

## New Victorians in the 1970s

On a bright Saturday in June 1978, thousands of colorful balloons filled the sky above the gleaming, pastel Victorian building facades on Castro Street. A crowd of people, many half-naked, filled fire stairs, sat on windowsills, or watched behind roof parapets. The street itself was closed to vehicular traffic, and information booths for various gay and lesbian organizations, including political action committees, the police-community liaison office, and gay arts nonprofits, lined the sidewalks. Revelers danced and made out at the foot of a stage where DJs and musicians played songs that were popular in San Francisco's gay nightclubs. This scene unfolded during the Castro Street Fair, an annual neighborhood festival inaugurated in 1974 by the local gay business association. The street fair demonstrated the newfound visibility of gay social life—as well as the vibrancy of gay and lesbian cultures, and the size of their constituency—to City Hall, heterosexual residents, and the media. The Castro Street Fair was also part of the eponymous neighborhood's transformation from a working-class Irish neighborhood to a gay territory in the early 1970s. Still, Castro Village, as it became known, with its own institutions and distinct patterns of everyday life, fit the traditional mold of San Francisco's ethnic neighborhoods.

The social, political, and cultural changes that took place in the San Francisco Bay Area, from the first public demonstrations demanding rights for homosexual citizens organized by the Society for Individual Rights in 1966 to the devastation of gay social life that the AIDS pandemic brought in 1982, reveal how particular gay male identities were embodied in interactions within the urban landscape. This chapter shows that a territorial consolidation of political power became a key concern for gay organizers during this period. Meanwhile, spaces such as gay bars and Victorian flats, along with the “Castro clone” as a paradigmatic gay embodiment, became synonymous with homosexuality as a cultural phenomenon. As it

was broadcast in local, national, and international media, this gay culture changed how society at large perceived spaces hitherto associated with heterosexuality. Meanwhile, the people who populated most of the gay urban landscape were middle-class white men, which was the case with Castro Street Fair attendees and neighborhood street life during the rest of the year, along with its Euro-American village iconography. This shaped the forms and symbolism of gay territorialization during the 1970s with important consequences for how governmental institutions viewed gay rights. Gay citizens began to use the capitalist logic of urban economic revitalization to demand equal access to mainstream economic and social institutions in the United States.

By 1970 urban gay cultures were not confined to the dark interiors of bars, sex clubs, and bathhouses but swelled out into plazas, sidewalks, parks, and every kind of business. Gay businesses included bars, clubs, bathhouses, diners, and even a hamburger joint that began acquiring legendary status as gay hangouts nationally and internationally.<sup>1</sup> The concentration of overtly gay businesses in specific neighborhoods created territories where gay men, and to a certain extent women, felt free to express homosexual desire openly. Among these territories the Castro emerged after 1972 as the center of a youthful, self-confident, and sexualized gay social life. Besides bars and other hangouts, the availability of cheap Victorian flats in the Castro allowed predominantly single gay men and some lesbians, many of whom had recently arrived in the city, to experiment with cohabitation.<sup>2</sup>

The story of how the Castro became gay must be situated within the broader context of San Francisco politics. Relocating industrial port operations from San Francisco to Oakland in the 1960s consolidated City Hall's attention to developing the financial and tourism sectors. Urban renewal projects in the Fillmore, the Embarcadero, and the area south of Market Street targeted working-class residents, primarily African American and Latinx.<sup>3</sup> Oakland's poor and working-class neighborhoods struggled to absorb regional migration. At the same time, major infrastructure projects, such as the Bay Area Rapid Transit suburban railway system, provided access to sprawling suburbs and exurbs. This segregated a large swath of the working-class that included residents of black, brown, and new immigrant neighborhoods from the city's wealth, amenities, and white population.<sup>4</sup> Within that systematic wave of economic and social disenfranchisement, neighborhood activists and labor unions led fights for neighborhood resident rights to address public disinvestment and collectively shape the city's future.<sup>5</sup> The emergence of the Castro as a gay territory at the beginning of the 1970s followed a similar process of neighborhood empowerment. Local political actions, epitomized by Harvey Milk's work, used similar tactics with labor unions, especially boycotts, to assert their political presence first in the neighborhood and then in the city. This chapter situates the Castro's transformation in the context of the city's neighborhood politics and the building of self-assured gay cultures through the spaces that gay men appropriated during the long 1970s. By cultivating a sense of distinct cultural belonging gay men articulated claims to national citizenship.

These claims had both insurgent and assimilationist characteristics, the results of which are most obvious in the mainstream turn of the LGBTQ+ movement three decades later.

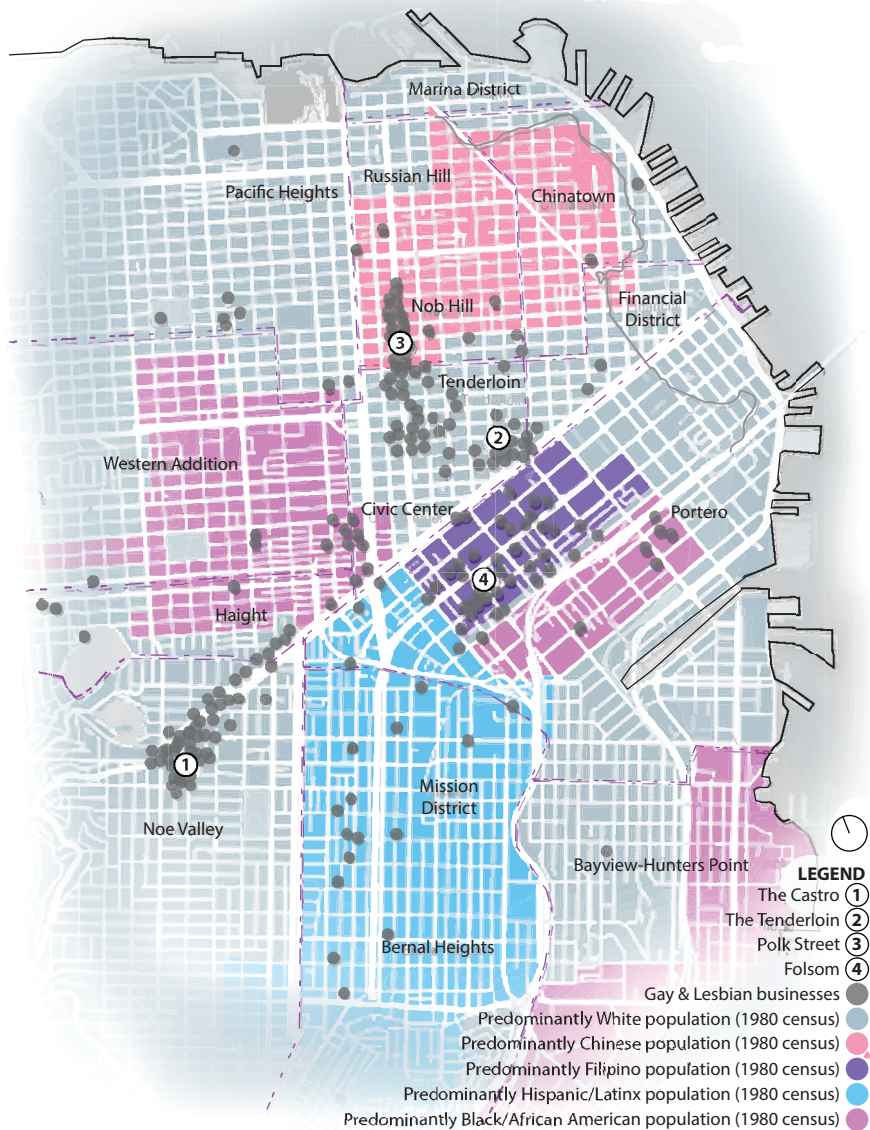
### CITY OF NEIGHBORHOODS

San Francisco's urban morphology is characterized by a densely built downtown that boasted several tall office buildings and luxury hotels as early as 1875.<sup>6</sup> An industrial district historically occupied the bayfront and the flat areas to the south. The downtown is surrounded by inner-city neighborhoods, mainly comprising mid- and low-rise buildings, originally built in the late nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Each of these neighborhoods, which include Chinatown, North Beach, Russian Hill, and Pacific Heights, among others, has historically had distinct cultural and social characteristics that mapped onto their physical landscapes (map 2). For example, Chinatown residents tended to live in small apartments within three- and four-story buildings with commercial storefronts that often extended their presence onto busy sidewalks with robust street life.<sup>8</sup> North Beach was the epicenter of Italian immigrant culture in the city, with residential apartment buildings, dotted with bars, and known for its nightlife. More affluent San Franciscans lived in the ornate apartment buildings following European styles in Russian Hill and Pacific Heights, and in the grand mansions of the latter overlooking the bay.

In 1960 San Francisco had a population of 740,316 residents, 18.6 percent of whom were nonwhite.<sup>9</sup> That diversity was under threat due to the efforts of business and political leaders to redevelop traditionally working-class and immigrant neighborhoods to appeal to new white-collar migrants to the city, who were drawn by the continuing growth of the financial and services sectors. However, the ties that neighborhood residents developed based on the cultural and class experiences they had in common led to a number of successful opposition campaigns to downtown interests throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Liberal and sometimes radical neighborhood politics and coalitions based on common goals, such as opposing the demolition of existing buildings and having a say in the allocation of public funds for infrastructure projects, were key components of the city's famously fractious municipal politics. It was in this landscape that Eureka Valley transformed from a white, working-class, Irish American neighborhood—dominated by families during the day and dive bar patrons at night—to a white, gay, middle-class mecca: the Castro.

The emergence of a gay residential neighborhood in Eureka Valley followed the countercultural youth movements of the late 1960s. Between 1966 and 1970, free love culture and anticonsumerism attracted many new sexual migrants to the San Francisco Bay Area, who congregated in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood adjacent to Golden Gate Park. Some settled in communal houses in Berkeley and Oakland, but even when the newcomers did not live in Haight-Ashbury, they tended to congregate there.<sup>11</sup> An alternative bar scene, including a small gay bar contingent, grew

# SAN FRANCISCO NEIGHBORHOODS



MAP 2. San Francisco neighborhoods with historical locations of gay and lesbian businesses. Demographic information based on data from the 1980 census. Sources: Brian J. Godfrey, *Neighborhoods in Transition: The Making of San Francisco's Ethnic and Nonconformist Communities* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1988); Jay Barmann and Mike Stabile, "Behold: A Map of San Francisco's Lost Gay Bars," *SFist*, published online April 11, 2013, accessed March 5, 2023, [https://sfist.com/2013/04/11/a\\_map\\_of\\_san\\_franciscos\\_lost\\_gay\\_ba/](https://sfist.com/2013/04/11/a_map_of_san_franciscos_lost_gay_ba/). © Gabriel Gonzalez & Stathis G. Yeros.



in the area. (The free love culture, though not explicitly associated with homosexual social and sexual relationships, led some hippies to view homosexuality through the lens of bodily pleasure and included homosexual/bisexual relationships.)

Just over the hill from Haight-Ashbury and southwest of downtown was Eureka Valley, nestled between Corona and Dolores Heights. In 1960 it was packed with rows of two- and three-story flats and single-family homes with narrow front porches reached by sets of stairs from generously sized sidewalks. The center of the neighborhood's social life for the predominantly working-class Irish residents was the Most Holy Redeemer Church on Eighteenth Street. Castro Street runs through Eureka, jutting diagonally off Market Street. The section between Market and Nineteenth Streets, two blocks from Most Holy Redeemer, served as the neighborhood's commercial corridor. Typical for neighborhoods in this part of the city, including adjacent Haight-Ashbury and the Mission, most buildings were built between 1850 and 1915 following one of the styles associated with the Victorian building type. At the time of their construction, modest interiors hid behind ornate facades decorated with wood and stucco details.<sup>12</sup> Many had small backyards adjoining neighboring properties that functioned as extra spaces, augmenting the narrow typical floorplans' footprint. Backyards and front stoops were also spaces for social interaction with neighbors.

By 1970 most buildings in areas west of downtown built in the late 1800s showed signs of aging. These neighborhoods were home to predominantly blue-collar residents. As San Francisco's economy increasingly focused on banking, commerce, and tourism, the lack of well-paid jobs available to these residents forced many to leave the city. The constant fear of housing demolitions in the name of urban renewal added to this exodus. Eureka Valley's white working- and middle-class population was similar to neighboring Haight-Ashbury before 1966.<sup>13</sup> The arrival of hippies, which attracted much local and national media attention, had changed the patterns of everyday life in that neighborhood. Young people's tools to construct hippie experimental social structures ranged from unconventional androgynous fashion to consciousness-altering drugs like LSD.<sup>14</sup> City administrators, the police, and older residents did not take well to the newcomers and sought to contain them within a few streets, effectively branding them as deviant and their environment as dangerous.<sup>15</sup> The Haight-Ashbury property market went down accordingly. This change became a cautionary tale for Eureka Valley residents, who were warned by news reports of an impending "hippie takeover."<sup>16</sup> Some residents chose to sell their properties at what they considered advantageous prices in the late 1960s and relocate to suburbs and exurbs.<sup>17</sup>

The cheap rents that resulted from this out-migration and Eureka Valley's physical environment of Victorian homes and dive bars appealed to some gay hippies, who intended to make a fresh start by fleeing the deteriorating living conditions of Haight-Ashbury and the constant police harassment there.<sup>18</sup> By 1970 a sizable number of businesses catering to gay men had opened in Eureka Valley. Gay men

began to patronize a local bathhouse, much to the dismay of its longtime patrons. The oldest gay bar in the neighborhood, the Missouri Mule, had already been in operation for seven years. The name Castro Village was introduced to differentiate the two blocks of Castro Street, where these businesses were located, from the rest of Eureka Valley.

### IMAGINING THE CASTRO

In 1970 three other neighborhoods, Polk Gulch, the Miracle Mile, and the Tenderloin, had already well-established reputations as gay areas. Polk Gulch, on Nob Hill near the Tenderloin, was predominantly associated with middle-class gay sociality, and the neighborhood supported a small commercial strip with businesses catering to gay shoppers.<sup>19</sup> The Miracle Mile on Folsom Street between Fifth and Thirteenth Streets, on the other hand, was associated with leather sexuality and gay and lesbian sexual experimentation.<sup>20</sup> Both areas had a metropolitan air. Homosexual men and, to a lesser extent, women went there to socialize and have sex but rarely relocated to these areas.<sup>21</sup> The Tenderloin, with its diverse gay youth culture and early transgender rights activism, was home to a sizable queer population, but it was still considered a transitional environment. The urban fragmentation of sexual cultures often made gays and lesbians vulnerable to the reactionary response by the police, who regarded their growing public visibility antagonistically. As a result, police arrests on charges of public sex, often on dubious grounds, and extortion increased at the turn of the 1960s. In 1971 San Francisco police arrested an estimated 2,800 gay men, compared to thirty-six such arrests in New York City that year.<sup>22</sup>

Compared to the other gay areas, Castro Village developed a decidedly non-metropolitan image as a safe residential neighborhood, referencing village life in its name and in representations of its built environment. An illustration in the *Bay Area Reporter (BAR)* in September 1971 marks the first time that the name Castro Village was used in a local publication to denote a gay neighborhood (fig. 6).<sup>23</sup> *BAR* was a bimonthly gay and lesbian newspaper established in 1971 to cover news and provide cultural, political, and social commentary. It had the broadest distribution of Bay Area gay and lesbian newspapers in the 1970s and 1980s and became a publication of record for the LGBTQ+ movement. The illustration of Castro Village in *BAR* rendered the street as a fairytale scene. It included caricatured depictions of only a handful of buildings, all of them freestanding—not the case in real life—and some of them completely reimagined as embodiments of their namesake. For example, Toad Hall, a well-known gay dive bar, was depicted as a hobbit house in the form of a mushroom, complete with a smiling toad on the roof. These landmarks (some not featured in the illustration) included two more gay bars, the Missouri Mule and Midnight Sun, and several businesses that an outside observer would not associate exclusively with gay sociality: Jaguar Books, Alexander's Framing, Ryderwood Antiques, and Flowers Inc., among others.



The association of Castro with village life fits into the long-standing pattern of neighborhood life in San Francisco organized by ethnicity. Everyday life in Irish American, Central American, and Chinese American neighborhoods, among others, was organized around distinct cultural traits expressed, for example, in street life, neighborhood commerce, religious ceremonies, and other festivals.<sup>26</sup> In the San Francisco Bay, social bonds forged through shared cultures at the level of neighborhoods influenced local politics and regional planning after World War II, as residents formed neighborhood associations and competed for local development grants.<sup>27</sup> The creation of a shared gay culture in the Castro was similar. A distinct form of street life, specialized businesses, and annual festivals, including the Castro Street Fair and Halloween, celebrated this culture. There was also a neighborhood landmark, the Castro Theater, one of the few remaining film palaces in San Francisco, built in 1922, with an ornate facade, a large vertical neon sign, and a prominent marquee on Castro Street. Its grand hall, besides showing a curated lineup of classic and gay-themed films, functioned as a community hall for live events—and eventually became the main location of the San Francisco International LGBTQ+ Film Festival, which started in 1977 as the Gay Film Festival of Super 8 Films.<sup>28</sup>

Changes in the programming of existing buildings, besides the Castro Theater and bars, extended to the domestic architecture that supported gay and lesbian everyday lives and contributed to a collective reimagination of traditional heterosexual social structures. As gays and lesbians moved into Victorian family homes—their architecture historically associated with compulsive heterosexuality—they appropriated and meaningfully altered the buildings' use and symbolism. Cohabitation in Castro Victorians and their alterations informed expressions of gay culture and urban life in the 1970s. Sexual relationships with many partners were the norm, but there were also social rules about how to navigate intimacy while cohabiting, for example, avoiding romantic relationships among people in the same friend circle, especially when they lived together. Gay men renovated Victorian home interiors, added partitions, and altered their aesthetics to suit new structures of intimate and social life.

Richard Rodriguez's autobiographical essay "Late Victorians," a sensitive account of the loss wrought by the AIDS epidemic published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1990, assesses gay culture's contributions to urban life—particularly in the Castro—from 1970 to 1985. Rodriguez writes about gay identity, cultural Catholicism, bodybuilding, gay-bashing, and the tragic banality of death during the AIDS epidemic in the final years of this period, with architecture playing a significant role. Rodriguez, who had lived in San Francisco since the 1970s, writes early on that he inhabits "a tall Victorian house that has been converted to four apartments; four single men."<sup>29</sup> The interior of that apartment appears several times in the essay, a kind of center from which the meandering narrative runs, each time, in a different direction. Victorians, he noted, are associated with domesticity, and

their appropriation by gays and lesbians was a way to subvert traditional notions of the family:

Two decades ago, some of the least expensive sections of San Francisco were wooden Victorian sections. It was thus a coincidence of the market that gay men found themselves living with the architectural metaphor for family. No other American imagination is more evocative of the family than the Victorian house. In those same years—the 1970s—and within those same Victorian houses, homosexuals were living rebellious lives to challenge the foundations of domesticity.<sup>30</sup>

Rodriguez continued by uncritically reproducing the somewhat reductive view of gay men as purveyors of good taste in interior decoration. He argued that this stereotype has followed gay men since the Renaissance because of their need to subvert the “natural order” of procreational sex, surviving “in plumage, in lampshades, sonnets, musical comedy, culture, syntax, religious ceremony, opera, lacquer, irony.”<sup>31</sup> For Rodriguez, it followed that reclaiming the family house and the family-oriented neighborhood with or without “plumage” politicized the relationship of gays to physical space and defined their political liberation in San Francisco. He thereby gave new meaning to the old stereotype. His two-room unit at the southern end of a Victorian home was a case in point. More than a sanctuary for the author, whose description emphasized the palimpsestic accumulation of decorative accents that evoked previous uses, the unit was an example of the typology’s built-in capacity to accommodate more than traditional families under one roof.

In a typical Victorian flat like Rodriguez’s, rooms were arranged in a row along a six-foot corridor that occupied one side of the building (fig. 7). The corridor was wide enough to accommodate a narrow staircase, usually near the entrance. Small rooms for the toilet and handwashing station, and closets along the corridor, left about three feet for circulation. Usually, a basement created the need for a short flight of stairs from the sidewalk to the main entrance. The backside of the building often opened to a small backyard. Buildings up to three stories were often divided into single-floor flats. The only difference from Victorian single-family homes was that buildings with flats had up to four entrances to the street with independent access to each flat. The architectural element that defined the design of Victorian homes was the bay window, resulting from early builders’ attempts to maximize the amount of light that went into street-facing rooms. Bay windows also augmented the space of the front room and gave it a more public presence by extending ever so slightly into the street. They were often decorated with ornate motifs and intricate woodwork that offered opportunities for customization.

The typical room layout, though lacking public symbolism, was equally a distinguishing architectural feature of this typology. The layout’s built-in flexibility contributed to reinventing Victorians as exemplary of gay domesticity in the 1970s. The serial layout allowed each room to open into another or be separated with partitions.<sup>32</sup> Rodriguez’s room, for example, had an internal window that resulted



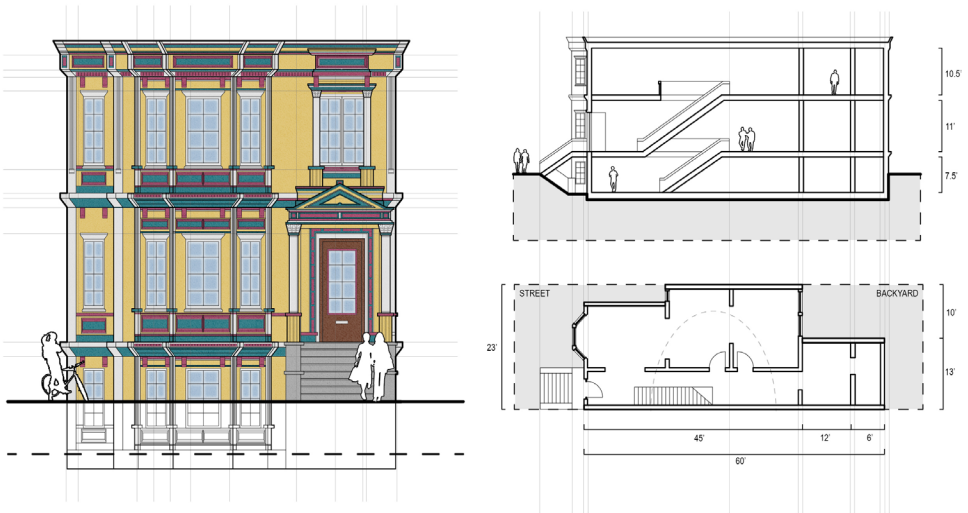


FIGURE 7. Spatial arrangement of rooms and stairs in a typical Victorian home for a narrow San Francisco lot based on Moudon, *Built for Change*. This flat typology, originally devised to house nuclear families, was reimagined for queer use. © Gabriel Gonzalez & Stathis G. Yeros.

from the conversion of a dining room to a bedroom. In addition, the rooms in the middle ordinarily would be considered annexes to the rooms on either end. However, because they received light and ventilation through narrow light wells, they offered a degree of independence and privacy to their occupants. All that allowed residents to adapt Victorian homes for nontraditional forms of communal living. These included mainly groups of friends living together, who usually did not have sexual relationships inside the “household,” or sometimes more traditional arrangements when a committed gay couple who owned or rented a flat offered one or more rooms to gay subletters.

In the context of the Castro’s queered landscape, Victorian adaptations also demonstrate the reciprocity between the public space of the neighborhood and the private space of reimagined domesticity. The rise of the gay neighborhood and the strength of cultural bonds that developed there mapped onto the Victorian flat layout, and the other way around: nontraditional kinship structures informed gay socializing and how sexual cultures moved among the bedroom, the sidewalk, the bar, and the bathhouse. This does not mean that all gay men participated in public sexual cultures, but that the meaning of privacy and individuality must be squared with the publicness of those cultures. The latter were marked by the rejection of mainstream inhibitions with sexual experimentation and social use of recreational drugs, mainly marijuana and methamphetamine. It was not uncommon to design and equip bedrooms with furniture and equipment to enhance sexual pleasure. This culture expanded to sidewalks, where men could socialize shirtless,



to some beaches where naked sunbathing was the norm, and to public parks where one could seek casual encounters with other individuals or groups, without much fear for police retribution after the mid-1970s. The wooded section of Yerba Buena Park, for example, was a well-known site for sex in public and it was the subject of heated debates in conservative media coverage.<sup>33</sup>

During this time, the success of Victorian home renovations changed the character of the Castro yet again. In 1970 there were 16,000 Victorians in San Francisco, down from as many as 48,000 in 1915.<sup>34</sup> Most of them were not immediately recognizable, because many owners had renovated the aging exteriors using surplus industrial paint and asbestos shingles to cover façade woodwork during World War II. As new renters and a few homeowners began renovating Victorians in Haight-Ashbury around 1967, followed by the Castro, Nob Hill, and the Mission in the next decade, they gradually became desirable places to live and to invest. As a result, a disparity emerged between the actual rent of flats and the potential rent that owners could accrue.<sup>35</sup>

Although building renovations began as an ad hoc effort often spearheaded by renters with paint buckets but no financial assistance, more organized preservation efforts of Victorian buildings had emerged already in the early 1960s. For example, residents in the neighborhood around Alamo Square, not far from the Castro, organized a neighborhood association during that time to oppose the demolition of old Victorians. San Francisco planning was undertaking a broad urban rehabilitation program that aimed to replace old buildings with modern apartments in poor areas, which had already led to the demolition of entire sections of the predominantly black neighborhood of the Fillmore.<sup>36</sup> The Alamo Square Neighborhood Association was spearheaded by a group of gay men who individually renovated a few Victorian buildings around the square and, after organizing with their nongay neighbors, received funding from the Federally Assisted Code Enforcement Program to help improve the neighborhood's physical infrastructure.<sup>37</sup> In the 1970s the neighborhood association successfully sought to designate the area an historic district. The campaign was not without pushback. Absentee landlords and building owners who did not want government interference in how they maintained their buildings had to be convinced. The winning argument was usually financial, as historic preservation in the 1970s and 1980s became an engine for what planners called "inner-city revitalization."

At first, most San Franciscans saw the colorful renovation of Victorians as a whimsical New Age fancy reflecting their occupants' nontraditional lifestyles. As the treasurer of the organization for the Alamo Square Historic District designation explained, their fundraising methods were part of the "gay" 1970s: "Holding a porno night at my place was one of the ways we raised funds for the project. One of my neighbors at the time produced quite a lot of still and movie porn, so it was a rousing success."<sup>38</sup> However, what started as a symbol of nonconformity became a stylistic trend distanced from its countercultural symbolism. *Painted Ladies*,

a handsomely illustrated architectural guidebook published in 1978, showcased 108 Victorians categorized by style and neighborhood. It documented the transformation of San Franciscans' attitudes toward Victorians and the renovations' centrality in discourses about architectural preservation.<sup>39</sup> The book, which led to the publication of three sequels in the span of the next twenty years, gained popularity among residents renovating their homes, but also with nonresidents curious to learn how the social and art movements of the 1960s had changed the famously liberal city's physical environment. Martha Asten, a longtime owner of Cliff's Variety, a Castro hardware store that many residents relied on for building supplies, credited *Painted Ladies* with an increase in paint sales and Victorian plaster and wooden decorative accents that became widely available in San Francisco hardware stores.<sup>40</sup>

One of the latent themes in *Painted Ladies* was that renovations restored a sense of "dignity" and "respectability" to Victorian homes, in the authors' words.<sup>41</sup> A reviewer of the book in the *American Art Journal* put it in even more dramatic terms, exclaiming that "the authors remind us of the many abuses launched against the venerable structures: the systematic destruction of entire blocks of Victorian homes; the rape of the cast iron decorations for scrap in the World Wars; and the tampering with the original surfaces of the building."<sup>42</sup> Placing the buildings in a moralizing discourse, this reviewer put those involved with their restoration in the position of saviors. In a historical inversion, the Victorian iconography associated with family life for over one hundred years was being "restored" not only by nostalgic heterosexual homeowners but also by many gays and lesbians eager to reimagine ways of inhabiting them by rescripting their interiors. The countercultural origins and methods of achieving this rescripting notwithstanding, developer-led urban renewal capitalized on the desirability of renovated, formerly poor, and often black or immigrant Victorian sections of the city.<sup>43</sup> This was true for many San Francisco neighborhoods and was particularly acute in the Castro, where wealthy new homeowners gradually led to the neighborhood's economic and cultural gentrification.<sup>44</sup> Even Harvey Milk, the Castro activist politician who eventually symbolized gay neighborhood politics, moved from his Castro apartment to another space on Market Street due to rent increases a few months before his assassination in 1978.<sup>45</sup>

#### THE POLITICS OF URBAN VISIBILITY

The difference between the Castro and other residential neighborhoods where gay people lived was that the latter represented the novel idea that gay visibility within San Francisco could be used as a political tool more effectively when it fit the established life-patterns of traditional ethnic neighborhoods that dominated the city's social and political life. In 1970 the Society for Individual Rights (SIR) was the largest gay and lesbian political organization in the city and the region.

Its magazine, *Vector*, had national distribution. SIR had already identified two main pillars for successful political organizing. Its leadership fostered solidarity among gays and lesbians by highlighting shared experiences of oppression, such as work discrimination and police harassment, and formed coalitions with other organized groups based on specific issues. For example, Jim Foster, SIR's president in the early 1970s, recognized that the increasing number of gays and lesbians in San Francisco gave them significant political leverage as a voting bloc.<sup>46</sup> SIR used this power to build coalitions with sympathetic heterosexual audiences to achieve their political demands incrementally. At the dawn of the 1970s, after a decade of building the foundations of a single-issue political movement defending the rights of homosexual men and women as US citizens that largely downplayed sexuality in public discourse, the organization began cautiously employing public rhetoric of gay empowerment and pride. This rhetoric de-emphasized sex and the places where it happened to maintain an "image of respectability," geared toward acceptance by heterosexual allies.<sup>47</sup>

The steady stream of homosexual men and women arriving in San Francisco and other Bay Area cities, especially Berkeley and Oakland between 1964 and the mid-1970s, attracted by their national reputation as countercultural hubs, began to erode the façade of the homophile movement's respectability politics.<sup>48</sup> For many newcomers, going out to gay bars, clubs, and social events and asserting their rights and obligations as homosexual citizens were all essential components of coming out of the proverbial closet. Expressions of gay identity in everyday interactions in the 1970s suggest that coming out was performative rather than deterministic. Coming out did not tend to represent a definitive rupture with an earlier period of the closet. Instead, it was a staging of gay social life in public that continuously rearticulated the logic of the closet in creating admissions criteria for participation in dominant forms of gay public social life. The visibility of this social life invited a great deal of scrutiny. Instrumentalizing the political act of coming out produced contradictory manifestations of public homosexuality that oscillated between asserting cultural differences and advocating mainstream assimilation. Moreover, living in the Bay Area, participating in San Francisco's gay nightlife, and coming out politically as a distinct constituency fed into each other. The arc of political debates in the gay press shows an ideological shift during the 1970s, linking gay rights with openness and visibility. However, in practice, this visibility was selective and overwhelmingly benefited young white men, while transgender people, lesbians, black, Latinx, and Asian/Pacific Islander queers occupied spaces at the margins of public gay cultures. This dynamic has defined Castro politics from 1970 until the present.<sup>49</sup>

By 1970 public homosexuality was more or less defining Castro politics, and Harvey Milk's career seemed to embody that turn. Milk was one of the key proponents of coming out as a political stance. Elected to the Board of Supervisors in 1977, he is considered the first openly gay elected official and, after his assassination

the next year, became a global symbol for gay liberation.<sup>50</sup> He had moved to the Castro in 1972 with Scott Smith, after living in New York: Milk worked first on Wall Street, with considerable success, and then as a Broadway producer, with less success. They opened a camera store on 575 Castro Street and lived in the apartment above. At the time, Milk was in his early forties and embraced many elements of the Bay Area hippie culture, including its emphasis on communal pooling of resources. The store became a de facto hub for leftist political activities and a place for residents to share resources and information.<sup>51</sup> Milk's talent was his ability to bridge neighborhood politics with the politics of homosexuality and other broad issues, such as environmentalism. He often acted as a kind of grassroots spokesperson for gay men in the Castro and successfully built coalitions with other organized groups. The concentration of gay-owned businesses in the Castro made the political power and demands of gays and lesbians as a social group hard to ignore. Milk rejected SIR's politics of respectability early on: it should not, he believed, be the sole vehicle for gay representation in governmental institutions. Influenced by liberationist rhetoric, Milk invoked parallels with labor unions and black liberation demands, and sometimes directly engaged in union politics.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, he demonstrated that gay and lesbian demands were rooted in distinct social and cultural practices, including nonmainstream ways of living in the city. The Castro was a testing ground for the expression of gay liberation as a set of demands and obligations.

At the turn of the 1970s, Eureka Valley residents considered the opening of gay bars a harbinger of neighborhood change, which the dominant business association, Eureka Valley Merchants Association (EVMA), sought to stave off: they would not accept any openly gay business owners into their ranks.<sup>53</sup> This ostracism led to establishing an alternative business group, the Castro Village Association (CVA), as a rival to EVMA. CVA first appeared in a June 1972 list of associations and business groups published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the city's newspaper of record, as the newest Eureka Valley merchant association that promoted "street fairs and joint advertising schemes."<sup>54</sup> Although there are no further mentions of the association until 1974, it eventually became a vehicle to assert gay merchants as a local economic force. When Milk opened Castro Camera, he approached each of the merchants in the area individually to explain his grievances with EVMA.<sup>55</sup> He eventually became CVA president in 1974. Castro residents and gay political organizers saw Milk's political acumen in full force as he threw himself into building the reputation of CVA as a model for gay organizing in the commercial sector. According to Randy Shilts, Milk's biographer and a journalist for the *Chronicle*, if in 1973 Milk championed the need for political representation by openly gay people, one year later his slogan was that "gays should buy gay."<sup>56</sup>

This did not mean gays and lesbians should only frequent or shop at businesses owned by other gays and lesbians. Instead, CVA sought to leverage the power of

boycotts. For example, Milk brought up the example of African Americans boycotting municipal bus companies to change the practice of segregating them in the back of buses.<sup>57</sup> He argued that their success resulted from the bus companies' economic losses. He did not think this was morally the right reason to change bus company policies (like most social progressives at the time, Milk considered the rights of all disenfranchised minority populations under a framework of human rights), but he considered boycotts necessary steps toward social change.<sup>58</sup> CVA played the role of both an agitator by threatening gay boycotts and a partner for businesses. For example, when Milk decided that the association's reputation would benefit from including the local branch of Hibernia Bank in its roster, he sent a letter to the manager inviting the branch to join, enclosing copies of the deposit slips from CVA members' accounts at the bank. This strategy paid off. Soon, even the business owners who rejected gay and lesbian ways of life saw the economic benefits of welcoming their business.

In August 1974 CVA organized the first Castro Street Fair, which proved the reputation of gays and lesbians as "good for business" by bringing twenty-five thousand people to the neighborhood. The two-block section of Castro Street was closed to vehicular traffic for street performances, dancing, and revelry. The following year, attendance climbed to one hundred thousand.<sup>59</sup> Besides benefiting local businesses, it was also a remarkable annual public demonstration of the city's dominant forms of gay culture. It celebrated the processes of gay and lesbian territorialization, which had resulted in a clearly defined physical area marked by the convergence of businesses, residences, and political organizing. The two blocks of Castro Street between Market and Nineteenth came to symbolize freedom of sexual expression for thousands of residents and visitors. According to novelist Jess Wells, who lived in nearby Duboce Triangle and socialized in the Castro, the entrance to the two-block area was "an imaginary line" that separated the neighborhood where gays and lesbians "were suddenly free to hold hands, confirmed in who [they] were," from the rest of the city.<sup>60</sup>

The crowds at the 1970s street fairs were predominantly young and overwhelmingly white. In fact, throughout the 1970s, Castro residents were approximately 95 percent white: the association with a "village"—as a self-contained, culturally homogeneous social unit—was grounded in reality.<sup>61</sup> Visitors who enlivened Castro's street life throughout the day were more diverse, but it was not uncommon for businesses to exclude potential customers based on race and gender. Bars and clubs often required multiple forms of identification from black and brown people to enter, and some bars were off-limits to women altogether.<sup>62</sup> And while a few nonwhite cultural and political figures were prominent in San Francisco's gay scene of the 1970s—most notably singer, disco performer, and countercultural star Sylvester, who was black—they were exceptions to the rule: in the many photographs of Castro social life that feature him, he is often a singular person of color amidst predominantly white audiences.<sup>63</sup>

There were, however, alternative networks for socializing that black Bay Area residents built. These included parties and other social events held mostly in private residences.<sup>64</sup> Many of these spaces operated under the radar of mainstream gay and lesbian cultures. Moreover, Latinx queers in the Mission faced unique cultural and social obstacles in articulating immigrant homosexual and transgender identities.<sup>65</sup> They created spaces catering to their needs, such as *Esta Noche*, a Latinx gay bar with drag shows that opened in 1979, and literature circles (and later, during the AIDS crisis, programs that catered specifically to Spanish speakers). But these networks and spaces are sparsely documented, a reminder that both the territorialization of homosexuality and, consequently, the pursuit of citizenship during the formative decades for LGBTQ+ politics in the United States was understood primarily as a white phenomenon. Indeed, the visibility of the Castro's predominantly white, male, middle-class gay population shaped mainstream perceptions of gays as a primarily white, male, urban minority.<sup>66</sup>

For the mainstream press and the broader heterosexual public, homosexual visibility during the 1970s was associated not so much with everyday life as with more overtly political events, the premier of which was the annual Gay Pride parade. The San Francisco parade, which began as the Gay Freedom Day to celebrate the anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York, quickly eclipsed all other events in attendance and political symbolism. Its size expanded together with the rise in public visibility of gay and lesbian presence in the city throughout the decade. The first parade took place in Polk Gulch in 1972; in 1975 approximately fifty thousand people marched down Polk Street toward Market with banners and floats, issuing a set of demands to the local and national governments on behalf of gays and lesbians. In 1978 there were over two hundred thousand attendees.<sup>67</sup> Pride organizers aspired to represent the various constituencies that comprised the gay liberation movement. This aspiration was often the subject of bitter debates. For example, some lesbian groups refused to participate in the first few parades, protesting gay male chauvinism and the exclusion of women from leadership positions in the gay movement, which ultimately led to the proliferation of self-organized events by different queer subgroups in the city, such as the Dyke March and later trans-oriented events. Still, the annual late June parade was the main event, a show of political and cultural might for gays and lesbians, and later transgender people, as a distinct constituency. Heterosexual politicians attended, too, and marched alongside community leaders.

In a speech during the 1978 Pride parade, Harvey Milk, who had just been elected supervisor, explicitly linked gay visibility in American society with recognition of gays and lesbians as a minority with unrealized political rights by the federal government. He started his speech with a direct political call: "My name is Harvey Milk—and I want to recruit you. I want to recruit you for the fight to preserve your democracy."<sup>68</sup> For Milk, the pursuit of gay rights was undoing a long history of constitutionalized bigotry and extended to conservative politics



in the United States of the 1970s. He also celebrated coming out as a means of political action:

Gay brothers and sisters, what are you going to do about it? You must come out. Come out to your parents. I know that it is hard and that it will hurt them, but think of how they will hurt you in the voting booth! Come out to your relatives. I know that it is hard and will upset them but think of how they will upset you in the voting booth. Come out to your friends. If indeed, they are your friends. Come out to your neighbors, to your co-workers, to the people who work where you eat and shop. Come out only to the people you know, and who know you. Not to anyone else. But once and for all, break down the myths, destroy the lies and distortions. For your sake. For their sake.<sup>69</sup>

Coming out, in Milk's formulation, was not a singular event, but a way of changing perceptions, and it happened not just via the rhetorical crescendos of *Pride* or the crowds at the Castro Street Fair, but as part of everyday social life.

On November 28, 1978, Supervisor Dan White, an Irish-Catholic former policeman, assassinated Milk and Mayor George Moscone, blaming the two politicians' role in what he perceived as his ouster from the board. The killings' homophobic characteristics were unmistakable. Although White was motivated personally by his ouster and although he did not commit murder in the name of his constituents, he had been elected in a socially conservative district and saw the rise of homosexual urban cultures and their influence in City Hall as a detriment to his priorities.<sup>70</sup> The double assassination riled up the city. Vigils for the two politicians' death brought people to the streets as a form of quiet anti-hate protest at the killings' direct aftermath. White's light sentence one year later prompted a spontaneous eruption of anger in the streets around City Hall known as the White Night Riots of October 14, 1979, that led to vandalism and the burning of police cars at Civic Center. Dianne Feinstein, who was president of the Board of Supervisors, assumed mayoral responsibilities and spearheaded a moderate, conciliatory political response. In the long run, some of Milk's political mentees, such as Cleve Jones and Anne Kronenberg, worked for the state government, where they were also able to influence pro-gay policies.<sup>71</sup>

Public visibility of homosexuality in the city, however, remained a point of contention. The new mayor, who until then had served as supervisor in wealthy, socially conservative Pacific Heights, famously courted the gay vote in the 1979 mayoral race by visiting drag balls and campaigning in the Castro.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, she also sought to appeal to wealthy developers who envisioned the city as a tourist downtown behemoth surrounded by upscale bedroom communities.<sup>73</sup> This vision was antithetical to the boisterous and sexually permissive environment of the Castro and the leather strip of Folsom Street, the two principal gay areas in the city at that time. The economic activity in and around the Castro created synergies between local business and development interests, shaping its legacy as a modern entrepreneurial

neighborhood. San Francisco's tourism, commercial, and real estate sectors capitalized on this legacy and the city became a reference point for measuring the degree to which other cities were progressive by having "out" gay cultures.<sup>74</sup>

### THE CLOSET AND THE GHETTO

The global resonance of Castro Village as a peculiar gay resort with its business association, permanent and part-time residents, and large numbers of visitors, was far greater than what early gay and lesbian residents envisioned. The visibility of gay life in everyday interactions in the Castro and elsewhere also shaped the contours of dominant gay embodiments in San Francisco. Gay men expressed aspects of their social, cultural, and sexual identity by transforming the physical environment. That environment in turn influenced how they expressed multidimensional gay identities in public through fashion, comportment, and social behavior. Castro denizens represented the main characteristics of gay embodiment in the 1970s. Although there were many other ways to embody gender and sexual nonconformity in the city at the time, men in the Castro—young, mostly under thirty, and openly sexual—were the most visible. What had seemed, in the early 1970s, like a close-knit village gave way, by the decade's end, to images of exuberant and demonstrative gay masculinity.<sup>75</sup> In mainstream media, sex eclipsed other activities and provided a concrete example of what it meant to socially come out of the gay closet.

Gay men's exuberant masculinity, freewheeling erotic display, and incipient consumerism in the Castro were not wholly distinct from underlying mechanisms of control and surveillance.<sup>76</sup> Castro denizens were subjected to scrutiny by one another—specifically of their fashion and sexual behavior—and by the media, advertising executives, real estate agents, and eventually governmental institutions. Before this growing audience, the dominant narrative of gay liberation solidified as a story of coming out of the closet and into a legible, homosexual identity. Those who embodied dominant ways of being gay—modeled largely on men in the Castro—were increasingly recognized as deserving national subjects: homosexual citizens. Thereby surveillance was normalized as an invisible power mechanism of the nation-state to control everyday life. This does not mean the structure of society remains the same, as the fights for rights of minorities throughout the twentieth century demonstrate. Rather, the normalization of surveillance shows the state's capacity to absorb those changes while maintaining its ruling legitimacy. Meanwhile, homosexual citizens were subjected to each other's scrutiny about their fashion and sexual behavior. This demonstrates the limitations of breaking out of the closet as a political action.<sup>77</sup> The closet's inside/outside binary logic prescribed proper ways to articulate homosexual identities openly in order to make them politically legible. Paradoxically, the concurrence of coming out and gay territorialization created "gay ghettos," externally and internally monitored enclaves of homosexuality.<sup>78</sup>

In the late 1970s, gay men in San Francisco used the term ghetto to refer to the Castro but not without some trepidations about reductionism.<sup>79</sup> Milk and novelist

and local gay celebrity Armistead Maupin considered this conceptualization of a gay enclave as “a stage in gay development” from which men would eventually “graduate,” even though they were personally uneasy with the racist connotations of urban reformers’ use of the term to justify forced displacement.<sup>80</sup> The dominant model of the urban gay citizen became a type referred to as the gay clone. In San Francisco, the term was associated specifically with the Castro and those who embodied gay hypermasculinity became known as Castro clones. As the name implies, the clone look was a deliberate attempt to reproduce a sociocultural identity through fashion and social behavior as gay embodiment in the laboratory conditions of the Castro. Clone culture, however, was part of urban gay environments around the United States (Greenwich Village in New York offered paradigmatic examples of this culture in the mid- and late 1970s).

Clones were typically young gay men with time to go to the gym and enough money to party. Usually, they were white-collar sexual migrants to the city.<sup>81</sup> The typical clone outfit in the late 1970s consisted of Levi’s blue jeans, leather boots, and a flannel shirt or a simple “muscle” T-shirt for the warmer days. The clothes were tight-fitting to emphasize the wearer’s masculine physique. Jeans were often worn without underwear to better highlight genitals and buttocks, and the top or bottom button was sometimes left undone, signaling sexual availability.<sup>82</sup> Martin Levine, who conducted an ethnographic study of gay clones as a national phenomenon in the late 1970s, argued that clone embodiment, which included fashion as well as the performance of hypermasculinity in everyday interactions, was an urban phenomenon facilitated by the rise of gay neighborhoods. He found that clones operated within a relatively isolated social environment from heterosexual society. They separated their work life from their socializing, frequenting exclusively gay bars, clubs, even restaurants, and traveled to cities where they “fit right in” with local clone culture.<sup>83</sup> This geographic expansiveness demonstrates that cities played a major role in how sexuality became intelligible as a distinct American subculture, with networks that extended beyond a few isolated sites.

Clone embodiment extended beyond fashion and social behavior to how gay men inhabited physical spaces and the aesthetics of those spaces. Many Castro bars and clubs in the 1970s had sexually suggestive names such as Naked Grape (1972–75), Hustle Inn (1976–77), Rear End (1974–76), Purple Pickle (1972–77), Moby Dick (1979–present), and Badlands (1973–2020).<sup>84</sup> Hypermasculinity extended to typical design choices, such as dark walls and furniture, mood lighting, arrangement of furniture for cruising, and sometimes backrooms for casual sex. In private homes, bedrooms sometimes were created as extensions of this sexual environment: walls and ceilings covered with mirrors to enhance visual pleasure during sex, gay erotica, and strategically placed lubricant, sex toys, and drugs to be within quick reach near the bed.<sup>85</sup>

*Gay Semiotics* (1977), a photo-essay by Hal Fischer, illustrates how young gay men in the Castro created a world loaded with sexual meaning that was reflected in their appearance and comportment. Fischer participated as both a member

and critical observer of the gay world that he captured in his photographs (fig. 8). The artist's text overlays commented on the gestures, accessories, and fashion of gay masculine archetypes. Fischer organized his subjects in a taxonomy of different gay types that included the "media persona," the "Western look," and "gay street fashion," among others. He also included an annotated guide of the gestures and strategic use of coded artifacts—such as keys and earrings—that served as a nonverbal communication system. A handkerchief in the left-back pocket, for example, signified that the wearer preferred an active role during sex.

*Gay Semiotics* visualized a gay erotic world predicated on overt masculinity that was conceived precisely as the antithesis of earlier cultural representations of homosexual men as effeminate "dandies" and "pansies."<sup>86</sup> Seen in the context of the changes in the gay urban landscape, mustachioed white men depicted as gay archetypes in Fischer's photographs created a new closet at the very moment they were coming out to mainstream society as homosexual. Gay clone cultures constructed an inside—those who shared the coded language and "butch" aesthetics—and an outside they labeled anachronistic. Still, the visual and gestural signs associated with that inside reflected the clones' mainstream socialization, where hypermasculinity associated with power and working-class aesthetics represented the "tougher" side of that masculine culture (most clones' middle-class lifestyles notwithstanding). Levine argues that "men enacted a hypermasculine sexuality in a way to challenge their stigmatization as failed men."<sup>87</sup> However, as clone cultures matured by the early 1980s, the appropriation of hetero-patriarchal tropes lost its playful subversiveness, solidified exclusions based primarily on looks and sexual prowess, and for some became a straitjacket of gay conformity.

The comparison of two representations of urban gay culture a little over a decade apart reveals the historical shift in dominant gay embodiments and their environments in San Francisco, though both instances of gay self-fashioning reveal the ongoing weight of the closet. The first is a photograph published in *Life* magazine in 1964 as part of the first extensive cover story on gay urban environments in mainstream press. It shows a group of men inside The Toolbox, a leather bar on Folsom Street, in front of a mural by Chuck Arnett. The mural's life-size figures share with the men inside the bar not only an austere sense of fashion but also a confrontational, self-consciously masculine attitude (fig. 9).<sup>88</sup> At the same time, the enactment of this sort of gay scene inside The Toolbox (which was demolished in 1971) projected defiance toward mainstream culture that *Life* readers represented. The gay men in the magazine's pages express their coming out, willing to be publicly identified with spaces that were, themselves, becoming publicly identifiable. Gay spaces now included brick-and-mortar locations that one could search for in the local telephone directory.

The second image, a photograph by Crawford Wayne Barton, shows a group of men crowding a sunny sidewalk during the 1977 Castro Street Fair (fig. 10). Most of them are shirtless, and at least a couple place their hands suggestively on

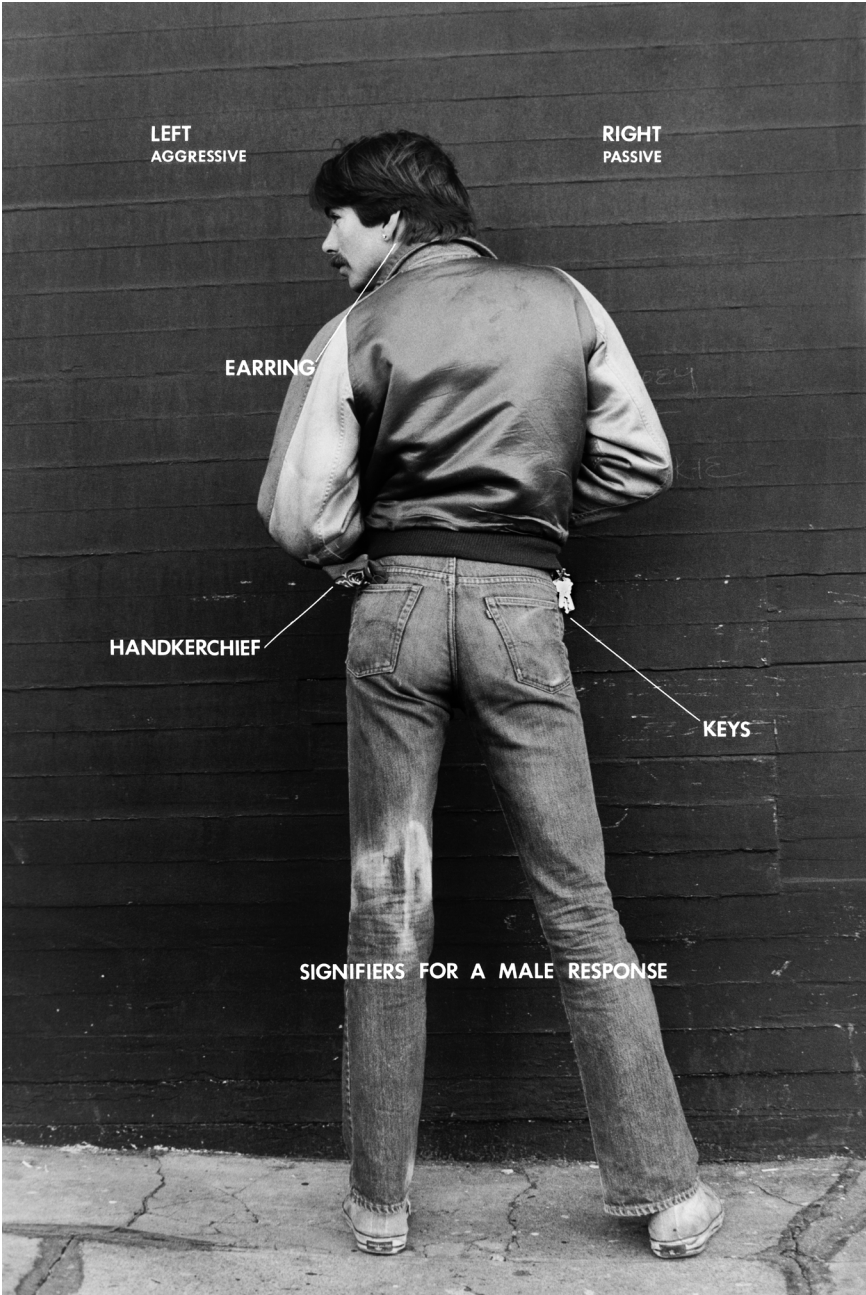


FIGURE 8. Hal Fischer, *Signifiers for a Male Response* from the series *Gay Semiotics*, 1977/2014. Fischer annotated the photograph, explaining the sexual meaning of style elements. Photograph by Hal Fischer. © Hal Fischer.





FIGURE 9. Mural by Chuck Arnett at The Toolbox, a gay bar on Harrison Street, depicting a group of men looking self-assured with upright body postures. The mural appeared in a photograph published in *Life* magazine in June 1964. The bar was demolished in 1971. Photograph by Henri Leleu. Henri Leleu Papers 1997–13. © SF GLBT Historical Society.



FIGURE 10. Crawford Wayne Barton, *Castro Street Fair: Men and Motorcycles*, 1977. Photograph by Crawford Wayne Barton. Crawford Barton Papers, 1993–11. © SF GLBT Historical Society.



the crotches of their jeans and shorts. Few are looking at or talking to each other. Instead, they appear content to be at arm's length from potential sexual exploits, casually posing for onlookers. Compared to the previous image, the men in this photograph were not defensive or confrontational in how they presented themselves as a group but rather self-assured, distant, and aloof. Similar scenes were ubiquitous in photographs and film footage of the neighborhood at the end of the 1970s, working less as disclosure of homosexuality and more as a symbolic break of the distinction between public and private gay cultures. Homosexuality was no longer relegated to cavernous club interiors and private residences.<sup>89</sup> Men on Castro sidewalks were coming out by symbolically extending the private into the public, thus queering the public realm. Beneath the surface of virility and stable gay embodiments, however, lurked vulnerability and indeterminacy. The sense of control of their environment that gay men lining up Castro Street asserted through their gazes has its corollary, that of being watched.

The cultural context of contemporary liberal democracy afforded the inclusion of gay sexual identity as a minority experience within a multicultural social structure that, decades after these photographs were taken, led to such political turning points as gay marriage and open military service.<sup>90</sup> At the same time, inclusion was based on accepting the underlying taxonomic logic of the closet. The embodiment of an ultimately fragile gay masculinity, the transformation of Victorian buildings, and the use of gay visibility in the Castro as political currency reveal gay men's aspirations to shape their own environments by appropriating and subverting the uses and meaning of existing urban spaces. These appropriations demonstrate ambivalent relationships to the logic of the closet, which operates at multiple scales simultaneously: the body, the building, and the city. Strategies of disclosure were shaped by, and thereby maintained, binary structures of social and spatial organization.

Despite prefigurative social experiments in how to live in the city that playfully rescripted public space, gentrification began to take hold of Victorian neighborhoods such as the Castro. This, in conjunction with AIDS, changed the characteristics of gay social life in the following decades. The analysis of Castro social life during the 1970s shows that rights-claims based on sexuality and consumption were paradoxically linked through the performance of new gay social identities and embodiments. These changed the meaning of homosexual urban insurgency from demands for government recognition of homosexuals as a persecuted minority, such as those aiming to alleviate queer youth poverty in the Tenderloin in the late 1960s, to a proactive celebration of gay culture as quintessentially masculine and American.