the heavens.

In the center of the dome, similar to the sepulchre, was the tree of light, a monument to the technological power that ignited the ritual of the night. It too, instructed a circumambulatory motion, in which one could navigate around the dance floor to the beat of the music. Yet, the traditional notions of the tree of life, from the Book of Genesis, is to test the knowledge of good and evil by way of Adam and Eve, but at the Saint, their religion doesn't differentiate between good and evil, and the sacred and profane. Instead, they combine them, establishing a sense of freedom from constrictive ideas of normative morality.

In the Pantheon and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the oculus is a source of natural light, where a framed view of the sky offers a peek into the heavens. At the Saint, the oculus was also the source of transfiguration for it was used to unveil the most venerated object of the night: the mirrored disco ball. The tree of light activated the reflective tiles and the ball painted glowing beams of light across the dome and onto the celebrants' gyrating bodies. The oculus here was a



physical marker of the transformation of the night in which the audience was reinvigorated by the sacrament of light.

Lastly, the balcony of the Saint is the clearest example of where the the sacred and profane intermingled. This is where men traveled to partake in heightened, sometimes orgiastic, sexual experiences. The balcony was the sacristy of their church, away from the public altar of the dance floor where one prepared for the bodily communion between man and man and where “profane” acts were made sacred. To put it simply, the balcony offered a climatic experience in which the devotion for the male body could be practiced without shame, and where one could find sustenance for their sexual appetite.

The Saint’s design and its relationship to early church architecture concretizes its reputation as the Vatican of Disco (even if the idea of the planetarium came to Bruce Mailman in a dream.) The lineage of these architectural features, from the Pantheon, to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, to the Saint, is what allows a space to become transcendent. Ultimately, the design of the space structured the Saint’s nocturnal pilgrimage, and it took the congregants on a journey to “sainthood” all under its euphoric dome.

### **Ritual**

*“You had entered the chancel. The circle of the dance swirled around you. The beautifully smooth floor slid under your feet. You were now fully enveloped into the worship.”*

-Robbie Leslie

### Devotion of Difference: Constructing the Religion of Disco

The stories that have stemmed from the Saint, from magazine articles to diary entries, have painted the club as a site of devotion and worship. Three main objects classified the experience of ritual: 1) the dome, which was at the core of securing movement and performance in space, 2) the gay male body, which was the sacred vessel that traversed the dome, and 3) the

unveiling of the disco ball as a sacrament. Together, with these three devotional objects, the Saint constructed a sensorial ritual practice where space, body, and disco allowed gay men to escape reality and it created a new dimension for gay men to not only exist, but to rejoice.

The first point of evidence of worship is in the way the Saint divided its year into seasons, similar to a liturgical calendar (Figure 1.17). The season would run from September to June, and took a break in the summer, so that its members could travel to the the gay mecca of Fire Island. During the year, there were many types of services from weekly sabbath days (the weekend), to specific religious holidays from Halloween, Christmas to Walpurgisnacht (a saint's feast day traditionally celebrated with dancing and bonfires to ward off witches.) Additionally, the calendar documents the phases of the moon with special celebrations held on the equinoxes and full moons. Therefore, the Saint constructs a multi-faith liturgy in which it celebrates a mixture of religions from Christian to pagan traditions. These combinations of ritual, derived from already established religious traditions, set the framework for a legitimate faith. As expected in a church, the Saint uses these events as a way to stimulate, excite, and unite the community, and it created a base for the veneration of sacred objects (body and disco ball) in the structure of a holy space.

In order to better understand how the Saint embodied the transformation from gay club to church, one must understand the ritual that lived within its walls. In Catherine Bell's *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, she states that rituals are produced, "with an intent to order, rectify, or transform a particular situation."<sup>29</sup> In other words, ritual gives a place of worship a base from which spirituality has a foundation to grow, but it also establishes a sense of tradition within

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<sup>29</sup>Catherine Bell, "The Ritual Body," in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 108.

space. Ritual structures belief with prescribed activities and it streamlines worship. In the Saint, the transformation of faith is materialized through the relationship between ritual and the body via the dancing congregant and his motion through space.

Moreover, movement through space is a matter of performance. Rituals are created through a set of organized rules which are constructed by the history of a space and what is deemed sacred.<sup>30</sup> Specifically, the Saint's traditions were grounded in gay socialization and cruising culture, and unlike traditional churches, the Saint didn't admonish this behavior but glorified and incorporated it into the creed of their religion. This difference from the traditional use of ritual structure can be seen in the by-laws of the club (Figure 1.18). For example, the Saint was male only, especially on Saturday nights<sup>31</sup> (although there were some exceptions), there was a specific dress code of pants and a t-shirt (high heels were strictly prohibited), and there was a ban on any objects that could obstruct the sanctity of the experience on the dance floor (i.e. flashlights could ruin the effects on the dome). Ultimately, the rules of the Saint set the night with parameters, outlining requirements for participation much like a religion grounded in ritual law, and it constructed the experience based on a set of guiding principles.

### Ritual of the Body

According to Bell, "ritual exists as an implicit variety of schemes whose deployment works to produce socio-cultural situations that the ritualized body can dominate in some way."<sup>32</sup> Thus, the body was imposed with schema of all types in the Saint essentially activating all five

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>31</sup> According to Steve Casco, the devastation of AIDS forced the club to open up for straight nights on Fridays.

Steve Casco, telephone interview by the author, November 30, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Bell, 98.

senses of the body. These schemes, or sensory experiences, created a new landscape for the gay man to apprehend and dominate his minoritization.

Catherine Bell uses Foucauldian theory to link the body to social practices and the wider organization of power as a way of forging a specific political “technology” of the body.<sup>33</sup> Changing the norms of the power structure inside the Saint, where society’s expectations of heterosexuality could be ignored, gave the gay male body a new identity, one which was based on spatial positioning. In other words, as a gay man, one’s position in society was debased because of heterosexual norms that vilified homosexuality, and the beauty of being in the Saint was the othering that heterosexuality permitted could be dismissed, creating an alternative society inside the club. Thus, the physical manifestation of this transformation of the political identity of the body is enacted upon entering the club. It was a portal of empowerment where the body underwent a radical replacement of status from societal degenerate to an object of veneration. Ultimately, consecrating the gay male body allowed it to escape the social construction of 20th century America, and explore a new dimension where the gay male body could be liberated rather than suppressed, and where it could be interacted with through a new perspective.

### The Body as Object

As a sacred object and key to the ritual of the Saint, the body had to undergo several stages of preparation before the physical and emotional journey to the dance floor. Jeff Brosnan, a Saint member, recounts the exhausting experience of attending opening night with his friend, detailed in a letter from 2005. He said they danced and traversed the space, but within a matter of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 97.

time, his friend left, saying, “this place was too much for him.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, the tribal experience was too much; the combination of blasting music and the dancing mass of people was physically taxing on him. In order to complete the ritual of the Saint, you therefore had to have a seasoned body. This “ritual mastery,” noted by Bell, “designates practical mastery of the schemes of ritualization as an embodied knowing.”<sup>35</sup> Embodied knowing emphasizes the need for a somatic understanding of the ritual, and reaching mastery meant your body would have the ability to surrender to the music. Ultimately, dancing should be effortless, so one’s focus could solely be placed on spiritual transcendence, rather than physical stamina.

Honing and sculpting the body, like a malleable object, helped in mastering the physical component of the night. In *Disss-Co (A Fragment)*, Douglas Crimp mentions the transformation of the male body from man with natural build to chiseled god. He attributes this change to a piece of gym equipment that transformed the male physique known as the Nautilus Machine (Figure 1.19).<sup>36</sup> Crimp credits the Nautilus with creating, “synthetically produced bodies, the dancing machines,” of disco.<sup>37</sup> Men’s natural curves were enhanced and replaced by larger pecs, also known as “disco tits,” bubble butts, arms like tree limbs, and rugby player thighs (Figure 1.20). This body was essentially a product of a machine, a mold of the perfect male body that could be prepared for the exhaustive and cathartic celebration on the dance floor. The

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<sup>34</sup> Letter by Jeff Brosnan, September 20, 2005, Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York.

<sup>35</sup> Bell, 107.

<sup>36</sup> Arthur Jones created his first Nautilus Machine in the 1960s called the Blue Monster which led to the “machine environment” of health clubs today. These machines helped transform simple gyms filled with free weights into fashionable fitness clubs. The Nautilus Machine was unique for its time because of the way it redistributed the weight during a workout making exercise more efficient and sculpting the body differently.

Andrew Martin, "Arthur Jones, 80, Exercise Machine Inventor, Dies," *New York Times* (New York, NY), August 30, 2007, [Page #], accessed December 9, 2018,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/30/business/30jones.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Douglas Crimp, *Disss-Co (A Fragment)* (New York, NY: MoMA PS1, 2016), 11.

mechanization of man transformed the image of the ideal body and made it easier to be multiplied and mass produced. To put it simply, the body was seen as the object of desire, and striving for such an ideal created an army of male clones all trying to achieve the same seasoned dance body.

The men that frequented the Saint represented the privileged class of gay culture. Its members were 95% white gay men, and everybody else, black, latino, Asian, fell into the other 5%. Whiteness prevailed in the Saint because it was an expensive club in which members paid \$125 for their membership cards and paid \$10 at the door, and their guests paid twenty dollars each (Figure 1.21).<sup>38</sup> Therefore, only a certain group of gay men could afford to attend the Saint, and as a result the space catered to exclusivity rather than democracy. This narrowed the participants of the ritual to the rich, and subsequently contributed to the worship of one type of body. This is visualized in many of the Saint's posters that advertise annual memberships and holiday parties. For example, the Saint's poster for the 1986-87 Season depicts a white man with the "perfect" anatomy (Figure 1.22). His face is proportional and masculine with heavy eyebrows and a mustache. His chest is toned and his muscles undulate his skin, giving the body curves that flow from shoulders to arms to legs. His dick is hard and ready for play. Surrounding the body are mathematical lines and equations as if to imply this man was designed and methodically perfected through science. This example of the white male god caters to their

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<sup>38</sup> Tim Lawrence, "The Forging of a White Gay Aesthetic at the Saint, 1980-84," Tim Lawrence, last modified July 2, 2013, accessed November 24, 2018, <http://www.timlawrence.info/articles2/2013/7/2/the-forging-of-a-white-gay-aesthetic-at-the-saint-1980-84-dancecult>.

clientele, their body image, and what they stereotypically desired. Ultimately by circulating this ideal, it narrowed the definition of the body as sacred object as white and hyper-masculine.

Adhering to this particular corporeal uniformity was key to the physical manipulation of the body and the perceived notions of the typical “saint,” but instead of measuring a person’s piousness the scale was set on one’s appearance. In addition to the physical preparation, the body also underwent a transformation of consciousness. Illegal drugs were part of the tradition of the Saint even if this was not Bruce Mailman’s intention. Altering the mind was a way to enhance, enthuse, and escalate the euphoria in the dome. It skewed reality, and made the body feel infinite in its ability to dance and fuck all night. Together, the chiseled disco body and the drug induced perception of limitless energy constructed the body as a vessel of spiritual and physical bliss. The body was like a temple where the ritual lived and from which it erupted, and the discoer provided the will for ritual. In Brosnan’s description of opening night, he paints the portrait of how a drug induced night transformed the social landscape of the dome:

What I saw I interpreted as pure joy and ecstasy. There was a communal spirit on the floor, whether it was four men sharing a red handkerchief with ethyl chloride sprayed on to the four corners, each man with a corner of the handkerchief in his mouth inhaling, two men dancing slower than the music because they were on Quaaludes, eight men dancing together like a Pines family sharing a bottle of poppers, or a singular person on the banquette dancing in his own inner spirit. Even alone I felt swept up in the tribal experience.<sup>39</sup>

This relationship between euphoria and drugs was essential to attaining and becoming one with the “spirit” of the dome.<sup>40</sup> The tribal experience was felt collectively, it reverberated throughout the mass of bodies, and it unified the body with the space.

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<sup>39</sup> Letter by Jeff Brosnan, September 20, 2005, Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York.

<sup>40</sup> Robbie Leslie and many writers of the Saint use the word “spirit” to describe, construct, and recollect the feeling and unifying atmosphere one felt in the dome.

### Space, Structure and Relationship to the Body

The Saint framed the process of ritualization, and it imposed various schemes, or sensory experiences, on the body to prepare for its ascent to the disco gods in the dome. On an average night, one would enter a set of nameless doors, go to the ticket booth, and continue into the dome or the bar while being greeted with “Good Evening’s” at every step. This greeting initiated the night and it welcomed the congregants to the “altar.”<sup>41</sup>

These preliminary steps taken in the lobby are an example of the circularity of the Saint. Bell states, “The construction of this environment [ritualized space] and the activities within it simultaneously work to impress these schemes [sensory experiences] upon the bodies of participants.”<sup>42</sup> This means that the way one moves about the ritualized space is effected by the seduction of an individual’s senses. The visual experience of the Saint was dominated by the dome, its size, and the celestial bodies projected in the skies, but this only demonstrates one scheme that was placed on the body.

Now, closing your eyes, imagine the sound of a thousand men dancing to the music above you, the smell of sweat from the body of the tribal dancer, the feeling of a cold drink going down your throat replenishing your spirit, and the sexual exhilaration of your body being fucked in the heavens in the balcony overlooking the men dancing below you. Together, these sensory variables are similar to the experience of walking into a church where one can smell incense burning, hear a piano playing, bibles opening, pew kneelers unfolding, congregants’

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<sup>41</sup> Brosnan described entering the Saint on opening night, and the attendants used the words “good evening” to greet and acknowledge a person’s entrance into the “church.” It was as if they were welcoming the congregants to a new dimension and effectively directing them toward the sacred dome. Additionally, the “altar” refers to the dance floor. (a term coined by Robbie Leslie)

<sup>42</sup> Bell, 98.



voices whispering. Ultimately, the sound of spaces inform and initiate ritual, and therefore inscribe a tradition in architecture.

The union between body and space climaxed when the sea of bobbing men met the disco ball that descended into the planetarium (Figure 1.23). At this moment, the celebration infiltrated and mesmerized the collective consciousness of the crowd. The mirrored ball acted as the discoers' north star, a way to locate themselves within the night. Robbie Leslie, DJ at the Saint, describes the moment when men walked onto the dance floor, and encountered the holy space before and after the disco ball's descent:

The dome heightened your understanding that this was a place to be revered. A place of beauty. A place of worship. A place that had to be found. And when you had finally reached forward and found it, you became a part of that space. You were a part of the spirit.<sup>43</sup>

The dome was the heart that circulated the life of the Saint and it gave ritual the space to create a communal spirit. Its architectural wonder informed the body of the space's spiritual purpose, and it created a place where one could have faith, not in God per se, but rather in a community of individuals. When the disco ball finally rained down beams of light on the crowd, Robbie Leslie reflects that's when, "the journey of the speck of light reflected that journey you had to take to see it. The meeting of those two journey's was magic."<sup>44</sup> In other words, going to the Saint was more than just getting drunk and cruising men, because it offered a heightened, even spiritual exploration of one's senses and their relationship to architecture. Ultimately, the Saint proposed a new definition of a place of worship, religion, and what it meant to be believe in something.

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<sup>43</sup> Letter by Robbie Leslie, "The Holy Altar," n.d., Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York, NY.

<sup>44</sup> Letter by Robbie Leslie, "The Holy Altar," n.d., Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York, NY.

### Pilgrimage

*“Sometimes we go to New York just to go to the Saint. Not because it's there, but rather because it isn't here. And quite frankly, it isn't anywhere else either. Nothing else compares”*

-Tim Smith and Jon Wenckus

Two different types of pilgrimage surround the Saint: 1) the pilgrimage to New York and the Saint as a gay mecca and 2) pilgrimage to the site after its closure. A spiritual pilgrimage, defined in the *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage*, refers to the devotional practice by which a person goes on a mental journey to one or several holy sites.<sup>45</sup> This implies one's body stays put and through prayer one can visit a holy site. I want to push this definition further because when it comes to the religion of the Saint it not only was a physical site of pilgrimage that was taken by New Yorkers as well as visitors from afar, but it also branded the memory of anyone who participated in the reverie.

In 1982, two years into its life, the Saint surveyed its members to better understand the needs of their clientele. Tim Smith<sup>46</sup> and Jon Wenckus, who lived in Washington D.C., went beyond filling out their survey and wrote a letter to the Saint regarding their experiences at the club (Figure 1.24). In their opening statement, they mention how important the Saint and New York have been for two out-of-state gay men. “We are drawn by that special electricity and magnetism which New York City alone possesses. Many cities have tried to compete, but none have succeeded. Each city has its own character and pace and thankfully so. But when we want a change we look north.”<sup>47</sup> It's as if New York City reinvigorated their lives, and acted as a place where one visited to reconnect to a larger urban context. Additionally, it was also a place where

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<sup>45</sup> Lutz Kaelber, "Spiritual Pilgrimage," in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage*, ed. Larissa J. Taylor (Boston, MA: Brill, 2010), 693.

<sup>46</sup> Tim Smith donated his Saint memorabilia to NYU Fales Library.

<sup>47</sup> Letter by Tim Smith and John Wenckus, 1982, Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York, NY.

they went to re-engage with gay culture and to re-energize the soul. They continue to attribute the city's spirit to the energy of the Saint:

“For those of us who only get to New York once and in a while, those stars in the night, those 336 speakers in 96 groups, those hot and juicy bodies, and that little plastic card [member's card] are very special to us. They represent to us a little piece of fantasy, a strange diversion, one really hot time and the closest thing to heaven four hours and \$52 away.”<sup>48</sup>

Smith and Wenckus view the Saint as an escape, a place to reconvene, and recenter. They describe it as heaven with juicy male gods and starry nights, and fantasize about their time there, constantly returning to their memories, a marker of personal transfiguration, a place that has changed them. They also remark that the Saint is a strange diversion, but a diversion from what? From the normal nine to five life, from homophobia, from a tamer gay scene in DC? It could be any of these, but it's important to recognize their characterization of the Saint as a unique and singular experience.

Throughout the Saint's life, it was a magnetizing force that attracted gay men from all over. Yet, the club, although seeming immortal during its existence, closed its doors in 1988. After a drop in membership, surely due in part to AIDS decimating its clientele, Mailman couldn't afford to keep it open. After it closed, the Saint laid empty and for the first time lifeless. In 1994, a journalist writing a feature on the Saint returned with a friend to the abandoned church of disco. They describe the club as a site “suspended in time” in which the structure of the dance floor was still intact. The author describes his journey there as, “I have come on a pilgrimage. In the center of the dance floor I find it, barren, wires hanging, to all appearance a dead thing. Could it [the apparatus holding the lights in the center of the dance floor] be deciduous?”

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Awaiting some disco spring? I reach out and touch the dormant tree of light.”<sup>49</sup> It’s striking to envision a Saint that is “a dead thing,” a memory that’s passed, its magic extinguished. As the author recounts returning was a pilgrimage of mourning and of respecting the history of the space.

These two types of pilgrimages constitute different modes of worship. In the first case, pilgrimage was about reviving one’s spirit in a community, and the second is about mourning a void. The reason for pilgrimage changed after the Saint’s death. Not only did the club die, but so did many of its members. It wasn’t just a place to visit the hallowed dome, but also to pay one’s respects to the discoers that perished as well. Memories paint the Saint as otherworldly, where one could press the pause button on reality. Through these stories, spiritual pilgrimage continues to live on not only for those who had the chance to worship in the Saint, but also someone like me. When I listen to the accounts of a night at the Saint, and I close my eyes, I can get a hint of what it was like to be there. This memory only lives in my imagination, and it feels like an escape similar to the way it was for gay men in the 1980s. Although, for me, I’m trying to reconnect to a past that feels impossible to have in the present. Nothing like the Saint exists today, and the space it inhabited has been erased from everyday life. The past and its stories are the only way I can access the spirit of the Saint and attempt at reconnecting to its history.

### **Conclusion**

*“The closing of the Saint saddens me. I keep marching away from the past I knew, toward the unknown future...I desperately want to grab hold of the sky and wrench the earth from its orbit, to prevent the passing of the days.”<sup>50</sup>*

-R.J. Markson, *New York Native*

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<sup>49</sup> McEwan, 40.

<sup>50</sup> R.J. Markson, "Second Avenue and Sixth Street Blues," *New York Native* (New York, NY), May 2, 1988, 22.

After eight years, the Saint closed its doors to heaven after one last 36 hour celebration in 1988. Several reasons led to its closure, including the inflating real estate prices and a changing disco sound, but what changed the life of the Saint was AIDS<sup>51</sup> and its decimation of gay men. By the end of its run, 700 membership renewals came back with “return to sender. Occupant deceased,” and the living and breathing organism of the church of disco never returned to its peak.<sup>52</sup> The saints of the disco were vital in creating the life of the Saint and without them its magic went, too.

The Saint acted as a diversion from reality and redefined the experience of the gay man within its walls. The design was so effective that when it came time to leave utopia in the morning, it was hard to readjust to society and leave paradise behind. This strange feeling of reacclimating back into daily life after escaping it for several hours was recounted by Jeff Brosnan:

I made the rounds saying goodbye to everyone I could find, went to the coat check and retrieved my jacket, left a tip, and walked out of the Saint into the glare of the morning sun...I walked past Kiev restaurant and to the Gem Spa candy store where I plunked down money for the New York Times and walked home up Second Avenue feeling too tired to stay awake and too alert to fall asleep. If I am feeling anything it is a combination of joy of what I have experienced and an overwhelming feeling of loneliness. These are the feelings that will remain with me on future visits to The Saint.<sup>53</sup>

Brosnan describes his process of reestablishing reality through several notions of the present.

First there is the glaring sun piercing his body reminding him of time, a concept that didn't exist in the Saint. Next, he walks through the East Village, situating himself back into his urban

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<sup>51</sup> Steve Casco said that at one point AIDS was called the “Saint disease” because of how much it spread throughout its clientele.

Casco, telephone interview by the author.

<sup>52</sup> McEwan, 42.

<sup>53</sup> Letter by Jeff Brosnan, September 20, 2005, Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York.

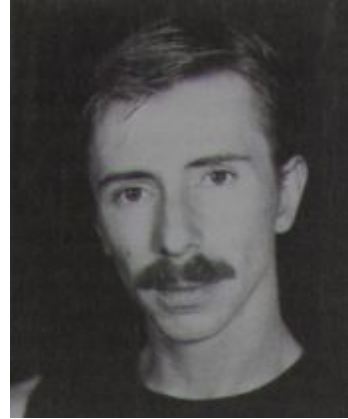
setting, and he buys the New York Times to reconnect to the headlines of the day, establishing the larger context of society. Lastly, his contradicting feeling of joy and loneliness is at the core of what the Saint offered gay men. While in the dome, it was there where you felt unified with everyone in the room (at times 1,200 men). That physical and communal bond was rarely felt outside the Saint. When any discoer left the club and broke that bond, it wasn't easy to come off that high when you went back out into the city. It meant giving up the ultimate connection of community, of faith, of spirit, and waiting another week or longer to feel that again.

A church, from my own experience, is a place one goes to (depending on how religious) on a weekly basis for sabbath and on major holidays. For some, it is a place where one feels obligated to go because you were born into a certain faith, and for others it offers sustenance to the soul. There is spectrum of belief and the need for a spiritual center in one's life varies. Language surrounding the Saint, about its physicality and experience, uses religious metaphors to equate it to the concept of a church, and its ability to captivate and cultivate spirituality. Ironically, western religion had always persecuted the homosexual and turned faith into a dirty word for many gay men because the church, at least in the Christian tradition, rejected gay men. Therefore, church's spatial identity was not a home, but a prison for gay men, and the Saint transformed and redefined what the church represented. It formed a religion that embraced gay men, martyrs of religious persecution, and secured a space that was designed to facilitate this spiritual transformation.

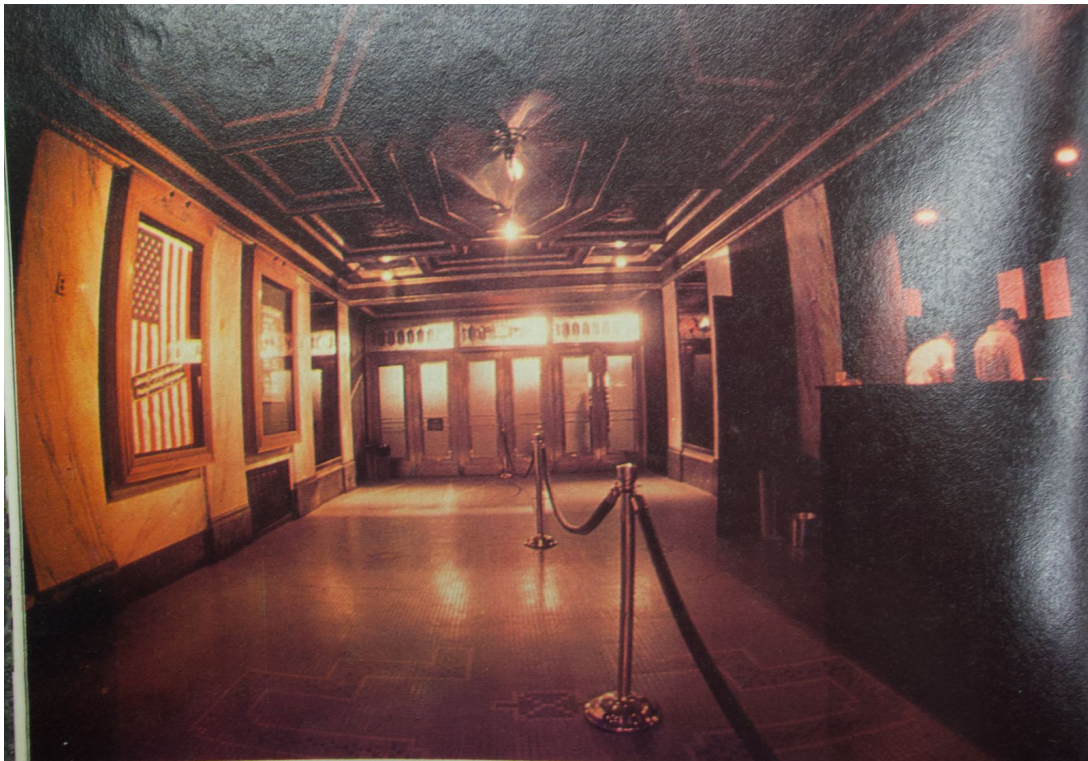
Yet, it needs to be acknowledged that the Saint, as the Vatican of all discotheques, suggests that it was the centralizing place for the worship of disco and the gay male body, but that wasn't necessarily the case. It offered a faith that was semi-exclusive, racially homogenous,

and overtly masculine. When you look at the gay community as a whole, those prerequisites only represent a specific group of people. Thus the Saint was a church that only offered a spiritual experience and a recontextualization of identity for a select crowd of believers. There is nothing wrong with this, but I feel it's my duty to acknowledge that the Saint, although architecturally and functionally was most like a church, it didn't mean it was the spiritual center for everyone. Other clubs and spaces in New York met other people's communal needs and needs for escape, yet the Saint as a space was unique and stands by itself in disco history. It created a bond with its congregants that couldn't be reproduced, and its history lives on in the memory of the dome, where men loved, bodies swirled, music pulsed, and where heaven existed.

## Chapter 1: Illustrations



**Figure 1.1.** Bruce Mailman (Left). Undated. A still from Interview on Youtube. Charles Terrel (Right). Undated. Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York, NY. In *Stardust*, 1982.

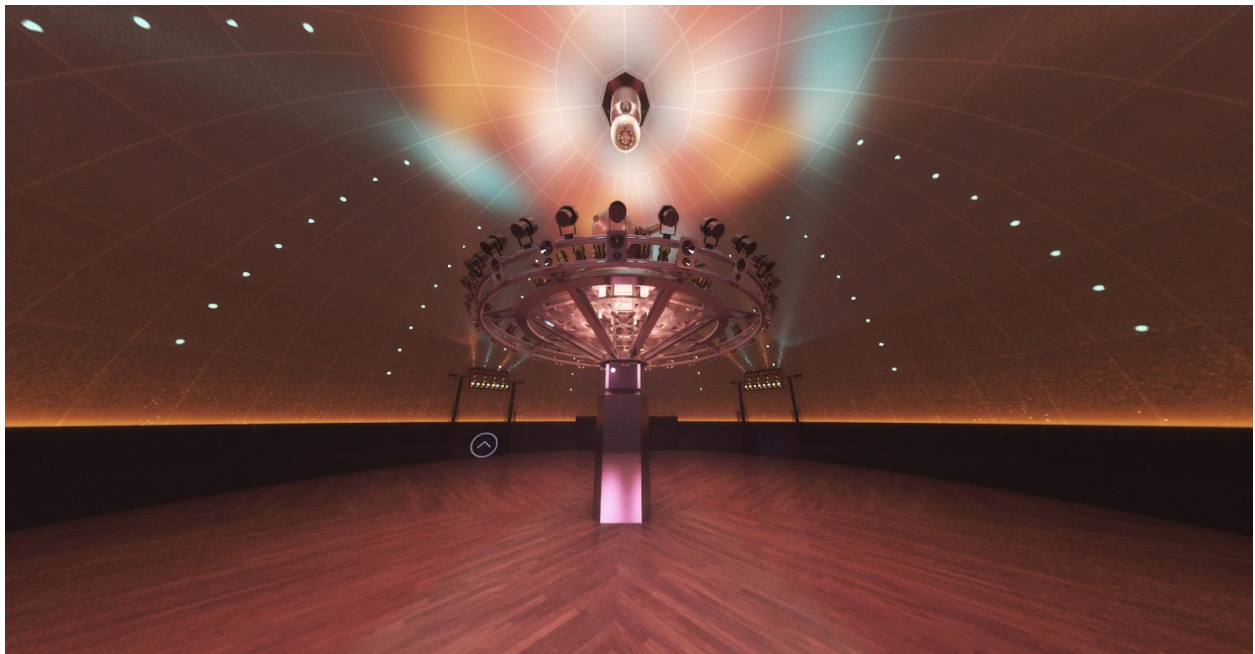


**Figure 1.2.** The foyer of the Saint with coat check on the right, and the original architectural features of the Fillmore East. undated. Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York, NY. In *Blueboy*, June 1981.

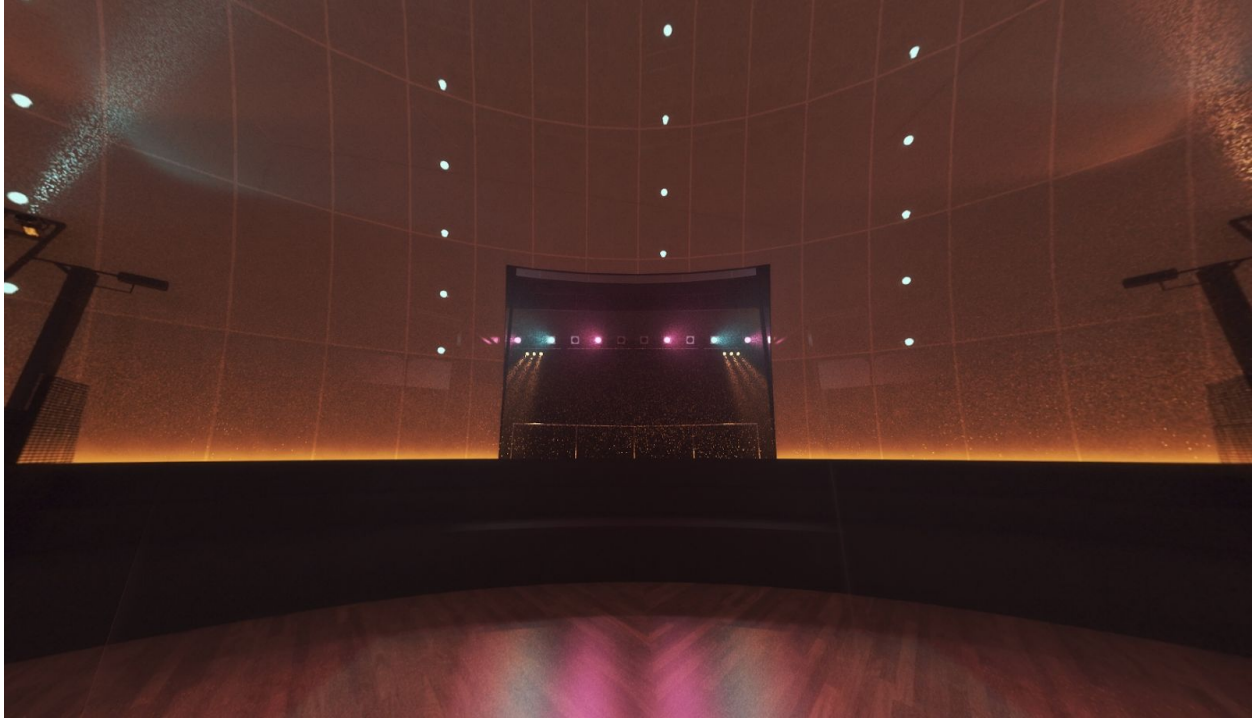




**Figure 1.3.** The metal frame of the dome. undated. Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York, NY. In *After Dark*, 1981.



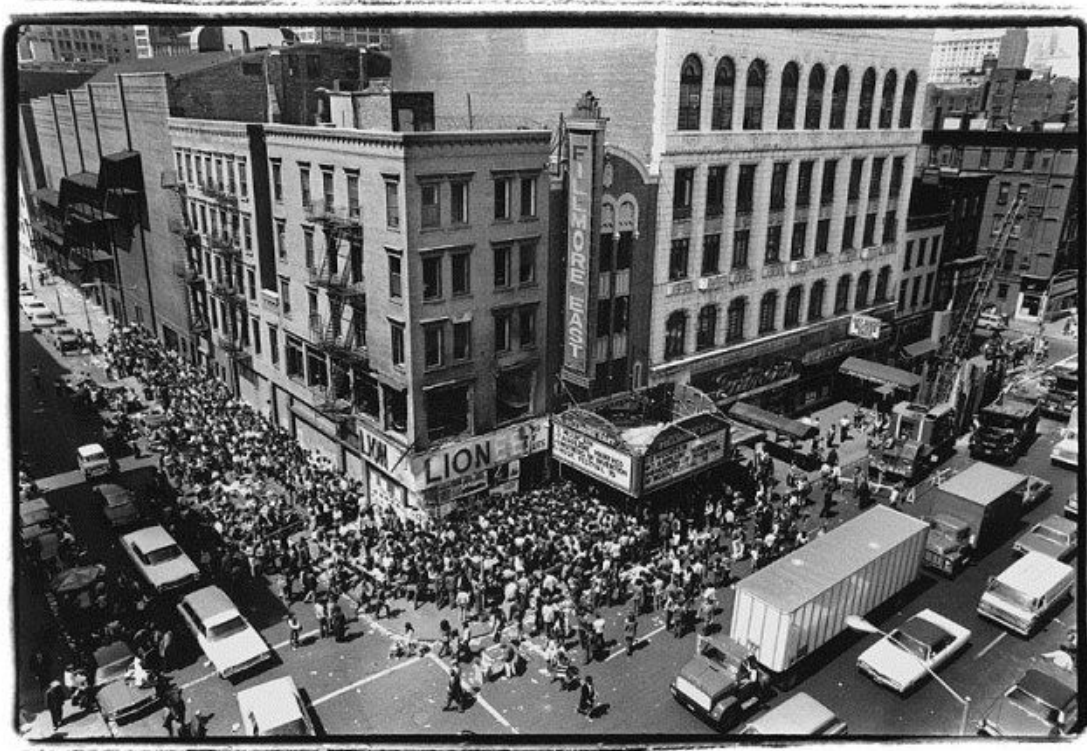
**Figure 1.4.** From a virtual tour of the Saint, above is the “Tree of Light” with all the lighting equipment and star projector. Undated. *The Saint At Large*. New York, NY.



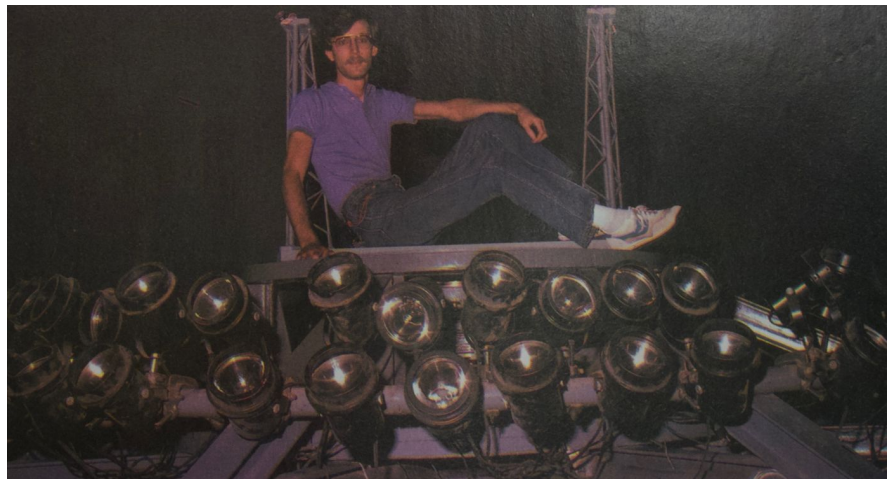
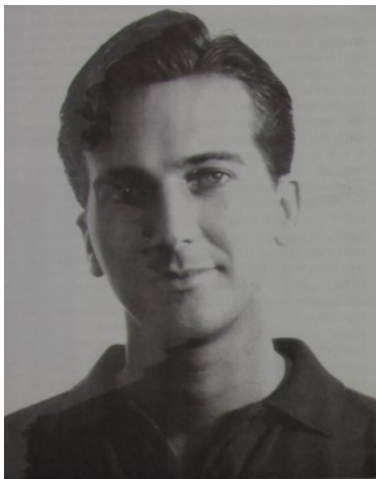
**Figure 1.5.** DJ booth in the dome. Undated. The Saint At Large. New York, NY.



**Figure 1.6.** View from the balcony. Undated. The Saint At Large. New York, NY.



**Figure 1.7.** The site of the Fillmore East. Undated. Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. New York, NY.



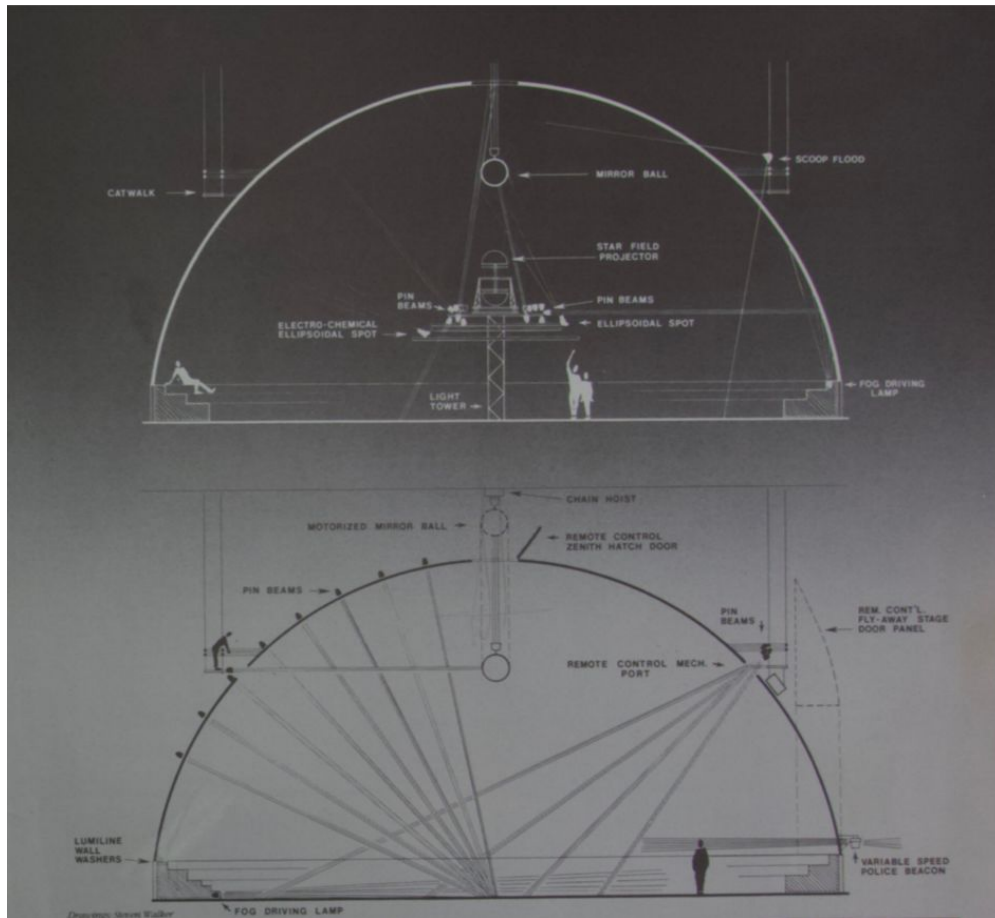
**Figure 1.8.** Robbie Leslie, DJ at the Saint (left). Undated. Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York, NY. In *Stardust*, 1983  
Mark Ackerman, light designer at the Saint (right). Undated. Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York, NY. In *Blueboy*, 1981.



**Figure 1.9.** Celestial bodies projected on the dome. Undated. The Saint At Large. New York, NY.



**Figure 1.10.** Star Projector. Undated. The Saint At Large. New York, NY.



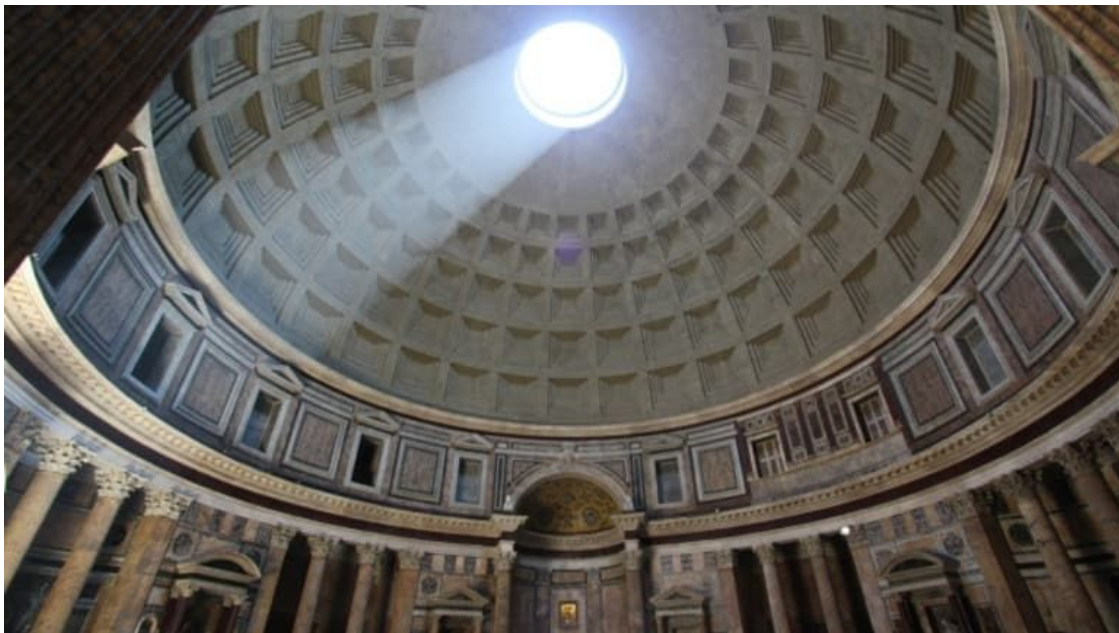
**Figure 1.11.** Rendering of the lighting system in the dome. undated. Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York, NY. In *After Dark*, 1981.



**Figure 1.12.** The moment when the disco ball came down into the dome. Undated. The Saint At Large. New York, NY.



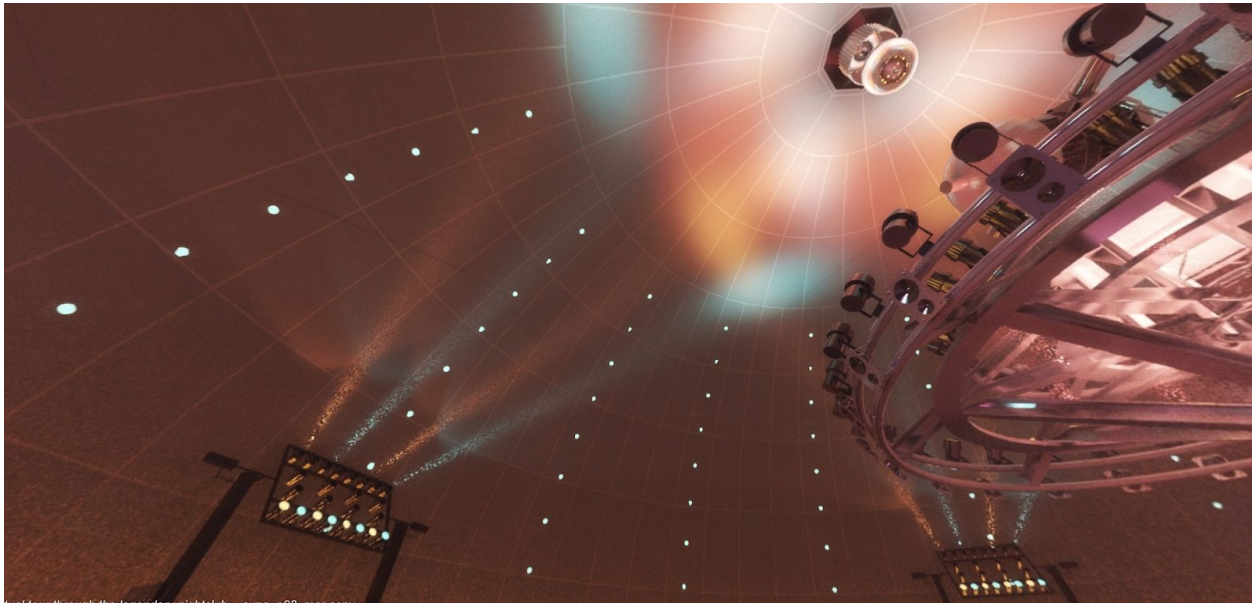
**Figure 1.13.** Pantheon. Undated (present day). Ancient History Encyclopedia.



**Figure 1.14.** Inside the Pantheon and the rotunda details. From [www.history.com](http://www.history.com).



**Figure 1.15.** Rotunda of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Undated. From <https://churchoftheholysepulchre.net>.



**Figure 1.16.** The dome and its coffered-esque ceiling similar to the Pantheon. Undated. The Saint At Large. New York, NY.

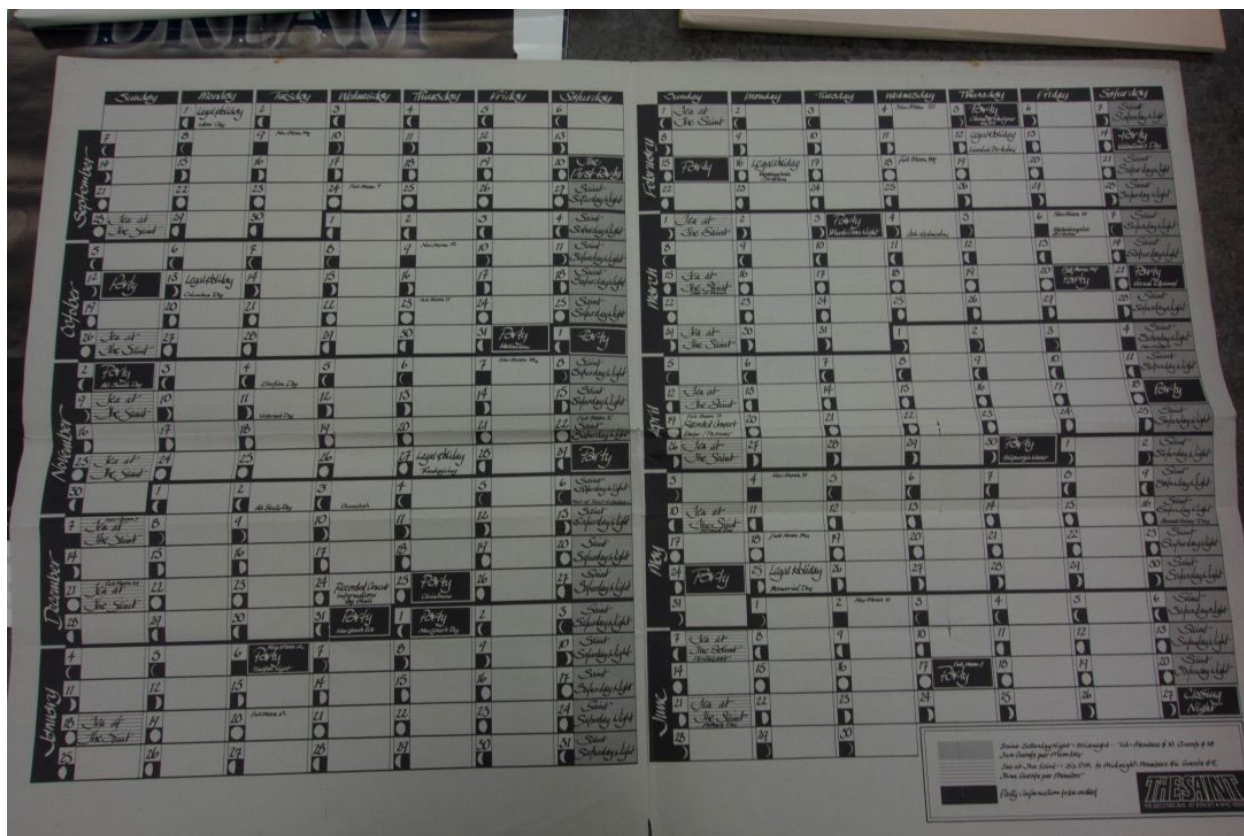


Figure 1.17. The calendar of the Saint outlining the season, its regular “sabbath” days, and special holidays. Undated. Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York, NY.



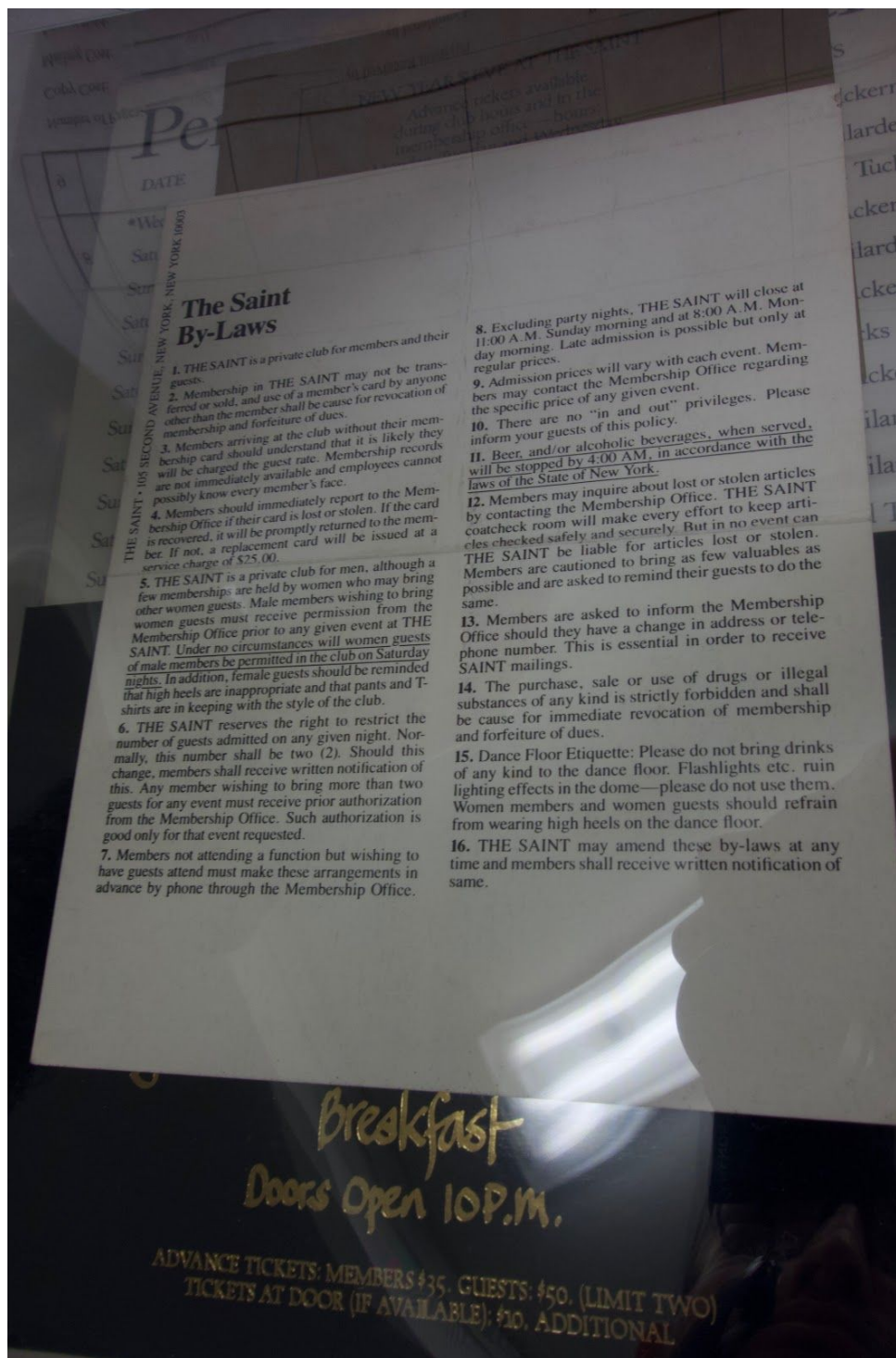
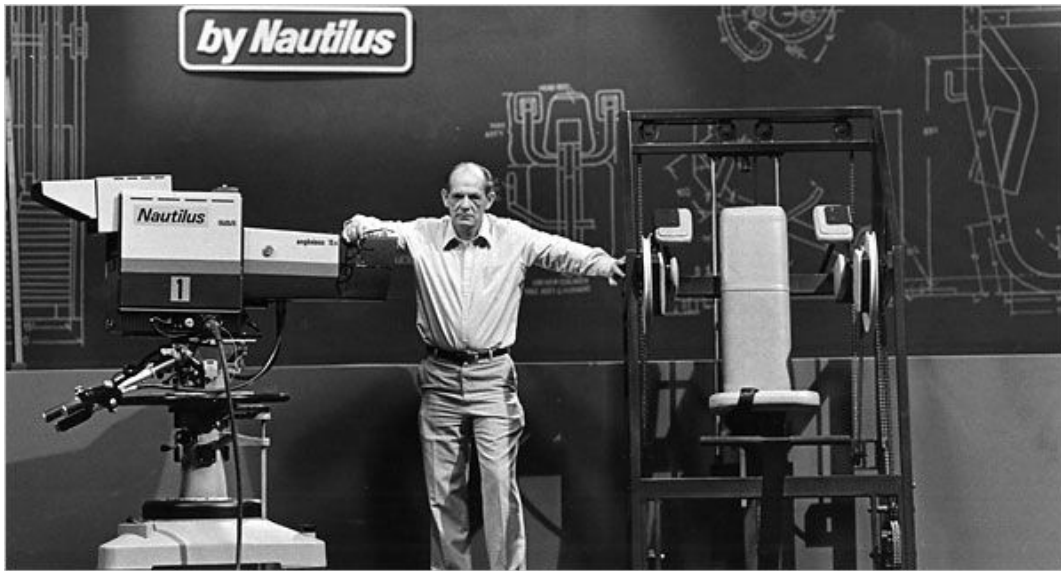


Figure 1.18. The Saint By-Laws. 1982. Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York, NY.



**Figure 1.19.** Arthur Jones with the machines he invented. 1982. *New York Times*.



**Figure 1.20.** Untitled. Reproduced in Tom Bianchi, *Fire Island Pines: Polaroids 1975-1983* (Bologna: Damiani, 2013).

Caption: This man compares himself to the ideal man of David Paul O'Mara, a 60s era physique star. This polaroid relates the expectations of masculine desire and beauty.

TIM SMITH  
5110894

| DESK | CASH | DATE   |
|------|------|--------|
|      |      | • 1 18 |

**THE SAINT**  
105 SECOND AVE. AT 6TH ST. • NYC 10009

MEMBER'S SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

INVOICE # **D 04712**

|         |         |
|---------|---------|
| M       | \$15.00 |
| M-1     | \$40.00 |
| M-2     | \$65.00 |
| M-3     | \$90.00 |
| S       |         |
| # PERS. |         |

**CUSTOMER RECEIPT**

Closing Night  
Saturday, June 23, 1984

**Figure 1.21.** Customer Receipt. 1987. Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York, NY.

Caption: the price break down on the right shows the various costs of bringing guests.

**THE SAINT  
MEMBERSHIP  
1986-1987 Season**

The 1986-1987 Saint membership will go on sale Memorial Day weekend, May 24th, 1986. Memberships if purchased before July 5th will cost \$100 and will include a free summer membership; if purchased between July 6th and September 1st (Labor Day) membership will cost \$125; when purchased after September 1st memberships will cost \$150. Purchase your membership early and save \$50 on a full membership and \$25 on a summer membership. A Saint membership offers you:

- Lower prices for all regular Saturday night events
- Lower prices for all Saint parties
- Free admission to all Sunday, Thursday, and Friday events
- Locker purchase option (\$40 for the season)
- Preferred entrance on all nights—no waiting on line
- Guest privileges on all nights—members may call in guests to be placed on a special "member's guest list" insuring guests entrance and preferred treatment.

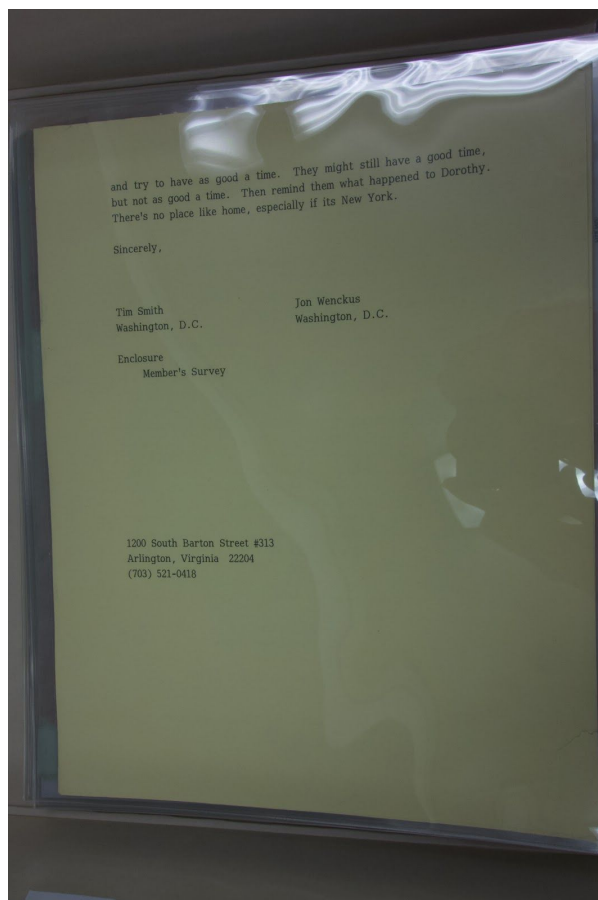
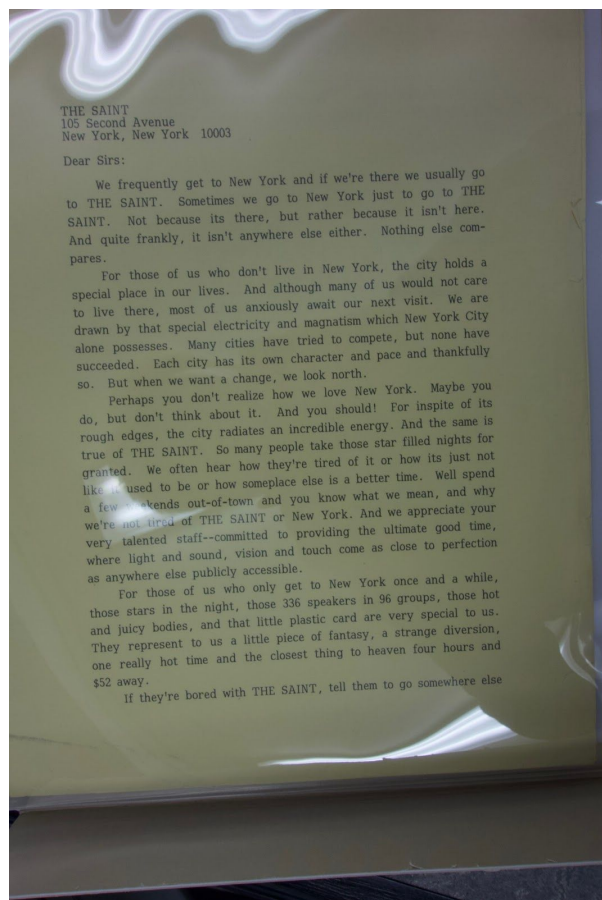
Your Saint membership makes Saturday Night At The Saint the place for gay men to be—the best private gay space in the city.

SHRO

**Figure 1.22.** The Saint's membership poster for the 1986-1987 Season. 1986. Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York, NY.



**Figure 1.23.** Disco ball emerging from the oculus of the dome. Undated. The Saint At Large. New York, NY.



**Figure 1.24.** Jon Wenckus and Tim Smith Letter to the Saint. 1982. Tim Smith Collection, NYU Fales Library, New York, NY.

## Chapter 2



## The Piers: the Ruins of the West Side

## Introduction to the Ruins of the West Side

*A ruin is decaying architecture, the remnant of a forgotten time and purpose. It's lawless, curious, in a period of transition between its past and slow future death, it's temporary, varied in use, a chapter in the urban landscape's narrative. The image of a ruin is an object of fascination.*

In 1967, the artist Robert Smithson explored the intrigue surrounding post-industrial infrastructure when he took “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” by bus. On his ride, he saw the cityscape change and he reflected on the eerie quietude of factories on a Saturday morning. Although these places were not ruins yet; the factories and their machines represented the era of industrialization which was approaching disuse at this time. He called these sites “dialectical landscapes” where “geological past and a catastrophic future” meet with “decayed 'monuments' to rival those of Rome.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, the aura of ruins is linked to time, the way they suspend it but also with how ruins materialize the passage of time through the decaying of their structure. The west side piers of New York, constructed in the early 20th century as ports of entry for shipping and commerce, exhibit this same fascination of transition from a place of utility to decay, devoid of their original function. Essentially, the piers exemplify the beauty of ruins, the second lives they create, and the relationship they have to the rest of the city and its citizens.

The deindustrialization of New York began in the 1960s when America was at a social and spatial point of transition. Families began to redefine the American dream as moving to the suburbs and owning a home where they could enjoy the cachet of living outside the city with space to grow. Alongside this social shift, factory jobs were becoming less available in New

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<sup>54</sup>Brian Dillon, "Introduction," in *Ruins*, Documents of Contemporary Art (London, England: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), 14.



York, and the changing economy and labor industries led to the decline of once bustling functional spaces (Figure 2.1).<sup>55</sup> As these ports lost their necessity and were relocated to New Jersey, the piers went from hosting the world's ships, sailors, and cargo to being a dilapidated treasure of the city.

When rendered as a past thing, the piers took on a quasi-private, quasi-public identity in which the city owned the piers, but because of its forgotten nature and the lack of funds and interest for reinvestment, they became a public space to traverse and explore. There were several piers along the west side and each had their own clientele and reputation. Pier 45 (Christopher Street) and Pier 48 (Between Perry Street & 11th ave) were mainstays for gay men, Pier 51 served as a hangout for “drug addicts and derelicts,”<sup>56</sup> and Pier 34 was the site of an art project led by David Wojnarowicz and Mike Bidlo. Thus, each pier offered a different experience but shared the same fascination of the ruin, its possibilities, and the freedom they offered for self-expression for people on the outskirts of society.

The piers varied in their states of decay with some just being a concrete slab jutting out into the water and others with complete structures in disrepair, acting as a shelter from the elements and the outside world (Figure 2.2). In a 1972 article from *Arts Magazine*, George Segal attended a performance by Bill Whitman at the pier where Chambers and West Street meet. Segal illustrates the way the audience traversed the space to get to the performance, which lends itself to the experience at other piers, their danger, beauty, and excitement:

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<sup>55</sup>Sean Posey, "Rotten Apple: How New York Symbolizes Inequality in America," *The Hampton Institute* (blog), entry posted September 4, 2014, <http://www.hamptoninstitution.org/rotten-apple.html#.XGR6489KjEY>.

<sup>56</sup> Arthur Bell, "Mayhem on the Gay Waterfront," *Village Voice* (New York, NY), January 13, 1975, 5.

We could hear the water through the slapping underneath, we could see the stars through the openings in the building in ruins, walked to the end and there you could see New Jersey and more water; very romantic....You had to be careful not to step into danger. The space kept changing every few steps, you couldn't tell what the rubble was, what the building had been or any of its history....<sup>57</sup>

The pier was a landscape full of unknowns. Was it safe to be there? What if someone fell through the gaps in the floor? It must have felt so wild and free compared to the sleek and sanitized World Trade Center that was going up only blocks away. After venturing through emptied offices and traversing up a level on a catwalk, they came to what looked like an amphitheater but was actually the former waiting room for the Hoboken Ferry line (Figure 2.3). There, the audience stood at balcony level and watched the performance of "Architecture." Yet, what was most fascinating about the night was not what Whitman orchestrated below the balcony, but the meandering path he had the audience traverse through the ruin (Figure 2.4). A majority of his art was about the junk, material, trash, and debris of the city, and using the piers as the backdrop of Whitman's performance illustrated the transgressive nature of spaces that act as monuments to the city's disarray and dysfunction. By calling the piece "Architecture," he established the historical importance of ruins to New York's constantly evolving built environment.

In order to better understand the piers, one must look at the ruin as a model for queer space. The term "queer" describes an entity that is divergent or different from normative culture. In other words, gayness exists because of its difference from heterosexual life. Jean-Ulrick Desert in *Queers in Space* describes being queer, or gay, as a "visceral identity" that establishes

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<sup>57</sup>Georg Segal, "On Whitman and Things," *Arts Magazine*, November 1972, 53.

predisposed sensibilities beyond the erotic into all facets of human engagement.<sup>58</sup> In other words, identifying as gay not only has a sexual component, but it also instructs the way the body is located in space, where it can be queer, and how connections form to other gay men in space. These sites of queerness live within the spectrum of private vs. public and across various typologies that cater to gay men from various economic and racial backgrounds. Such spaces ranged from discos, to backrooms at bars, to parks, to subway restrooms.

Depending on your class, race, and gender, there were certain spaces allocated for queer expression, and the split only widened between radical queers who relied on public spaces such as the piers and assimilated gays who owned property and payed for leisure.<sup>59</sup> In other words, the wealthier one was, the more private options one had, from experimenting in your own home to an upscale club like the Saint. The piers are an example of a public space because they were open to anyone looking for an adventure or a place to sleep for the night, but at the same time, they also had a semi-private component because of the former warehouse structures that offered a reprieve from the street for a more intimate experience. It's within this space that queerness escapes heteronormative surveillance, and where the possibility for gay self-expression, from sexual acts to making art on the walls, was allowed, even though that sense of wild freedom threatened the lives of its queer brothers and sisters at times.

Ultimately, there was a flexibility of existence at the piers that couldn't be felt in a heteronormative world where gender roles were prescribed and expectations assigned. Since

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<sup>58</sup> Jean -Ulrick Desert, "Queer Space," in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, ed. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1997), 20.

<sup>59</sup> Benjamin Shepard and Gregory Smithsimon, "Fences and Piers: an investigation of a disappearing queer community," in *The Beach Beneath the Streets: Contesting New York City's Public Spaces* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), 115.

casting aside their primary function of maritime trade and transportation, the piers' natural decay rendered them a queer site/sight amongst the phallic and heterocentric skyscrapers of Manhattan, acting as the antithesis to the normative experience of the built environment (Figure 2.5). For some, they were aesthetically dead things sinking into the Hudson, but on the contrary, they were vibrant, full of culture, spirit, and embraced the multiplicity of identity.

### **The Sublime and Beauty of the Ruin<sup>60</sup>**

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke distinguishes between the experience of beauty and the sublime as two mutually exclusive feelings. For him, beauty connotes pleasure and society's goal of reproduction, while the sublime is a mix of pain and delight, terror and danger, and self-preservation.<sup>61</sup> When thinking about the piers, the relationship between beauty and the sublime is in a hybrid form where both of these feelings coexist in tandem.

As a gay man, one's experience of the world could be similar to the nature of the sublime because of the delight and pain that was associated with being queer. Society's goal of the

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<sup>60</sup> In this section, you will see the photography of Alvin Baltrop, a black gay man from the Bronx who documented the life of the piers. He came of age in the 1960s during the civil rights, gay rights, and women's rights movements, and was constantly surrounded by a world in flux. After serving in the Navy, he bought a van, advertised as a mover, and he spent weeks on end photographing and living on and off at the piers between 1972-1985. Baltrop was consumed by their nature, their ephemerality, and the multiple lives of danger and pleasure that existed in the "breathing ruin." Baltrop once said, "in the dark, we can all be free," and to me, the piers represent this darkness where life was lived under the radar away from the spotlight. Baltrop's photographs have given us a window into queer life in the 70s and 80s, and I'm using his work as visual evidence to understand the piers as a piece of architecture that held both beauty and the sublime.

Valerie Cassel Oliver, "Alvin Baltrop: Dreams into Glass," *Callaloo* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 68, <http://www.jstor.org.ezprox.bard.edu/stable/24264782>.

<sup>61</sup> Edmund Burke, "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Idea of the Sublime and Beautiful," 1757, in *Gothic Documents: a sourcebook, 1700-1820*, ed. E.J. Clery and Robert Miles (New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 2000), 112.

reproduction of beauty and normative definitions of pleasure ostracized anything that was considered “other.” For example, there is less at stake when a heterosexual couple is kissing in the street, than if it was a same-sex couple doing the same thing. When gay men expressed their sexuality in public they risked their safety, and invited a sense of danger if caught by the wrong person. Meaning, the experience of the sublime comes natural to gay identity at times because of the risk that came with being the “other” in public, which collectively was filled with moments of danger, terror, but also delight in varying degrees because expressing one’s identity was liberating.

Writing a section in his treatise, Burke uses the analogy of the wild beast to conceptualize the way we experience terror through an object. He uses the ox, bull, and horse as three animals that demonstrate strength, but differ in the way they evoke the sublime. The ox is utilitarian. It serves a purpose, and it’s strong but not frightening. The bull has a temper and is at times destructive, while the horse is an animal that serves, but can also have a unpredictable, wild side. Ultimately, Burke concludes, “whenever strength is only useful, and employed for our benefit or our pleasure, then it is never sublime.”<sup>62</sup> In this he meant that nothing can instill terror, fear or danger if the object, animal, place is controlled by our will. This analogy makes a fitting metaphor for the piers and queer space.

Thus, degrees of wildness, spontaneity, or fear become one measure of the experience of the sublime and its associated feelings. Burke emphasizes these qualities in combination, writing that, “we never look for the sublime: it comes upon us in the gloomy forest, and in the howling wilderness in the form of the lion, the tiger, the panther, or the rhinoceros.”<sup>63</sup> Yet following this

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<sup>62</sup> Burke, "A Philosophical," in *Gothic Documents*, 117.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 117.

rubric, a landscape, its architecture and geography, can also be wild and lawless and can act as a generator of the sublime. Moreover, the sublimity of a site might be enhanced by actions of its occupants and the aesthetic reputation of a space. A clean sleek office building with an army of security guards will not feel as wild as a dilapidated pier filled with subversive sex, drugs, and art (Figure 2.6). Ultimately, in thinking of the sublime under these terms, it's a matter of questioning the boundaries of a space, its social traditions, and the relationship it has to the rest of the built environment. Free from the "normal" code of conduct, the piers were a free-for-all in almost every sense of the phrase. Prostitution ran the streets, men sunbathed nude on the cement pier, addicts used drugs, sex could be had anywhere, and they were even considered to be a home for the homeless.

Burke uses "the word *delight* to express the sensation which accompanies the removal of pain or danger," in contrast to when he speaks of positive pleasure, which is simply described as *pleasure*.<sup>64</sup> Pleasure is therefore a feeling that is sparked by joy and doesn't stem from the removal of pain. Yet, the piers produced an experience that combined these feelings and was a site where beauty and the sublime, pleasure and delight were not separate isolated experiences. Darkness and obscurity added to the danger, and as Burke notes, "when we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of apprehension vanishes."<sup>65</sup> In other words, the more familiar one is with a space, object, person, the less sublime it is. Gay men, especially at Pier 45 and Pier 48, knew they had a home there, so it was less of a haunted ruin and more of a refuge for them. That familiarity allowed beauty to exist in the instant

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<sup>64</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 34.

<sup>65</sup> Burke, "A Philosophical," in *Gothic Documents*, 114.

gratification of a sexual experience or in the gay collectivity that fortified the waterfront (Figure 2.7). At the same time, the piers were still unpredictable having a constant level of danger which attends to the sublime.

The experience of pleasure and delight is expressed by Boo Boo, a transgender female sex worker, describing the piers as her home: “These people would live in the warehouses along the piers. They [There] were abandoned trucks and things like that. That was our home. This was where we would do our living”<sup>66</sup> Like many gay youth at this time, Boo Boo was kicked out of her home for dressing in drag and exhibiting “homosexual tendencies,” and she was forced to find a place to sleep and feel safe. She migrated to the piers because they provided shelter and housed people just like her. Another homeless person by the name of Adonis Baough described the situation as, “everybody not considered the norm could go there and be themselves and not be looked at any other way.”<sup>67</sup> The piers, to put it simply, were a judgment-free zone that escaped all the expectations and preconceived notions of queerness and the abnormal, they were a space that offered a reprieve from the exhausting hetero-pressure of society. The piers were not only a source of joy and comfort, but they also offered a feeling of delight because queer people could escape the pain of their past. As a result, they were able to construct their own version of home and community at the piers that wasn’t associated with pain, but with a sense of stability and acceptance of being the “other.”

The split personality of pleasure and delight, pain and terror was also determined by the time of day one went to the piers. Barton Benes described it as, “during the day, I think of it as a

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<sup>66</sup> Shepard and Smithsimon, “Fences and Piers: an investigation of a disappearing queer community,” 109-110.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 110.

different trip. There was one pier here where people would just go and sunbathe...but night time, they became a space for risk and eros.”<sup>68</sup> There was a Jekyll and Hyde unpredictability about the piers. During the day, the space was visible, the activity was lit by the sun, and there was less chance of mischief, crime, and danger (Figure 2.8). But by night, the darkness cloaked the ruins; its interiors were dimmed, rendering the space semi-visible lit only by stars and surrounding cityscape. Mystery was reestablished in the space and the danger of the unknown repositioned. Burke himself pointed out how, “greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger.”<sup>69</sup> Night not only provokes one’s paranoia, but it also allows for uncertainty and a lack of familiarity to unfold because both the space and physical acts within it are disguised, allowing for the sublime to take hold.

Nighttime offered an opportunity for more sexual experiences, but it also brought the threat of violence to sex workers and gay cruisers. Boo-Boo mentions the multiple friends that were murdered at night by violent heterosexual men looking to punish and hurt trans women (Figure 2.9). In other words, night reinforced the sublime in the piers when the identity as a safe space dissipated, and the pain, terror, and danger of the ruin overwhelmingly made the place crawl with fear. For example, when someone went to the piers to cruise, they experienced all of the emotions of the sublime: walking alone and anonymous to the dark ruins of the west side was dangerous and terrifying because of the unknown that could be encountered around the corner. One risked being mugged or murdered, but it was the ultimate moment of delight when a person found a partner for the night, for the hour, for the next 10 minutes. A sense of safety was re-established and fear vanished because one was no longer alone.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>69</sup> Burke, "A Philosophical," in *Gothic Documents*, 114.



The apex of the sublime and beautiful occurred at the transition of day and night where good and evil, light and dark, visible and invisible, collectivity to anonymity shifted. Adonis explains this ideal moment of change:

You have an evening-type community around 7:30, eight o'clock. That was the best time to meet because it was just getting dark. The breeze was still coming off the water. You can sit around, down by the water, and look at Jersey. And it's like the most amazing romantic thing to sit there with your friends, smoking a blunt, talking and laughing, crying, sharing...and you'd move on to the dark corners and pick the person you were going to be with that night.<sup>70</sup>

This midpoint that Adonis describes is representative of the coexistence of Burke's enquiry: the sublime and darkness is approaching, beauty is in the sunset, the breeze, the community gathered at the end of the pier, and pleasure and delight begin to intertwine when the sun goes down as individual endeavors into the darkness begin.

Burke states, "we are affected by strength, which is *natural power*. The power which arises from institution in kings and commanders, has the same connection with terror."<sup>71</sup> Applying this concept of *natural power* to the dog which Burke characterizes as both loved and feared makes for a valuable comparison to the piers and the dynamic between the domesticated and the wild. Dogs are considered "man's best friend," yet they are still animals that have an underlying ferocity that exists if not tamed. Natural power is the wildness of the dog before its domestication. Now applying this to New York throughout the decades, we see how the city and its spaces went from wild and free to sanitized, controlled, and suburbanized. The piers went from a symbol of a bygone maritime life, to a beautiful ruin with an array of activity, to razed platforms jutting out into the water, to green park space that has no connection to its past. The

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<sup>70</sup> Shepard and Smithsimon, "Fences and Piers: an investigation of a disappearing queer community," 112.

<sup>71</sup> Burke, "A Philosophical," in *Gothic Documents*, 118.

sublime of the piers was finite, and it only existed for a short period of time between their disuse in the 60s to their destruction in the 80s and 90s. At the end of their days, New York was “cleaning up its act” because the sublime and the image of the ruin that the piers encapsulated was seen as a hotbed for danger, terror, and later on disease. Quite frankly, an “ugly” undeveloped piece of real estate with queers and homeless people frolicking did not suit the wealthy upper class that was moving into the neighborhood, or the string of New York mayors interested in improving the “quality of life” in New York.

Thinking back to Burke’s account of beauty as being “linked to pleasure, society, and the goal of reproduction,” it’s obvious that didn’t include the decaying ruins, and by default anyone that frequented them as well. The relationship of the sublime and beauty was temporary, and it was refaced with a facade to make New York look more successful, stable, and clean. I’m not advocating for crime ridden spaces, but to extinguish the wildness, the natural power, and spirit of freedom that fueled New York and the piers killed a way of life that seems too far gone to return to.

### **Playing at the Piers**

The word *play* is used to denote an activity that one enjoys recreationally. During a time of play, the body interacts with the environment in which the end goal is to release any stress or pain from life. The west side piers were a playground for various people and they provided activities that brought joy and instilled freedom: artists were free to express themselves away from the commercial gallery, gay men hunted for sexual play, and drag queens came to vogue by the waterfront. Freedom and imagination fueled the environment much like the experiences we had on a playground as children. We were able to conjure alternative realities in which the

contorted jungle gym was a princess' palace or the island in a sea of lava. That same imagination and curiosity existed at the piers, but with a greater awareness of why such a place was unique.

Tim Edensor, the author of the book *Industrial Ruins*, outlines the characteristics of ruins as sites that include homemaking, adventurous play, mundane leisure, and art practice. These qualities all overlap to create different ideas of play and purpose at the ruin. To Edensor, "ruins serve as an uncanny space amidst a familiar realm. But precisely because they are regarded as forbidden or dangerous spaces, they can become spaces of fantasy, places in which unspeakable and illicit acts occur, places of unhindered adventure."<sup>72</sup> His characterization demonstrates that these "forgotten" spaces are incubators for imagination where one can explore a visible yet in many ways invisible detached part of society. Therefore, "play" took many forms at the piers and its occupants could create a realm where their subculture, from homelessness to gayness could be acceptable.

### The Architecture of Cruising

Gay sites have an architectural language that render them suitable for promiscuous play. Beginning with its atmosphere, according to John Lindell, public sex spaces are most often poorly lit so that people can act as "screens for the projection of imaginations" allowing for various interpretations and embellishments of someone's appearance.<sup>73</sup> In fact, this speaks to the the dual personality of night and day at the piers in which the activities changed based on how much light infiltrated the space. This search of imagined desires, in regard to Lindell, must also coincide with the ability to physically traverse the space itself. The pier, some reaching a quarter

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<sup>72</sup> Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: spaces, aesthetics, and materiality* (New York, NY: Berg, 2005), 25.

<sup>73</sup>John Lindell, "Public Space for Public Sex," in *Policing Public Sex: queer politics and the future of AIDS activism*, ed. Dangerous Bedfellows (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1996), 73-74.

mile into the Hudson, were attached ecosystems of alternative life. Within these various micro-worlds, there existed a reinterpretation of how one used the built environment and pursued physical interaction. In the normative world, within preconceived notions of how spaces operate, there is an understood behavior one follows. Gay men constantly toppled these notions of prescribed behavior in the built environment to find opportunities for sexual expression. For example, subway bathrooms also known as tearooms were notorious for being dens for gay sex. In *You got to burn to shine*, John Giorno has a very heated sexual exchange with Keith Haring in the Prince Street Station bathroom, and he describes the deep bodily connection that could be felt at that site between man and man.

Spatially, the piers also bore similarities to the structure of bathhouses and sex clubs. In a bathhouse, there is a mixture of spaces that account for different social interactions. There is usually, “a space with private rooms and group areas. It might include a sauna, a steam room, a whirlpool, or gym equipment...everyone is usually undressed with most people opting to wrap towels around their waist.”<sup>74</sup> These bathhouses are analogous to the piers because of their proximity to the river as well as their semi-private rooms in the warehouses. In a *New York Times* article from 1980, “Disused Piers Become Manhattan’s Beaches,” the writer describes how these dilapidated piers became sites for community not only for gay men but for a wider array of people who wanted to escape urbanity for some natural serenity and leisure.<sup>75</sup> From nude sunbathing to roller skating, there were several activities that added to the communal spirit within the public areas of the pier (Figure 2.10). For the sunbathers, it was at the end of Pier 45

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<sup>74</sup>Lindell, "Public Space," in *Policing Public*, 75.

<sup>75</sup>E.R. Shipp, "Disused Piers Become Manhattan's 'Beaches': Disused Piers Have Become Manhattan's 'Beaches,'" *New York Times*(New York, NY), July 24, 1980, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/121073437?accountid=31516>.

close to the water where Tava's mural of a throbbing dick stamped the piers with carnal desire (Figure 2.11). Simultaneously, there were also private sections to the piers in the abandoned warehouses that were filled with mazes of offices and massive public squares that were the former ferry waiting rooms (Figure 2.12).

Moreover, the piers resemble the architectural models of sex clubs featured in Lindell's chapter in *Policing Public Sex*, with drawings of cruising designs including pin-wheel dead ends, the McAlpin Device, and permeable cells. In figure 2.13, the concept of the "dead end" is unintentionally implemented in the aisles of abandoned bookshelves creating semi-private rooms. In figure 2.14, the shallow frame of the warehouse garage doors where two men are undressing resemble the indented spaces between the six columns of the McAlpine Device, and in figure 2.15, the permeable cells of the piers are materialized through the knocked out wall that allows for an easy transition through space. It's within these various degrees of privacy and design that men could find moments for sexual exchange whether it was behind the decrepit walls of a room or in the burning daylight on the concrete beach.

Lindell compares the sex club to a supermarket or mall in which a shopper converts from a destination-oriented mentality to one that allows impressions and desires to direct a person's attention in space, also known as the Gruen Transfer.<sup>76</sup> This applies to the piers because the way one circulated space was dictated by desire. Cruising is the clearest example of the Gruen Transfer because a man's attraction for another man is navigated through the gaze and this controls a person's movement. The secondary nature of this controlled-by-desire environment is the expected sexual fetishes of spaces. For example at a leather bar, you'll most likely find

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<sup>76</sup> Lindell, "Public Space," in *Policing Public*, 75.

specific social roles of doms and subs and architectures relating to S and M from swings, to modes of bondage, which isn't everyone's sexual fantasy. Similarly, at the piers, every gay man wasn't attracted to the experience of public sex. For example, "respectable gays like to think that they owe nothing to the sexual subculture they think of as sleazy."<sup>77</sup> Therefore, life on the fringe of society, sexually and culturally, had an adventurous spirit, and although it didn't suit all gay men, it operated on the fantasy of freedom and the search for desire.

### Innocence of Play

Notwithstanding the sexual dimension of the piers, there is also a second dimension of the innocence of play. As children, we once looked at the landscape as a moving image of curiosity, questioning shapes, sizes, activities, and people. The ruin perpetuates this childlike curiosity and pulls it out of the individual at any age. The sense of independence and freedom at the piers mimics the freedom one used to feel as a child, and they were a place where rules didn't matter and where desire and play could be one's motivation. This spirit was emulated by most at the piers and especially by artist Luis Frangella (Figure 2.16). David Wojnarowicz noted Frangella's particularly childlike perspective: "Luis was the biggest kid I ever knew on some level; he could look at the nightmares of New York summer streets on the hottest day of August and see with a child's eyes the pearls of water spilling from a hydrant."<sup>78</sup> As an artist, the environment around Luis inspired him, and he was able to interpret his surroundings and see the beauty within the landscape.

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<sup>77</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 563, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344178>.

<sup>78</sup> Memorandum by David Wojnarowicz, n.d., Luis Frangella File, David Wojnarowicz Papers, NYU Fales Library, New York, NY.

Today on Youtube, there is a subculture of people who are interested in urban exploration. These urban explorers post videos of their adventures through abandoned sites, from Chernobyl to American malls. Similarly to the piers, the artists that went to Pier 34 were urban explorers in their own right. They were a group of artists, connected by the art world, whose home was in the East Village, and they came to the west side to have some artistic exploration of scale and space that was free from the constrictions of gallery life, inventing a new form of play for artists.

### **The (Other) Hudson River School**

David Wojnarowicz was a wanderer, an urban explorer. He wrote about his daily life, and he vividly described New York and the vibrant characters he encountered in the city streets. He first went to Pier 34 in 1981, where he painted animals and cartoons on the walls, finding it to be quieter and not as busy as the sex piers a few blocks north (Figure 2.17).<sup>79</sup> Although an East Village artist, he explored the treasures of the west side, its bars, restaurants, clubs, and piers extensively and recounted his experiences in his journals. He went to the piers not only for sex but to investigate the space and the people that lived within its crumbling walls. He recounts one guy grabbing his crotch from the darkness, and another man alone in a room, with a hard-on poking out of his overcoat while “doing a strange dance...grimacing and stabbing the air with his cock and saying in a loud whisper: ‘come in here I’ll make you feel so good so good...’”<sup>80</sup> These caricatures of the ruins of the west side speak to the alternate reality that was established there

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<sup>79</sup> Jonathan Weinberg and Annie Wischmeyer, eds., *Pier 34: Something Possible Everywhere NYC 1983-1984* (New York, NY: 205 Hudson Gallery, 2016), 13-15.

<sup>80</sup> David Wojnarowicz, "Losing the Form in Darkness," in *Close to the Knives: a memoir of disintegration* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1991), 18.

where these experiences of perversion were commonplace and were given the opportunity to thrive.

Between 1983 and 1984, Wojnarowicz's work was shown in over 63 exhibitions and projects across the country and the world.<sup>81</sup> Many of the institutions, from museums to galleries, used the title of the East Village in various iterations to define the site of Wojnarowicz's and his colleagues' creative bliss. Therefore, to have place where art was made for art sake, and where the artist could escape the geography that always labeled them was freeing. In early 1983, Wojnarowicz told Mike Bidlo that he had found the perfect place, known as Pier 34, to escape this commercial pressure (Figure 2.18). From that conversation the experiment began, and by word of mouth, artists began to flock to the abandoned Pier 34.

The way it operated was simple: pick a wall, a room, a corner and begin to work. It was as unstructured as it could be. Wojnarowicz repeatedly commented on the importance of this project by saying "this is the real MOMA" and "Artists stay in control of your work...heart + minds."<sup>82</sup> The anti-commercial theme of the space was also acknowledged by Russell Sharon, an artist who dated and worked alongside Luis Frangella, who recalls, "nothing was assigned. It was a huge pier, so people would come and find the wall or the room or the space that they wanted to put their work in. Usually, the work was just in their mind, so people would show up with buckets of paint, and the idea, and work everything out right on site (Figure 2.19)."<sup>83</sup> Any artist

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<sup>81</sup> "The Estate of David Wojnarowicz," PPOW Gallery, accessed April 24, 2019, <https://www.ppowgallery.com/artist/the-estate-of-david-wojnarowicz/biography>.

<sup>82</sup> Cynthia Carr, "Rampages of Raw Energy," in *Fire in the Belly: the life and times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2012), 225.

<sup>83</sup> Sharon, telephone interview by the author.



could walk in and out completely fueled by their ambition and inspiration of that day. It felt like it was the last frontier uncorrupted by the art world and its dollar signs.

The organic process of the Pier 34 project speaks to the idea of this space as a natural landscape. The pier, as an object, as a piece of architecture, began as an intentional addition to the built environment for commercial use and transportation. They contained a life that was manufactured for efficiency and production, and its beauty ran secondary. After its closure the pier fell into disrepair and a new life began to emerge. This life was decay, a natural process that saw the structure of the warehouse turn to rubble, the wood disintegrate, and the materials form a kind of soil on the floors.

Originally, the pier was not wild in appearance, but over time it grew to be beautifully unrefined. This wildness was underscored by the fact that it was against the law to enter the pier. Russell Sharon says, “everybody knew that what we were doing was illegal, but it was something that was very easy to transcend. ...everyone's doing it, makes it feel like it's not really illegal.”<sup>84</sup> The risk of getting caught was always there, and in 1984 when the Anonymous Artists Alliance<sup>85</sup> organized an opening, the police arrested four people, confiscated a sculpture, and locked the doors again (Figure 2.20).<sup>86</sup> Ultimately, no one commissioned the artists at Pier 34, and they transcended illegality in order to pursue a purer form of art practice.

Andreas Sterzing, in 1983, took a picture of David Wojnarowicz and Mike Bidlo which has become one of the most iconic images of this project. In the room, they lie in an enclosed meadow of grass with a mural of a male head, painted by Frangella, in the background of the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> A group unknown to Bidlo and Wojnarowicz, the Anonymous Artists Alliance began to handout leaflets inviting everyone to a wine a cheese party at Pier 34.

<sup>86</sup> Carr, "Rampages of Raw Energy," 227.

photograph (Figure 2.21). Dark doorways add mystery to the space and the fractured and flaky walls paint the room with age. This photo embodies the romanticism of the pier, and its ability to transport the artist to a different realm of creativity. The grassy meadow, the most romantic of the pier images, is recounted by Wojnarowicz:

I would buy grass seed... and throw this grass all over. All the disintegrated plaster that had fallen out of the ceiling and all the airborne particles of earth and stuff would actually let this grass grow in the confines of the building, so it would be like an actual meadow inside several rooms that were just so beautiful... Those are some of the gestures that I love most and got the least attention because they were the most anonymous---you couldn't sign a blade of grass that says Wojnarowicz<sup>87</sup>

The grass was seen as the purest form of this anti-commercial space where no name was associated with it and no dollars signs could be assigned to it. Sharon attributes this organic feeling to the greater theme of his process, “I would always think before anything happens...in somebody's mind this image pops up, an idea, and it's a seed. It's a seed, and the ground was fertile there, so it grew very easily.”<sup>88</sup> Pier 34 was physically and conceptually fertile ground for artistic expression, and it opened the doors to creating a community of artists free from the rules of their profession.

In conversation with Sharon, I asked, “do you think a project like Pier 34 could be done today,” and he responded it could be done, but it would have to be something that grew organically, had no structure, and had a large group of kindred spirits.<sup>89</sup> The purpose of this project was about forging an organic, pure, and unbridled artistic process that was separate from the gallery world to which the artist was chained too. At the pier, artists could explore with scale and content, and their imagination had no limitations. In order for a project like this to exist

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<sup>87</sup> Weinberg and Wischmeyer, *Pier 34: Something*, 16.

<sup>88</sup> Sharon, telephone interview by the author.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

again, that spirit Sharon alludes to must be present and hungry for change. He also adds, “the elements and the people converged at the perfect moment and it couldn't not happen.”<sup>90</sup> It was destined, aligned in the stars, for this project to occur, and a lot of it had to do with timing.

Demolished in 1984, the project only lasted a year, and therefore the time to explore the freedom and community that lived there was limited (Figure 2.22). In many ways, the scope of the Pier 34 experiment is indescribable, and the feeling of being in a romantic ruin full of frescoes and sculpture in New York is hard to believe. Russell Sharon uses the Pope’s phrase “it’s a mystery of our faith... just tell them it's the same as how everything else happens, it just unfolds,”<sup>91</sup> and just like that the project unfolded, it lived, and died just like every glorious moment in history.

### **Living on the Edge**

The West Side Highway was constructed between 1931 to 1936, adding an elevated highway running from 72nd street to Rector street (Figure 2.23). Robert Moses, the mastermind behind New York’s expressways, thought it would alleviate traffic jams, and make it easier to travel north to south.<sup>92</sup> Its placement was at the center of commerce where the pier and city met, and each cross street was marked with an art deco frieze labeling each pier (Figure 2.24). The West Side Highway, also known as the Miller Elevated Highway in honor of Manhattan Borough President Julius Miller, benefited the circulation of the city and aided in the transfer of goods and people from ships to the streets of Manhattan. The west side exhibited a constant movement of people and life, and it altered the personality of the area.<sup>93</sup> Under a continuous slab

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> "MILLER'S CROSSING: THE WEST SIDE ELEVATED HIGHWAY," *Forgotten NY* (blog), entry posted June 16, 2001, accessed April 9, 2019, <https://forgotten-ny.com/2001/06/millers-crossing-the-west-side-elevated-highway/>.

<sup>93</sup> "Fenced Out," video file, 6:03, Youtube, posted by FABULOUSPOC (FIERCE), August 21, 2007, accessed April 9, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMrohHHdXd4>.

A member of FIERCE recollected how the elevated highway changed the nature of the west side.

of concrete, people's activities could be covered and hidden, and it allowed for a shadowy underworld to exist.

The ruination of this area, from the piers' disuse to the infamous collapse of the elevated highway in 1973<sup>94</sup> eventually became a symbol of an aging city grappling with the issue of urban decay (Figure 2.25). Devoid of its original function, the waterfront became a place of untraditional mixed-use from cruising site to art space, yet its transitory history of the highway and port adapted to the structures' ruination. Namely, instead of cars going up and down the highway and ships docking in, it was the in and out of men looking for sex and a place to escape.

Douglas Crimp, in his book *Before Pictures*, writes a chapter called "Action Around the Edges" which implies that the location of the piers is not only geographically at the edge of the city but it also characterizes its occupants as being on the fringe of society. Joel Garreau, journalist and author, coined the term "edge city" which he uses to describe an area where there is a concentration of business, entertainment and shopping centers in a previously known rural or residential area.<sup>95</sup> He explains that such areas are "cities, because they contain all the functions a city ever has, albeit in a spread-out form that few have come to recognize for what it is. Edge because they are a vigorous world of pioneers and immigrants, rising far from the old

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<sup>94</sup> "On 15 December 1973 a loaded dump truck plunged through a pothole near the Gansevoort Market, and the highway was closed south of 57th Street on the southbound side and 46th Street on the northbound side. Repairs were delayed as the city and state made plans to build Westway. Most of the elevated structure was demolished in stages from 1976 to 1989; through the West Side Highway Replacement Project (1985–2001), the elevated segment between 59th Street to 72nd Street was rebuilt and remained in use, while the at-grade roads previously beneath the highway south of 59th Street were rebuilt into an at-grade urban arterial. The road was renamed for baseball player Joe DiMaggio in 1999." *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, edited by Kenneth T. Jackson, and Nancy Flood, Yale University Press, 2010. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bard/detail.action?docID=3421196>.

<sup>95</sup> Sharon Omondi, "What Is An Edge City?," *World Atlas* (blog), entry posted October 3, 2017, <https://www.worldatlas.com/what-is-an-edge-city.html>.

downtowns, where little save villages or farmland lay only thirty years before.”<sup>96</sup> He also imagines spatial, square footage requirements as part of the qualification of the "edge city." But, this definition technically disqualifies the west side as an edge city because it was rural hundreds of years ago, so this comparison must be loosely applied and reoriented.

The edge city is thus imagined as peripheral to the center and is an example of how an urban area doesn't have to have the traditional downtown center. In fact, there can be multiple cores within one location, Los Angeles being the clearest example of this 20th-century urban development. Leaving the detailed specifications of an edge city behind and focusing on the conceptual aspect of multiple cores relates to the West Village, Christopher Street, and the piers because, together, all three acted as an urban core for queer people. This core operated as a secondary center that was separate from the heteronormative public spaces that existed everywhere else. Christopher Street is the best example of a classic “main street” where commerce, consumerism, visibility, and the public all intertwine. In 1969, the Stonewall Riots claimed this street and neighborhood so that the queer body could be open and expressive within the public space of urban culture.<sup>97</sup> The development of a public identity allowed for the commercial life of gay culture to grow and thrive, and ultimately a shopping district, between Sixth Avenue and Hudson Street, was established where all kinds of people from out of state tourists to locals, could find their favorite items. James Polchin who wrote on the “Landscape of

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<sup>96</sup>Joel Garreau, "Edge City," 1991, in *The Suburb Reader*, ed. Becky M. Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 494.

<sup>97</sup> James Polchin, "Having Something to Wear: The Landscapes of Identity on Christopher Street," in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, ed. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1997), 382.

Identity on Christopher Street” describes the gay spin on consumerism that could be found in the West Village:

Christopher Street is a shopping street in a city known for such avenues of consumption. The street participates in the city's larger social exchanges between production and consumption, between desire and economics. But here the terms of desire center on the male body. In a culture that consistently regulates the behavior of the queer body Christopher Street provides a space where queer sexuality can be viewed, displayed, expressed, and consumed.<sup>98</sup>

In other words, Fifth Avenue may have luxury brands for Manhattan’s wealthiest citizens but Christopher street has its leather shops for gay men. The difference is that on Christopher Street, the male body is advertised as normative rather than subversive and his visibility in the streets normalizes gay culture within the public realm. Having a consumerist identity fills the role of entertainment, business, and shopping centers that edge cities require, but instead, this alternative core doesn’t contribute to the normative expectations of such spaces (Figure 2.26).

Thus, there was a constant migration of queers that came to Christopher Street for this culture of visibility. Wade Henley, a twenty-one-year-old resident of Harlem in 1994 stated, "we can't really hang out on the corner where we live, so we come here...This is where I feel comfortable."<sup>99</sup> Indeed, there was a movement of gay people all over the city that came to this area for refuge and normalcy. Artists traveled from the East Village for freedom of expression and various others revelled in the nightlife of numerous clubs and the abandoned piers. It was an urban village where folk from the surrounding rurality of New York City, rural being defined not as population density rather as gayness (the more “rural” a location, the less visible gayness is in public), came to embrace their identity in the streets and to support their culture as consumers,

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 384.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 388.

similar to the way a diaspora functions within their community. In the way, members support businesses that cater to their cultural needs from commercial products to nightlife hotspots, strengthening the presence of a community in an area.

The significance of “the village” was due in part to its identity as a site of history, not only in its 19th-century tenement housing appearance, but in its cultural importance as ground zero for queer protest. The village was where gay men left the confines of the closet and claimed a place for their identity to exist in the streets.<sup>100</sup> This transformation from private to public, from secrecy to visibility, established a sense of place and belonging where being gay was not a threat but an expectation. The queering of the streets stimulated a lineage of activism that mobilized gay identity as a political tool. The body confronted the heteronormative world and established a place that was separate from, yet visible within the rest of the city. The West Village and the piers ultimately function as historical sites, grounded through spectacle and consumption, and they provide a sense of being a part of history through the experience of place (Figure 2.27).<sup>101</sup> To put it simply, by participating in the gay urban core, one was adding to queer history and preserving the right to occupy public space.

In 1994, after most of the piers had been razed and four years before the Hudson River Park project broke ground, REPOhistory, an artist collective focused on public art, initiated a project called *Queer Spaces* which installed signs in the form of pink triangles declaring the significance of a site to LGBTQ history. One of these sites was at the Christopher Street Pier where trans activist and legendary drag queen Marsha P. Johnson’s dead body was pulled from

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 386.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 389.

the water on July 6, 1992 (Figure 2.28).<sup>102</sup> After her death, a shrine of the outline of her body where she laid on the pavement was constructed, and her death was ruled a suicide, despite the fact that her friends and family denied that she was suicidal, implying that she was murdered. All this information is listed on the sign and it participates in rooting a site with a history that would otherwise go unknown and forgotten.

FIERCE!, an LGBTQ non-profit for youth of color founded in 2000, was established to sustain the queer life that existed at the piers and more generally in the West Village (Figure 2.29). After the death of the gay piers due to AIDS and “the quality of life” political agenda, much of the vibrant life that existed at the waterfront started to fade away. Today, “the piers” are known as The Hudson River Park, a privately funded public space, that was completed in 2003 and is responsible for replacing the ruins with green space and bike paths. Ultimately, FIERCE’s mission is to combat this disappearance and to protect the right of occupying the piers because of their historical importance to queer youth of color.

In 2006, the *New York Blade* declared that there had been a “Christopher Street Compromise” between the West Village residents and the queer youth that frequented the pier. The issue was over the pier’s 1 AM curfew, and the queer kids who would be constantly apprehended by security and forced to leave the park. This directly contradicts the piers’ history as a free communal site, but the residents of the surrounding area didn’t like the noise level and potential for criminal activity that the QPOC brought to the area. In response, the city extended the hours to a community space called the Door a few blocks away.<sup>103</sup> Riccke Manzala, a

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<sup>102</sup> Biography.com Editors, "Marsha P. Johnson Biography," Biography.com, last modified December 14, 2017, accessed April 9, 2019, <https://www.biography.com/people/marsha-p-johnson-112717>.

<sup>103</sup> Kerry Eleveld, "Christopher Street Compromise," *The New York Blade* (New York, NY), August 21, 2006, National, 3.



member of FIERCE, cautiously accepted this new proposal but made it clear that, “he welcomes increased services as long as they are not used as a ‘deterrent’ to keep people from coming to the pier,” and he suggests, “in the future it would be great to open a late night drop-in center in the Christopher Street area.”<sup>104</sup> From the beginning of the piers' demolition in the mid 80s and early 90s to present day, there has been a constant tug of war for the right of the pier and the new residents' “need” for securitized public space. Despite the forces against them, FIERCE has remained persistent in trying to preserve this alternative urban core that used to be so central to gay identity in the city streets where community and struggle converged.

Today, at the Christopher Street Pier, there are banners celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Hudson River Park with the slogan “20 Years of Piers” blazoned on lampposts (Figure 2.30). This assumes that nothing existed before the Hudson River Park, and essentially these four words erase decades of history. At the park, there is an AIDS Memorial that takes the form of a black granite bench bearing the quote, “I can sail without wind, I can row without oars, but I cannot part from my friend without tears,”<sup>105</sup> chiseled into its base located at the former site of Pier 48. Another sculpture a few blocks north commemorates the victims of the Pulse Nightclub shooting and the wider LGBT community with translucent rocks that project rainbows onto the lawn beside them.<sup>106</sup> But there isn't a place that helps sustain the rich culture of freedom and

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>105</sup>This memorial is a 42-foot-long curved stone bench near Bank Street. The path is complemented by a balcony that juts out over the river where Pier 49 once stood.

"AIDS Memorial," Hudson River Park, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://hudsonriverpark.org/explore-the-park/art/aids-memorial>.

<sup>106</sup> The LGBT memorial is dedicated to the victims of the Pulse Nightclub shooting and is situated north of the Christopher Street pier between 12th and Bethune Street. The memorial is constructed of nine bronze “boulders,” some of which are bisected with laminated glass that act as a prism to create subtle rainbow patterns on the surrounding lawn and nearby objects.

"LGBT Memorial," Hudson River Park, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://hudsonriverpark.org/explore-the-park/art/lgbt-memorial>.

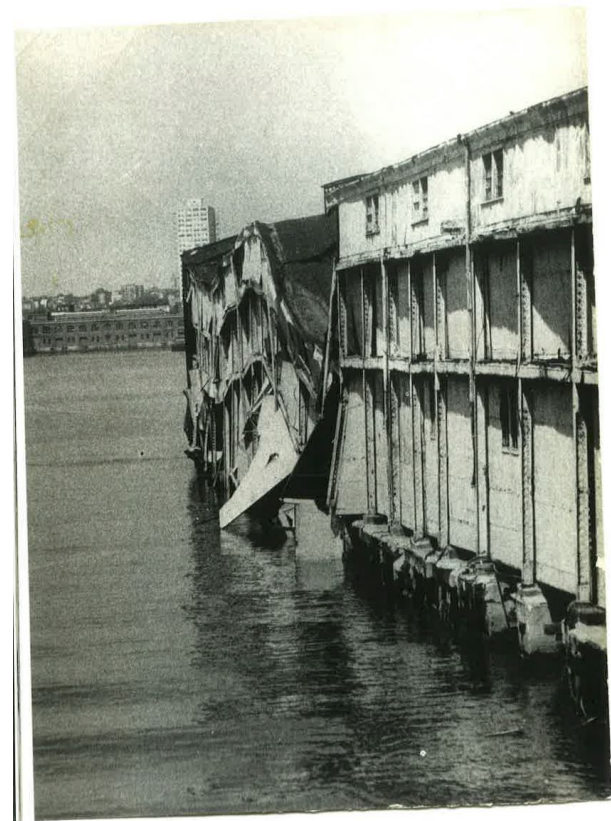
community that lived out on the piers, from the spontaneous artists that trekked from the East to the gay men that flocked in the nude. Similarly, the Saint faces its own issues of memorialization. On the building housing the former Saint is a plaque that reads, “Site of the Fillmore East (1968-1971)” that describes various rock acts from The Who to The Grateful Dead that performed there (Figure 2.31). Yet, there isn’t a plaque that acknowledges the Saint, a gay superclub that transformed the experience of the disco, which occupied the same building from 1980-1988. This selective preservation of history seems to be part of a wider theme of the re-identification of spaces, as their gay histories are wiped away and replaced by the shiny glass facades of new apartment buildings and greener pastures. Yet, although the city has moved on, and many gay men and their collective urban footprint are buried, there are still glimpses of the past. For the Saint, the original facade still stands. For the piers, one can still see the pilings of what used to be the foundation of an original structure. Opposite to the AIDS memorial, a pedestrian walkway juts out into the river where one can see these wooden cylinders scattered throughout the water (Figure 2.32). Some say they resemble a graveyard, but I view it as an ellipsis at the end of a sentence, and although the life and community that existed there are gone, this “dot, dot, dot” that persists on the water’s surface still silently protests, not ready to end its story.

## Chapter 2: Illustrations



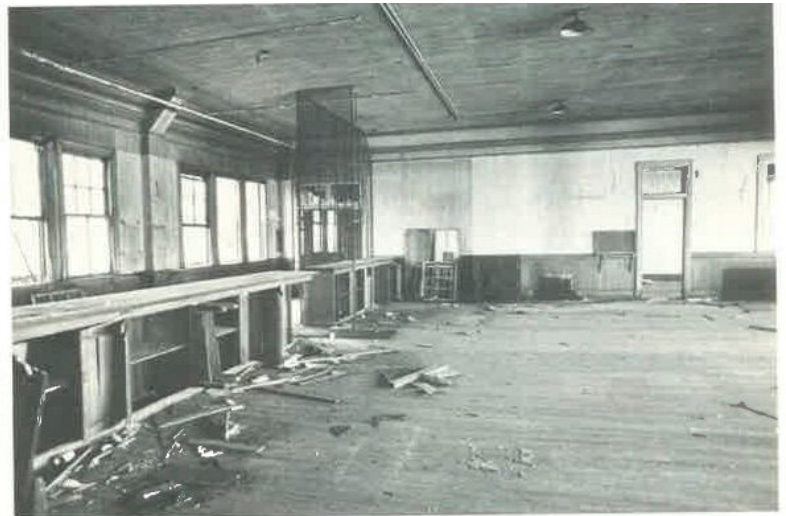
**Figure 2.1.** Waterfront traffic at Pier 46 (Troy Line), New York City. Undated. New York Historical Society. New York, NY.

**Figure 2.2.** Baltrop, Alvin. These two photographs illustrate the spectrum of decay of the piers. On the left is a razed slab of concrete, and on the right is a dilapidated warehouse. ca.1975-1986. In *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. New York, NY.





**Figure 2.3.** Whitman's performance piece, "Architecture," took place in the great "amphitheater." November 1972. In *Arts Magazine*. New York, NY.



**Figure 2.4.** These photographs illustrate the path one took to get to Whitman's performance. November 1972. In *Arts Magazine*. New York, NY.



**Figure 2.5.** Baltrop, Alvin. In the photograph, one can see the relationship between queer site and the normative urban context, where flesh and steel dick meet. Yet, one is clearly more subversive. ca.1975-1986. In *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. New York, NY.



**Figure 2.6.** Side by side comparison of the World Trade Center, a clean sleek office building, and the wild dilapidated pier demonstrating the two different worlds the built environment provided for individuals. New York, New York. (Left: From <http://www.nyc-architecture.com/GON/GON001.htm>, Right: In *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. New York, NY)



**Figure 2.7.** Baltrop, Alvin. The pier was a home and refuge for many gay men. There was both a feeling of community and anonymity where one could hangout with friends or engage in public sex with a stranger. Above, one can see this intermingling of community and anonymity with three men posing in the nude enjoying each other's company. ca.1975-1986. In *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. New York, NY.



**Figure 2.8.** Baltrop, Alvin. This scene demonstrates the romantic and safe viewpoint of going to the piers during the day where one's safety wasn't at immediate risk. ca.1975-1986. In *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. New York, NY.



**Figure 2.9.** Baltrop, Alvin. A visual example of the crime and murders that took place at the piers. Above you can see an active investigation taking place. ca.1975-1986. In *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. New York, NY.



**Figure 2.10.** Baltrop, Alvin. Nude sunbathers enjoying the day on the concrete beach ca. 1975-1986. In *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. New York, NY.



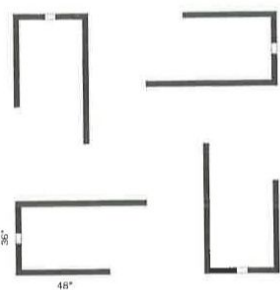
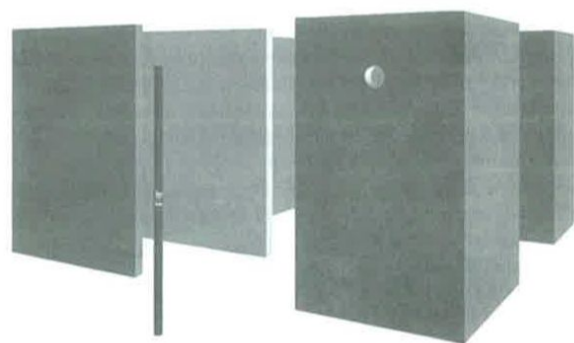
**Figure 2.11.** Frank Hallam. The muralist Tava painting at Pier 46. 1980. *Out Magazine*, New York, NY.





**Figure 2.12.** Picture of the massive “public squares” in the piers, as an example of the various interior spaces one could cruise in. November 1972. In *Arts Magazine*. New York, NY.

## 76 POLICING PUBLIC SEX



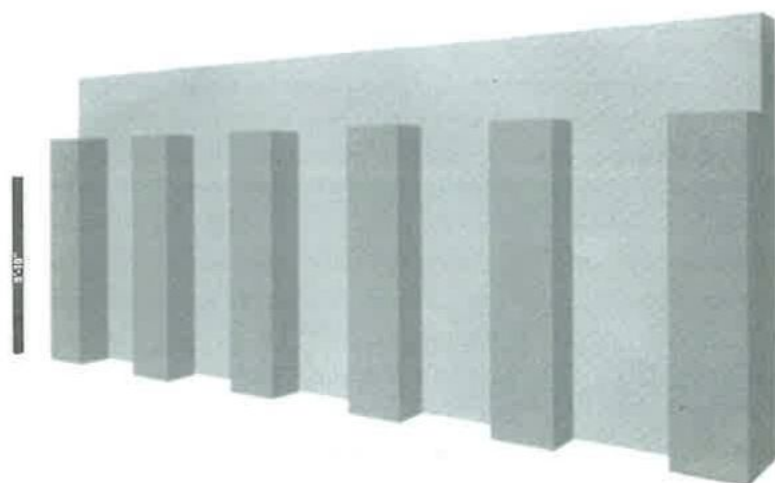
plan  
**SOCIAL STRUCTURE-8 (qty. 4) Pin-wheel of Dead Ends**

**Figure 2.13.** Visual comparison between the pin-wheel dead end (left) and the piers (right).

Lindell, John. In *Policing Public Sex*. New York, NY.



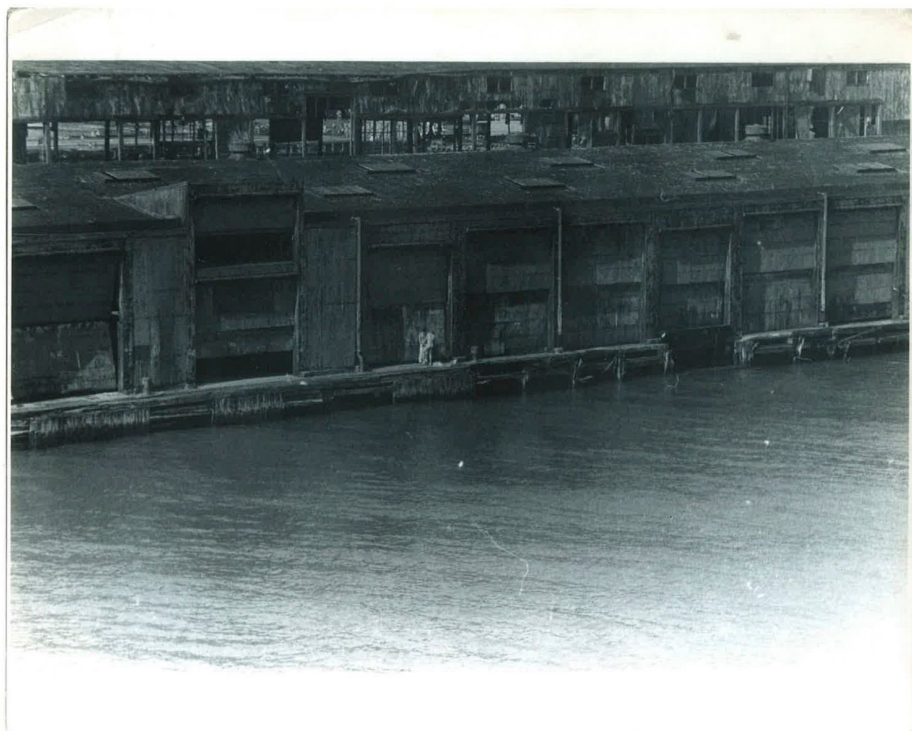
November 1972. In *Arts Magazine*. New York, NY.



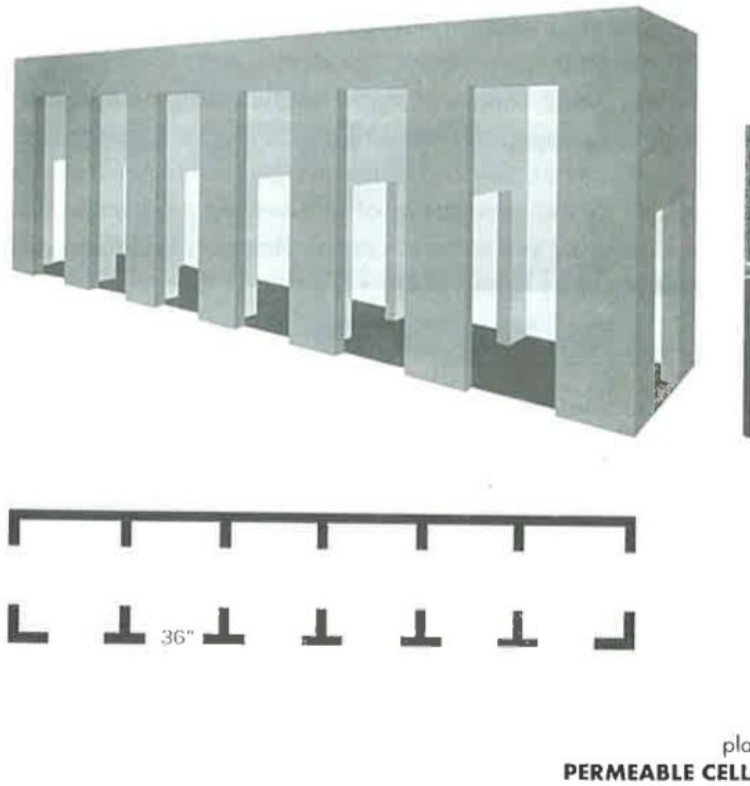
plan  
**SOCIAL STRUCTURE-9 (qty. 6) McAlpin Device**

Lindell, John. In *Policing Public Sex*. New York, NY.

**Figure 2.14.** Visual comparison between the McAlpin Device (left) and the piers (right).



Baltrop, Alvin. ca.1975-1986.  
 In *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. New York, NY.



**Figure 2.15.** Visual comparison between the permeable cells plan (above) and the piers (below).

Lindell, John. In *Policing Public Sex*. New York, NY.



Baltrop, Alvin. ca.1975-1986. In *Alvin Baltrop: The Piers*. New York, NY.



**Figure 2.16.** Sterzing, Andreas. Luis Frangella stands beside his murals of the human body at Pier 34. 1983. In *Pier 34*. 205 Hudson Gallery, New York, NY.



**Figure 2.17.** Sterzing, Andreas. Pier 34 and Pier 32, view from the Hudson River. 1983. In *Pier 34*. 205 Hudson Gallery, New York, NY



**Figure 2.18.** Sterzing, Andreas. Mike Bidlo and David Wojnarowicz with their work. 1983. In *Pier 34*. 205 Hudson Gallery, New York, NY



**Figure 2.19.** Sterzing, Andreas. Russell Sharon's mural at Pier 34. 1983. In *Pier 34*. 205 Hudson Gallery, New York, NY



**Figure 2.20.** Sterzing, Andreas. Bill Downer sculpture being arrested at an “Opening.” June 1983. In *Pier 34*. 205 Hudson Gallery, New York, NY



**Figure 2.21.** Sterzing, Andreas. The iconic photograph of Wojnarowicz and Bidlo lying on the meadow in Pier 34. 1983. In *Pier 34*. 205 Hudson Gallery, New York, NY



**Figure 2.22.** Pier 34's demolition in 1984 and you can see Wojnarowicz's mural on the verge of being erased from history. 1984. In *Pier 34*. 205 Hudson Gallery, New York, NY



**Figure 2.23.** West Side Highway ran adjacent to the Chelsea Piers. ca 1950.

<http://www.boweryboyshistory.com/2012/04/where-golf-balls-fly-pier-59-at-chelsea.html>





**Figure 2.24.** Art Deco frieze labeling the pier. Undated.

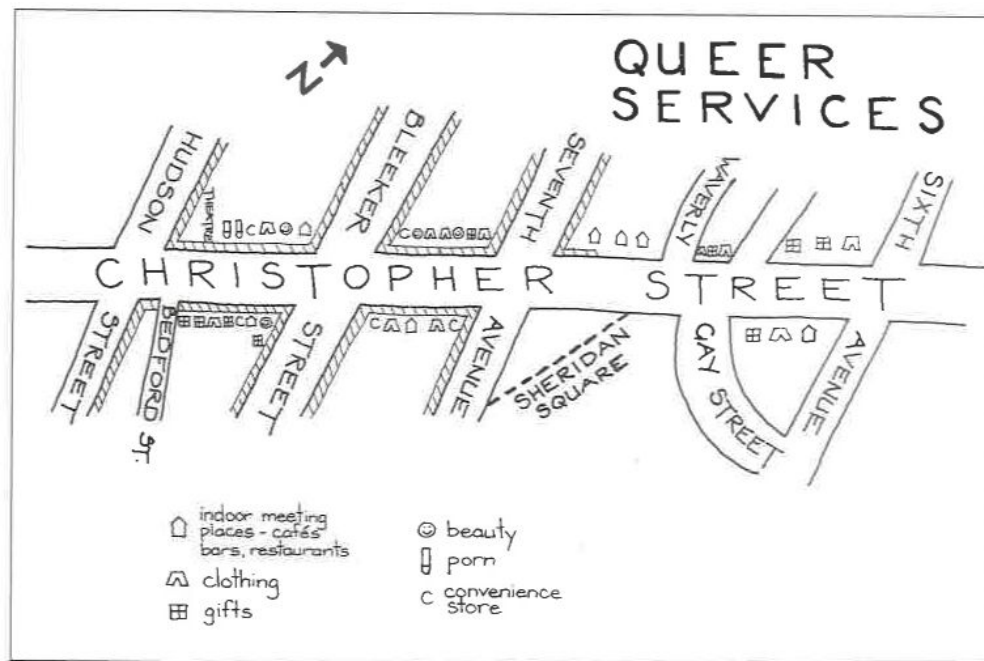
<https://forgotten-ny.com/2001/06/millers-crossing-the-west-side-elevated-highway/>



Ted Cowell

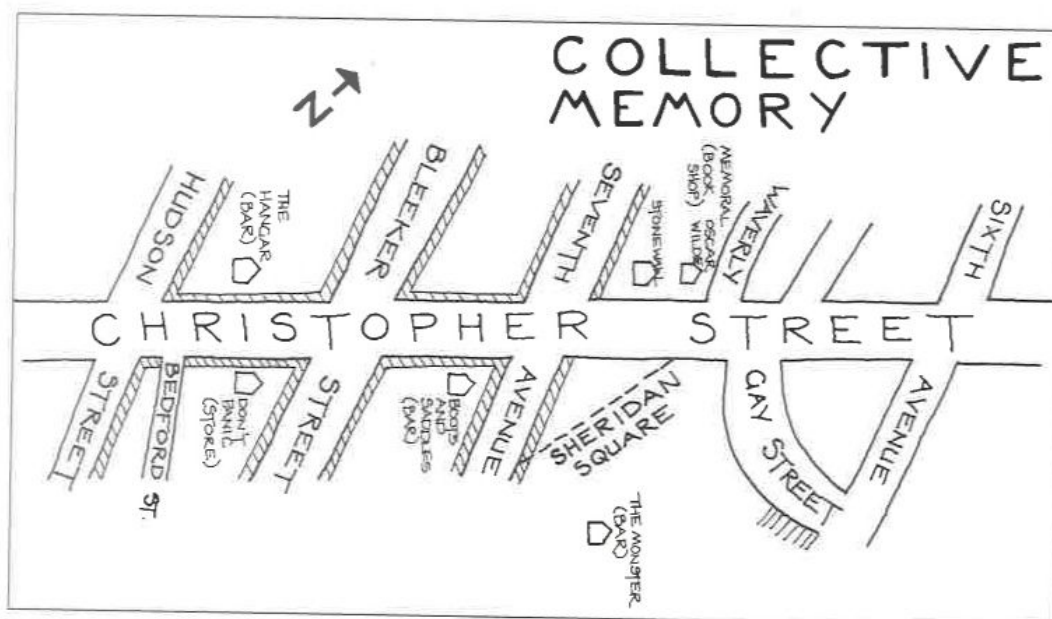
Truck and car fell onto West Street as a section of the West Side Highway gave way near Little West 12th Street

**Figure 2.25.** Cowell, Ted. Image of the truck and car that fell onto West street after a section of the highway collapsed. December 16, 1973. In *The New York Times*. New York, NY.



Map by James Polchin and Gordon Brent Ingram.

**Figure 2.26.** Map of Christopher Street illustrating the commercial center it became for queer people. Undated. In *Queers in Space*.



Map by James Polchin and Gordon Brent Ingram.

**Figure 2.27.** Map of the historical sites that forged the gay communal identity. Undated. In *Queers in Space*.



**Figure 2.28.** Pink triangle “Queer Spaces” signs were placed by RepoHistory at several NYC locations in the early 1990s this one highlights Marsha P. Johnson. 1994.

<http://www.nyclgbtsites.org/2017/10/06/marsha-p-johnsons-places-in-nycs-lgbt-history/>



**Figure 2.29.** FIERCE protest at Pier 40 and FIERCE rally poster. 2008. In *The Villager*.



**Figure 2.30.** “20 Years of Piers” Sign. 2019. New York, NY.



**Figure 2.31.** The Saint is now an Apple Savings Bank and the commemoration plaque is on the left hand side. 2019. New York, NY.



**Figure 2.32.** The original pilings of a pier. 2019. New York, NY.

## Conclusion

### Quality of Life

In 1966, New York City Mayor John Lindsay first started to use the term “quality of life”<sup>107</sup> to address the social ills of urban areas, which would reach its height in the 1970s. The causes of disorder included prostitution, littering, public drinking, loud music, panhandling, drugs, and graffiti.<sup>108</sup> Yet, as Lindsay’s years in office progressed, he broadened the conversation to not solely focus on the systematic troubles the minority faced, but rather he employed the term “quality of life” to include all New Yorkers. This reorientation of language turned the campaign from an initiative that was focused on uplifting the minority in society, through the creation social services, into an opportunity for other agendas to influence the conversation. Rightfully so, as everyone was struggling to survive in the fiscally dead and infrastructurally crumbling city, and broadening the conversation unified the voices of the tired and angry New Yorkers. But by changing the original intentions of the campaign, this allowed for the overpowering voice of the middle class to establish their own vision of a “livable” city which excluded and came at a cost for minority communities.

Each mayor since the 1960s has handled the Quality of Life (QoL) campaign differently: Koch spiked police enforcement and ignored the AIDS epidemic, Dinkins threw the homeless

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<sup>107</sup> The term “quality of life” originated during President Johnson’s War on Poverty in the the mid 1960s. In 1965, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was created and focused on fixing the living conditions of the poor and urban minorities. Subsequently, in HUD’s first major initiative after passing the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act in 1966, they headed a new program called, “Improving the Quality of Urban Life.” From there the slogan began and its many interpretations ran wild.

Alex S. Vitale, *City of Disorder: How the Quality of Life Campaign Transformed New York Politics* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2008), [Page #].

<sup>108</sup> Todd Purdum, "What Makes Us Angry," *New York Times* (New York, NY), August 7, 1994, 9, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/109390774?accountid=31516>.

out of Tompkins Square Park, Giuliani imposed aggressive policing of minor crimes from graffiti to public drinking, and Bloomberg added the Highline and supported accelerated private real estate development like Hudson Yards. Each contributed to the tactics of “cleaning up” the city -- not by curing its social ills, but by removing them out of sight.

This campaign originated in reaction to the burgeoning individualism of the 1960s and 1970s and the economic restructuring of the city during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>109</sup> The 70s are known for the mobilization of gay pride and black power, and the change of tactics from a message of assimilation to pluralism. For gays, the message went from “we’re just like you” to “we’re here, we’re queer, get used to it.” This sense of identity formed a gay community that was both strong and vibrant, but in the 1980s and 1990s, the pluralistic message of minority New Yorkers was obscured by the privileging of certain communities.<sup>110</sup> In other words, the individual was ranked by socioeconomic status in which the middle class held more power than the minority, and therefore the mayor listened to their needs, rather than to the needs of the disadvantaged.

The minority, who was at the center of this campaign in its original state, became the poster child of disorder. They--the homeless, unemployed, blacks, gays, lesbians, immigrants--were seen as the outsiders of society, and the middle class blamed them for the decline and instability in neighborhoods.<sup>111</sup> These and other minorities were profiled as the source of crime and over-policing was seen as the antidote to this problem, which is not unlike the situation FIERCE faces in 2019 on the waterfront. The method of policing transitioned from

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<sup>109</sup> Vitale, *City of Disorder*, 19.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

contacting the central 911 emergency system to community crime control.<sup>112</sup> This model resembles the one of gated communities in which profiling and neutralizing the threat of an unwanted guest is paramount to keeping the community safe. Yet, it needs to be said that some middle and upper class gay men were exempt from mistreatment by police because their race and economic status protected them, and they may have contributed a role in targeting the minority.

The QoL campaign focused on the aesthetics of a successful city, and subsequently influenced the destiny of gay space, which was not included in this new vision of urbanity. Paul Goldberger, in 1985, reflected on this transition of the urban, “the city is seen far more as a set of real estate opportunities, as a blank slate on which can be written ever bigger buildings, than as a community.”<sup>113</sup> Plots of wasteland became developers’ dreams, and the city became the site of a fast-paced competition which continues today and focuses on who could build the tallest building in New York (Figure 3.1). Little do they know that these contributions to the built environment should be considered less as an architectural achievement and more as a monument to the city’s enormous problem of wealth inequality. Ultimately, these experiments into the aesthetics of the quality of life only underscore their true utility for removing the visible disorder of older New York without any consideration for how architecture affects the trajectory of the city’s social fabric.

In his book *City of Disorder*, Alex Vitale argues that this paradigm shift of the urban has been reframed as what he calls the post justice city in which, “the process of social and economic

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<sup>112</sup> Jesus Rangel, "More Police to Combat 'Quality of Life' Crimes," *New York Times* (New York, NY), January 24, 1985, accessed April 22, 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1985/01/24/nyregion/more-police-to-combat-quality-of-life-crimes.html>.

<sup>113</sup> Paul Goldberger, "Architecture View; What Has Architecture to do with the Quality of Life," *New York Times* (New York, NY), February 10, 1985, 5, accessed April 22, 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1985/02/10/arts/architecture-view-what-has-architecture-to-do-with-the-quality-of-life.html?searchResultPosition=11>.



polarization that gave rise to the repressive policing of homeless and disorderly people in order to maintain the stability of new entrepreneurial spaces.”<sup>114</sup> To put it simply, this new city devalued the community spaces that established themselves in the 1970s and 80s, and instead focused on bettering the image of business and economic success by getting rid of the “disorderly places” such as a gay cruising sites. Once again, returning to Goldberger, “that’s the essence of the new urban paradigm--a kind of airbrushed urbanity that blends a whiff of urban sophistication with the separate, privatized space of suburbia.”<sup>115</sup> Therefore, the city has shifted its view on what the urban should represent, for decades it was a place of diversity and spontaneity based upon the freedom to move about space. But over time, by way of this campaign, a hybrid version of the suburban prototype was enforced, and its exclusionary tactics were used to stifle the diversity that lived on the streets.

Public space, where many gay men fought for and claimed their visibility in the city, felt the brunt of this campaign which comes at no surprise because the suburban model always elevates privacy. Therefore, the QoL campaign was directly in opposition to gay men’s public identity, and they counteracted it by privatizing public space and services. Hudson River Park, along the waterfront, is the best example of this strategy because it’s a privately funded public space. Ultimately, the quality of life of the middle and upper classes was to make the lives of homeless people and minorities untenable in public spaces. Solving their issues was not the goal of any of the QoL initiatives; rather, the goal was reducing the visible impact of minorities on the rest of the city, embracing an “out of sight, out of mind,” attitude.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Vitale, *City of Disorder*, 26.

<sup>115</sup> Paul Goldberger, "The Malling of Manhattan," *Metropolis Magazine*, 2001, 139.

<sup>116</sup> Vitale, *City of Disorder*, 25.

This change in aesthetics replaced the city with facades paid for by corporate money that were invested in the monotony of the globalized city rather than the history of multiculturalism in New York. Alongside this aesthetic transition, the social climate also changed, and the QoL campaign rejected anything that was unregulated, wild, and free. In 1993, the *New York Times* featured immigrant street artists from Eastern Europe and Asia who found work in tourist areas selling portraits of customers. Under the QoL rules, these artists were banned from the street if they didn't hold the proper permit, which most of them did not have. Robert Lederman, a painter from Brooklyn, stated, "drawing on the street is a form of freedom of expression protected by the first amendment...by requiring artists to get a license, the city is abridging that freedom."<sup>117</sup> If arrested, these street artists would be thrown in the same van as drug dealers and prostitutes and sent to jail for the night like criminals. Apparently, hard working portraitists were negatively affecting the health of the city. This infringement of the rights of an individual was an infringement on the city's dwindling freedom, and it represents the greater attack on anyone classified as the "other" in society, their activities, and the spaces they occupied.

Alongside the QoL campaign, gay space was also attacked by AIDS. Glued together by the traditions of gay socialization, body and space were always linked as one and revolved around one's desire for sex. Thus, when sex became synonymous with death, gay spaces were obscured carrying a mixture of life and death, fear and danger, and pleasure and desire. Places of community dwindled, bathhouses were closed by Mayor Koch, and sites began to see fewer and fewer people; gay men were afraid and many were dying. As the primary function of clubs as places for sex and lust was transformed, they became spaces for fundraising and

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<sup>117</sup> Jane H. Lii, "Is this Man Dangerous?," *New York Times* (New York, NY), September 1, 1996, 8, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/109599268?accountid=31516>.

community/political engagement. At Paradise Garage, Gay Men's Health Crisis hosted a benefit called Showers, in 1982, and raised over \$50,000 for AIDS victims (Figure 3.2).<sup>118</sup>

Ultimately, gay space suffered, and many of the mayors who spearheaded the QoL campaign weaponized AIDS as a way to dismantle community spaces. Mayor Koch was in office when the epidemic broke, and because of his lack of acknowledgement during the early years of the disease many people suffered and died. Larry Kramer, the AIDS activist, stated, "we must never forget that this man was an active participant in helping us to die, in murdering us. Call it what you will, that is what Edward Koch was, a murderer of his very own people."<sup>119</sup> Kramer here is teasing out the longtime rumor that Koch was a closeted gay man who took out his deep-seated homophobia on the gay community and their sites of congregation. Moreover, in the 1990s, the piers fell victim to QoL enforcement, as testified by Boo Boo, who recounts being thrown in jail multiple times because of the efforts of Mayor Dinkins and his persistent orders to clean out the piers:

So it was like a revolving door for me, from jail to Rikers Island and back. Not even getting to turn a trick or suck a dick. And I was back in jail doing another year. By the time I got out, the piers was gone. When I got out there was nothing. It was like. Where is everybody?" I asked people. And people was looking at me like I was crazy. There was no more of us down there.<sup>120</sup>

The disappearance of the piers, the Saint, of spaces all across the city meant there wasn't a place to go anymore. The bond one felt dancing with a thousand other men dwindled down only to a couple hundred toward the end of the Saint. For the piers, without the safety net and home that

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<sup>118</sup> "Paradise Garage," NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, accessed April 22, 2019, <http://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/paradise-garage/>.

<sup>119</sup> Andy Humm, "Ed Koch: 12 Years as Mayor, A Lifetime in the Closet," *Gay City News* (New York, NY), February 3, 2013, accessed April 22, 2019, <https://www.gaycitynews.nyc/stories/2013/3/w5447-ed-koch-12-years-as-mayor-a-lifetime-in-the-closet-2013-02-03.html>.

<sup>120</sup> Shepard and Smithsimon, "Fences and Piers," 120.

they served for Boo Boo and other queer youth, there was no place to feel comfort. The QoL campaign wasn't about uplifting queer minorities, but instead robbing them of the refuge they created in the urban environment and leaving them without any stability, erasing their sense of community.

### **Looking Back from the Global City**

Essentially, the QoL campaign was designed for people who felt threatened by the wildness and queerness of the city, and wanted to reestablish a sense of order in the streets. I grew up in a household where Giuliani and Bloomberg were said to be doing great work in making everything "better, cleaner, and safer," and in my naivete, I believed them. Yet, these men washed out the grit of the city, extinguished its freedom, and changed the way gay men and other minority communities function within the city limits.

When I think of the history of gay space and its disappearance, I've attached a great amount of mystery and curiosity to them. Returning to Burke, he states, "when danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight and are simply terrible, but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful as we every day experience."<sup>121</sup> I can't begin to comprehend what it must have been like to be a gay man in the 1970s and 80s, and to experience harassment in the streets and euphoria in the club, to explore the urban decay of the city, or to see my friends decimated by a disease. This distance that I've been given from the realities, dangers as well as pleasures, that gay men faced in these decades, similar to what Burke describes, allows me to have a retrospective view of gay space that's tinged by longing and nostalgia, a feeling I may not have had if I lived during that time.

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<sup>121</sup> Burke, "A Philosophical," in *Gothic Documents*, 113.

Even with the distance I have to these sites, I've still fallen into the fantasies they produced. Beginning with the Saint, I was entranced by the idea of going between heaven and earth all night and the feeling of leaving the club acclimating to the daylight and reality. After writing my first chapter, I had decided that this would've been my place, I would've gone to the Saint, and this would've been my community. Yet, when I continued onto Chapter Two, the piers captivated me, and they fulfilled a fantasy of mine in which they represented a wildness that I had wished for but never encountered in my own experience of New York. Once again, I decided that this is where I would've been in the 70s, falling into the dream cloud of gay space for a second time.

The Saint would have been 40 years old this year, and the piers even older, and even though their fantasies are still alive in the writing, photography, and voices of that time, the historical distance allows me to divorce them from personal experience. In other words, gay men were tied to these spaces, in need of them, and depended on them for community. For me, I feel as though I'm linking generations of community in writing and remembering these spaces, but I don't need to rely on them for safety and unity like gay men did in the 70s and 80s. Instead, my goal is to form a connection between these "alternative" cultural sites and the formulation of identity today.

We rarely learn about queer sites in high school, and if we do it's a one-liner about Stonewall. Instead, we study buildings with normative cultural significance like the Empire State Building and the World Trade Center. Both these sites have valid and important histories, and I don't want to take away from that. However, to study the history of minority spaces is to study the history of New York itself, and without that education one doesn't receive the full picture in

which identity and urbanity intertwine in the unmarked historical sites of the city. Goldberger comments on the cultural significance of architecture by connecting it to art's social benefit:

We do not sell off pictures at the Metropolitan Museum and devote the profits to feeding the poor, for example, though that would certainly provide one kind of social benefit. We do not do that of course because the pictures are a public trust- private property in the strict legal sense, but part of our shared culture in the larger sense.<sup>122</sup>

This idea of social and cultural value are materialized within gay space, and its importance goes beyond queer lines. The tactics of claiming the public, the tradition of social rituals tied to a physical site, and the historical context that these spaces operated and established themselves in is culturally rich and valuable in learning about our built environment and how communities navigate the terrain to establish a presence within urbanity. There is such a strong bond between body and space, and gay men sculpted the architecture of the built environment to serve their need for an alternative reality where they could explore the freedom of sexual-expression.

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

In New York, at one time being gay was synonymous with outlaw status. You were immediately placed on the periphery of society, and if you were a person of color, and queer, even more so. Today, gay identity and culture has changed immensely, and for the most part has become accepted into mainstream society. In this new gay identity, we find ourselves on the internet and apps exploring gayness, and the physicality of the gay site is diminished and rendered less of a necessity and more as a place of leisure. Gay bars and clubs still exist, but their meaning to us has been recontextualized by the experience of younger gays who prefer to use the screen as their platform for community and sexual-expression.

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<sup>122</sup> Goldberger, "Architecture View."

The best example of the historicization of gay sites is the *Cruising Pavillion*, curated by Pierre-Alexandre Mateos, Rasmus Myrup, Octave Perrault and Charles Teyssou, and it was an exhibition and collaboration between artists and architects that highlighted the aesthetics and history of cruising during the 16th Venice Architecture Biennale. This February, they opened a New York installment of the exhibition at Ludlow 38 on the Lower East Side. On the walls hung a mixture of art and historical documents, and everything was drenched in purple light, referencing a club interior. There were drawings and video of Fire Island homes designed by Horace Gifford, the architectural plan of the Saint's "pleasure dome" that I had seen at NYU, and a virtual reality cruising game where you had to determine if the man urinating beside you was looking for some action. Ultimately, this show establishes a cultural relevance to cruising and creates a visual and architectural lexicon to define gay space and illustrate its importance. Yet, at the same time, the mixture of artistic and historical documents felt generalized and their relationship disconnected. It was a tug of war between two exhibitions one that was interested in the historical ephemera of gay space, and one that was focused on contemporary artistic responses. Additionally, the featuring of Fire Island homes and The Saint, as previously stated, only represents one part of the community, and therefore this show fell into that homogenizing trap. Ultimately, the Cruising Pavillion in New York felt more like a trial run in preparation for future exhibitions which should embrace a more diverse look into gay space and its communities.

I wish I could've seen the day where there was an option of ten different gay clubs in a five-block radius, but today, specifically, gay space in both the private and public realms is scarce. As an architectural historian, the need for a physical site has stood out to me and

resembles why these spaces were revolutionary in the first place. They were unashamedly queer and they existed in direct protest to the heteronormative culture that silenced gay men for centuries. Yet, what's curious about the current process of suburbanizing the city with cleaner, quieter, and securitized neighborhoods is that it seems to be a reincarnation of history and its suppression of gay community spaces. The opportunity for radical freedom within the urban environment has been stifled by the privatization of the public, and therefore has taken a toll on the spontaneity of gay space and the formulation of identity.

Today on Grindr and Scruff, one cruises by thumbing through a grid of profiles resembling baseball cards with one's stats being your age, height, race, HIV status, and preferred position. It acts as a digital public plaza but with no physical interaction needed. It's an online persona talking to another online persona. This worldwide transfer of gay space to the screen loses out on a physical, communal connection, where meeting people skips the bar and begins and ends in the privacy of the bedroom. Ultimately, gay space is living in the shadow of its golden age of the 70s and 80s in which the experiences of today can never live up to its stories from "back in the day..." Yet, I can't help but think about other cities in the world with gay populations who are more at risk and rely on physical sites to retreat to and find community. In Ukraine, is there more of a need for a gay club or bar, because of gay baiting tactics of the alt-right online? I don't know the answer to this question, but Russell Sharon talks about the perfect moment of convergence of people, place, and time that happened in New York during the 70s and 80s, and I can't help but yet again fall into the fantasy and wonder if this convergence is happening somewhere else in the world.



## Conclusion: Illustrations



**Figure 3.1.** Image of the competition of ultra-tall real estate development in New York. 2019.  
New York, NY.



**THE GAY MEN'S HEALTH CRISIS\***  
PRESENTS  
**SHOWERS**  
A BENEFIT TO AID GAY MEN WITH KAPOSI'S SARCOMA AND OTHER  
GAY RELATED IMMUNODEFICIENCIES

paradise garage    thursday april 8, 1982    84 king street    9pm to 3am

surprise guests    refreshments  
the new york city gay men's chorus appearing    door prizes—a week for two at big ruby's guest  
at 11pm    house in key west florida  
visual entertainment    and other prizes

ticket locations, (tickets go on sale march 1, 1982)

|   |  |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| west side<br>rough rider<br>420 columbus avenue<br>(at 80th street) | midtown<br>uncle charlie's south<br>581 third avenue<br>(at 38th street) | village<br>greetings<br>35 christopher street<br>new york man<br>13 christopher street | chelsea<br>new york jock<br>214 tenth avenue<br>(at 23rd street) | east side<br>greetings<br>740 madison avenue<br>(at 64th street) |
|---|--|--|--|--|

(tickets at above locations or through the mail are \$20.00, at the door \$25.00, additional contribution can be made at the door)

\* THE GAY MEN'S HEALTH CRISIS — NATIONAL GAY HEALTH EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION INC.  
art by r. hood white ©  
design by steve stanish

**Figure 3.2.** Poster of GMHC's first AIDS fundraiser at Paradise Garage.1982.  
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## **Conclusion**

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