

Lesbian Feminism and Women's Spaces

In September 1994 a three-day celebration at the Women's Building of the Bay Area in San Francisco's Mission District marked its fifteenth anniversary. The non-profit had just finished paying off the mortgage for the four-story building and the timing coincided with the completion of a new mural dedicated to the modern women's movement, which covered two of its exterior facades. *Maestrapeace*, collaboratively designed and painted by Mujeres Muralistas, had taken approximately one year from planning to completion. It was an exuberant composition of recognizable figures—including poet Audre Lorde, artist Georgia O'Keefe, and indigenous rights advocate Rigoberta Menchú—along with abstract shapes and scenes from everyday women's lives around the globe. The muralists visualized a field of relationships among cultures, geographies, and social movements, engaging in the world-making project that the building's feminist founders had advanced almost two decades before.¹ The warm and sunny weather matched the joyful atmosphere of the festivities. A lineup of local women's bands played on the main stage, and other performances and exhibitions filled the building. As a journalist for a local lesbian magazine put it: "Woman-energy vibes from the building all weekend nearly floated it off the ground!"²

The Women's Building itself symbolized the resilience of the feminist movement in San Francisco during the preceding two-and-a-half decades and the agency of lesbian feminists within it. A feminist organization had transformed the Norwegian American social club that was housed there until 1969 into a cultural center for women's art and performances, while also providing affordable office space for feminist groups and nonprofits. The continuous operation of the Women's Building as a collective throughout those years also demonstrates how the women who inhabited it navigated ideological changes in the feminist movement

in part through their shared interactions in common, physical space. They were members of different generations, ethnicities, races, and classes, and many of them had participated in contentious debates about the political direction of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s, the split among radical and cultural feminists at the turn between the two decades, and the role of lesbian sexuality in shaping cultural feminism.

The organization had begun in the midst of the second-wave feminist movement, rooted in the discontent of women in postwar US society, whose roles were largely limited to being wives and mothers. The 1960s was a turning point for the politicization of women who sought equality in the workplace and participation in public life as full citizens. Feminists, especially in major cities, organized consciousness-raising groups where they empowered each other to overcome barriers to entering public life and achieving economic independence. The radical rethinking of traditional social relationships attracted many lesbians, who joined the feminist movement and transformed it by helping to build lasting institutions in cities and rural areas throughout the United States. In San Francisco and Oakland, a network of feminists and lesbians between the mid-1960s and the mid-1990s connected with one another, in part, by occupying and transforming physical spaces. That included private parties at homes and apartments as well as openly lesbian bars, like the ivy-clad Maud's, which opened in 1966 in San Francisco's Haight neighborhood, as well as lesbian bookstores such as the Information Center Incorporate (ICI) in Oakland and others that opened throughout the Bay Area from Berkeley to San Jose. By 1980 the most visible public lesbian social life in the Bay was concentrated in a three-block section of Valencia Street in the Mission, where a network of spaces included a lesbian club, a women-only bathhouse, a feminist bookstore, a women's travel agency, and the Women's Building, among others.³

The role of lesbians in the Bay Area's urban landscape has not been adequately recognized, in part because of the comparative visibility of gay male spaces in the city throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and in part because lesbian feminism has sometimes been misrecognized as indistinguishable from the broader feminist movement. Lesbian bars were few and far apart in the beginning of the 1970s and many lesbians frequented gay bars, some of which had "lesbian nights." Although many lesbians socialized in the Castro as it became the center of queer public life in the Bay in the 1970s, the neighborhood was associated primarily with an exuberant, performative gay masculinity. Lesbian residential concentrations were also less common—a part of downtown Oakland near ICI was one such rare example—at least until after 1978, when a critical mass of lesbian hangouts opened in San Francisco's Mission and many lesbians moved to the area around Valencia Street between Market and Twenty-Third Streets, giving it the characteristics of a lesbian neighborhood.

Throughout this time lesbian feminist collectives were instrumental in building movement spaces where women debated the intellectual and practical aspects of

how to create a pluralist feminist public. Together, they made decisions about the construction, aesthetics, organization, and use of physical space—decisions that, in turn, shaped the development of feminist identities. And as visions for those identities changed, in response to new ideas about sexuality, intersectional oppression, and gender embodiment, so too did the use of space. Together, the movements for women's and lesbian rights employed various strategies, and asserted philosophical and political justifications, to claim the right to inhabit urban space. They participated in leftist political groups, experimented with anarchism, built urban separatist collectives, and also worked with mainstream organizations and the government to reform their practices toward achieving gender (primarily) and sexual equality. Over three decades since 1970, feminist coalitions built on shared priorities tested feminist theories through insurgent ways of inhabiting the city. These changed over the years along with the assimilation of feminist and lesbian rights into mainstream American citizenship discourse.

PLACELESS IN THEIR STRUGGLES?

The absence of clear lesbian spatial markers in San Francisco in the beginning of the 1980s perhaps explains why urban scholar Manuel Castells argued in 1983 that lesbians in the San Francisco Bay were “placeless” in their struggles.⁴ Castells suggested that women did not have territorial aspirations because they did not concentrate in identifiable areas within the city, establishing instead dispersed interpersonal networks. He described this type of organizing as “more radical” than gay men's territorial presence in urban neighborhoods, presumably because they could subvert heterosexual social life anywhere in the city. At the same time, he argued that the lack of territorial consolidation meant that lesbians were less likely to achieve local power compared to gay men. However, as the story of lesbian social life at bars along with the spaces discussed in the rest of the chapter demonstrates, between 1970 and 1990 lesbians and lesbian feminists did mark their presence in the Bay Area's physical and social landscape, even if their embeddedness within the broader women's movement led them to be misapprehended by outsiders.

Bars frequented by lesbians had been part of San Francisco's bohemian nightlife since the turn of the twentieth century, and some—like Mona's, which operated in various venues from 1933 to 1957—developed reputations as lesbian hangouts.⁵ Many of these venues also became tourist attractions for postwar visitors who wanted to experience a taste of the city's famous counterculture, and were never openly nor exclusively identified as lesbian bars. That changed in 1966, when Rikki Streicher opened Maud's Study on Cole Street in the Haight. Streicher had every intention for Maud's to operate as an openly lesbian bar, and during its twenty-three years of operation, it was, as a journalist for the *San Francisco Chronicle* put it, “an institution—not just a bar but an enchanted meeting ground for a new generation of women.”⁶ Unlike earlier women's bars in the Tenderloin and North

Beach, Maud's was located in the two-block commercial strip of an almost exclusively residential neighborhood.⁷

The space had previously been a dive bar called the Study, with a clear glass window to the street. As Maud's, its façade was covered with a wall of planted ivy that concealed the single large room inside. A long serving bar was decorated with art deco lamps. Round tables occupied part of the floor space, as did a pool table. There was a jukebox, room for dancing, and a small stage for performances and community events. A small back patio provided extra space for quieter socializing. When Maud's opened, it was illegal to employ women behind the bar. As a result, an original crew of sixteen men served the boisterous crowd of women customers until 1971, when the law changed and the first cohort of female bartenders entered Maud's, becoming a staple of lesbian social life throughout the decade.⁸ The bar was primarily a place where women could socialize and find erotic partners, but staff were trained to intervene in the event of any physical or verbal altercation, whether in amorous disputes or when heterosexual men sometimes ventured into the neighborhood bar without knowing it was a lesbian hangout and tried to "pick up" women. Sometimes staff simply had to refuse entry to men.⁹ Like other bars frequented by lesbians and gay men in the city, Maud's operated in a regulatory limbo, being both openly lesbian and having to contend with routine police raids until the early 1970s, when increasing local political power of lesbian and gay organizations put an end to this practice. (A city nondiscrimination ordinance was finally signed into law in 1978.)¹⁰ Until then, the bar had a system: A red light began flashing when police were spotted outside, which warned same-sex dancing partners to split up.

Streicher had moved to San Francisco in 1944. She worked first as an X-ray technician and then managed several restaurants before she came across the available space in the Haight. She decided to pour her energy into transforming it to a social space for lesbians, and gradually built a tight-knit community around it with social gatherings, weekend trips, and athletic events.¹¹ In the 1970s Maud's formed a softball team that competed in the local league. The bar hosted Sunday postgame events and award ceremonies as sports became an important part of Streicher's activities and of socializing at Maud's.¹² While other bars had traditionally gender-conforming dress codes for women, it was important to Streicher that the women who went to Maud's could dress any way they wanted and openly flirt with each other. She kept the bar open every evening throughout the year, a trait she advertised in the gay and lesbian press, so that women who might be excluded from their families and heterosexual circles during holidays always had a place to go. There were annual Christmas and Thanksgiving dinners and New Year parties. Maud's was helping people to connect not only for romantic or sexual purposes but also in service of lesbian public social life.

In the 1980s, however, the success of the gay and lesbian movement in establishing more publicly queer spaces across the city was changing the culture of bars like Maud's. Many younger lesbians were going out to new fashionable clubs in the South of Market area, and a more affluent class of working professionals often

skipped bars altogether in favor of “sober” socializing. By 1989 Maud’s had not made money several years in a row, and Streicher decided to close the bar.¹³ During an anniversary celebration that year, which reminded the women who were once regulars at Maud’s of the bar’s contributions to their own lives and the history of the lesbian movement in San Francisco, Streicher auctioned off bar memorabilia, which found new homes around the Bay.¹⁴ The bar closed soon thereafter.¹⁵ A documentary film, *Last Call at Maud’s*, released in 1993, helped to cement the bar’s place in the history of lesbian spaces in the San Francisco Bay.¹⁶

In December 1978, a full decade before Maud’s closure, Streicher had opened Amelia’s, a dance club on Valencia Street in the Mission, directly across from the neighborhood police station. The location seemed to exemplify how much social and political life had changed: lesbian spaces were no longer hidden from public view. In fact, Valencia Street was becoming for lesbians what the Castro was for gay men. The new lesbian spaces in the Mission did not replace the clubs in the South of Market, but rather demonstrated women’s territorialization at the neighborhood scale. Streicher followed her customers there and Amelia’s became an important site for the open and self-confident lesbian culture that developed in the Mission neighborhood into the 1980s.

Amelia’s (named after aviation pioneer Amelia Earhart, who was the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic and, though not lesbian, was a symbol for women’s emancipation) occupied the ground floor of a two-story commercial building, with an additional floor that could be rented for private events. The interior exuded an air of opulence: a chandelier decorated the main space, where booths lined one of the walls; there was also a dance floor. Amelia’s had a resident DJ, regular parties, and openly celebrated lesbian social life, including at least two lesbian weddings in 1979 and 1980.¹⁷ They were, of course, not legally recognized, but they indicate that the ceremony’s symbolism as a declaration of love and dedication to building long-lasting homosexual relationships was part of lesbian social life several decades before same-sex marriage was protected under California law in 2013. Similar ceremonies between men took place in gay bars, and formal demands for marriage equality in the late 1990s built on the legacy of such events.

Besides weddings, Amelia’s also hosted fundraisers benefiting broader women’s causes. Mayor Dianne Feinstein attended an event in 1980 to present an award and is captured in photographs chatting with Streicher and celebrating with the women who filled the space, a reminder that lesbians and gays had consolidated meaningful influence in the political arena.¹⁸ Amelia’s was also a meeting place for other community events. A group of local gay and lesbian organizers, including Streicher, held meetings at the club to plan the first Gay Games in 1982, an event modeled after the Olympic Games intended for openly gay and lesbian athletes to compete and socialize with each other.¹⁹ To give a sense of its scale, the first Games brought 1,350 participants to San Francisco, a number that doubled four years later, creating the foundations for an international sporting event taking

were explicitly lesbian places to socialize, there were also many lesbians shaping broader feminist organizations. The lesbian and feminist movements were very much entangled in the late 1970s and 1980s. Many downplayed homosexuality in favor of reformist feminist politics, while others overstated separatism.²³ However, neither approach represented the full spectrum of lesbian and bisexual experiences as they existed on the ground. Feminist citizenship discourse often highlighted women's roles as mothers and wives within heterosexual couples, advocating for institutional reforms to better accommodate their rights within these roles.²⁴ Lesbian citizenship demands were not concerned with reproduction and marriage (at least until the late 1990s). They focused, rather, on economic opportunities and participation in the urban and national political arenas. In the spaces that constituted the Bay Area's lesbian feminist landscape women debated these differences, trying to reconcile them in everyday interactions.

SPATIALIZING LESBIAN FEMINISM

Even as distinct lesbian social spaces emerged, lesbian political spaces were mixed up with feminist spaces more broadly due to shared priorities. Feminism has historically been concerned with space as women articulated political claims as sets of emplaced rights, for example the right to inhabit cities equally with men and the right to design their own domestic environments.²⁵ The right to inhabit the American city by contesting the patriarchal norms of urban planning and governance was a precursor and in many ways paralleled gay and lesbian urban social movements for visibility and political representation in the 1960s and 1970s. In both histories, groups articulated their right to urban spaces through different combinations of assimilationist demands such as policy reforms, and insurgencies such as building their own self-organized and self-sufficient spaces.

Since at least the 1820s, Western feminists had been thinking critically about gender and space, particularly the association of women with the "separate sphere" of domestic life and labor.²⁶ In the political realm, agitation and vigorous protests during the first phase of the feminist movement in the United States contributed to many women entering American public life (albeit mostly from wealthy families). Most importantly, these struggles led to the constitutional amendment that gave women the right to vote in 1920. After this landmark achievement feminist political organizing slowed down during the interwar period, but women's mobilization on the homefront during World War II, creating urban gardens and taking up jobs vacated by men, prompted another reckoning with their role in society.²⁷ Nevertheless, postwar suburban development in the 1950s highlighted the resurgence of the nuclear family ideal in which the man, who worked outside the house, was the head of the household and the woman was primarily responsible for childrearing, largely confined to domestic spaces. In that context, the nationwide feminist movement that emerged in the following decades fought for women's rights to

enter the public sphere as equal citizens. In the 1960s and 1970s, so-called second-wave feminist arguments emphasized economic independence and control of women's bodies by decoupling female sexuality from male-dominated cultures. Some second-wave feminists called on women to choose lesbianism as a political position that enables women to emancipate themselves from men's control. Feminists also politicized family planning, especially after the first safe and effective oral contraceptive was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 1960.

During that period, the public sphere became the proper domain of feminist political activism. Feminists organized public demonstrations and set up innovative consciousness-raising groups that included sharing feelings and discussing how to overcome obstacles to achieving personal independence from patriarchal family structures, whether they took place in private residences, bookstores, or cafes.²⁸ Feminist groups also established women's centers, often located on university campuses. Women who participated in those activities rejected traditional domesticity and the division of labor within heterosexual households. Women, for example, advocated for universal childcare and for men to help with everyday domestic tasks such as cleaning and cooking, which required a significant cultural shift in mainstream perceptions of masculinity.

For many lesbians who joined the feminist movement in the 1960s, debates within dominant second-wave feminist organizations, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), did not directly address their quest for alternative social structures outside the heterosexual family.²⁹ As gay liberation gained national attention after 1968, debates about the role of lesbians in feminist political activism reached a boiling point. In 1969 Betty Friedan, NOW's president, commented that lesbians presented a "lavender menace" that threatened to derail the gains of the feminist movement by creating a backlash from heterosexual women.³⁰ The vigorous debate that followed, during which lesbian feminists asserted their presence and contributions to the movement, led to a resolution during NOW's 1971 national meeting that acknowledged lesbian rights as part of the organization's political agenda. The prevailing view was that radical social change could only be achieved by addressing all forms of social discrimination, including advocating for lesbian and gay rights.³¹

Meanwhile, radical feminist groups, influenced by the New Left's anti-establishment ethos, its emphasis on participatory democracy, and rejection of liberalism (as it was expressed by NOW's reformist agenda), started to build their own networks and experimented with cohabitation, the publication of zines and newsletters, and the establishment of urban and rural women-only communities.³² In the San Francisco Bay Area, radical feminists created separatist spaces that excluded not only men but also proxies of heteropatriarchy, such as gendered roles in lesbian relationships. Women collectives also established intentional communities in rural areas along the Pacific Coast, where they experimented with building their own homes and communal structures, dividing labor equitably and practicing

subsistence agriculture.³³ A similar ethos of self-organizing and resource sharing was part of how women built urban networks. They met in private homes, such as pioneer feminist organizers Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon's San Francisco home (now a protected historical landmark), and in a small network of bookstores run by lesbian feminist collectives.

The first lesbian bookstore in the Bay Area—and the second in the country, after Amazon Bookstore in Minneapolis—was Information Center Incorporated (ICI): A Woman's Place. In January 1972 eight lesbian feminist women opened it as a collectively run bookstore in Oakland.³⁴ ICI collective members were already involved with projects organized by the Oakland Gay Women's Liberation and actively sought to create a multiracial lesbian feminist group, placing the bookstore at the nexus of the anti-establishment political and cultural movements of the early 1970s. The collective adopted a nonhierarchical structure based on anarchist principles for its operation. Unlike at many other collectives, its members were solely coworkers: they did not live together or see each other much outside the bookstore, and often didn't see each other at all for long periods of time because of how work shifts were scheduled.

Oakland had a population of a little over 360,000 people in 1970, 40 percent of whom were nonwhite.³⁵ The Black Panther Party had been founded in the city four years earlier, and a legacy of antiracist activism informed the landscape of anti-establishment organizing. In neighboring Berkeley, the University of California campus had been the epicenter of the free speech movement in the mid-1960s, which affirmed the democratic ideals of a generation that grew up after the end of World War II and breathed new life into progressive politics across the United States. The convergence of anticapitalist, antiracist, disability rights (Berkeley was also home to the influential Center for Independent Living, founded in 1972), feminist, and gay-lesbian activism created synergies among diverse collectives that formed in Oakland and Berkeley. The work of many lesbian feminists who lived there led not only to protests and political canvassing but also to breaking down professional barriers. For example, a group of women with carpentry training founded Seven Sisters Construction Company in the mid-1970s, paving the way for women entering the construction industry and fighting for equal pay through union organizing.³⁶ Amidst this rich world of leftist foment, the ICI collective was intended to serve as a physical center where women could find information and resources to aid their struggles against the patriarchal and heterosexual basis of mainstream social institutions. For women who entered the feminist movement in the early 1970s, there was a national network of feminist conferences where they could find out about the latest feminist publications and debate ideas about theory and political action. But there were few opportunities to exchange ideas outside those events. ICI sought to fill that gap.

The eight women of the founding collective knew each other socially and some of them had worked together for a feminist newspaper. When two of the women,

Alice Molloy and Carol Wilson, came across a vacant corner storefront at the intersection of College and Broadway Avenues in a majority residential area north of downtown Oakland, they decided it was the site they were looking for. As the collective explained in an open letter to feminist organizations, aiming to inspire and help them achieve similar goals: "The area is varied with lots of shops and a small college of arts and crafts right across the street." This refers to California College for Arts and Crafts (later the Oakland campus of the California College of Art—CCA). They continued: "We are located by several bus stops, and foot traffic is moderately heavy. Also, a lot of women live in the neighborhood." Presumably the collective referred to lesbians, since neighborhoods are not typically divided by gender. Molloy and Wilson organized the effort to pull together the initial \$800 to secure the space and buy the first, small batch of books.

During the following ten years ICI became a reference point in a transnational network of more than one hundred feminist bookstores.³⁷ The collective not only built an extensive catalogue of feminist books but also shipped them nationally. They worked with small independent presses to bring back into circulation important texts that were out of print, along with offering platforms for new feminist authors. One of these presses, the Women's Press Collective, was adjacent to ICI, demonstrating the close connection between feminist bookstores and the production of new feminist knowledge.

The bookstore's physical space was an essential part of its movement-building mission. ICI's letter to new and aspiring feminist bookstore collectives highlighted what made a successful movement-space. A large bulletin board taking up one of the walls was a central component. They organized the material that they posted on the board under specific categories that included "living situations," "jobs," "services," "rides," "groups," "political actions," and "events." A separate wall was covered with material that women sent to them by mail, including information about new health collectives, new publications, plays, workshops, and therapy sessions, among other topics. Moreover, two sitting areas with sofas and pillows provided spaces for women to meet in small groups or make new chance encounters. The collective referred to the bookstore as a "liberated territory," emphasizing that it offered women opportunities to express and debate ideas without concern for upholding mainstream societal norms. They went on to explain the importance of how women experienced the space as part of its success: "We probably receive more enthusiastic compliments on our 'atmosphere' than we do on our selection of books."³⁸ Within the first five years, as the book collection increased, the collective introduced movable book stacks that they could reconfigure to facilitate larger community events such as poetry readings, musical performances, and lectures.

During ICI's first four years, collective members volunteered to run the bookstore working in shifts, mindful of accommodating each other's outside work schedules and commutes. They divided tasks, such as cataloguing, ordering,

answering mail, and maintaining the bulletin board, based on each member's skills. Daily operations created conflicts that led to some changes in the collective's membership during those years, but there was a stable core of at least seven members until the end of the decade. In 1976 ICI was able to offer salaries for employees, which streamlined bookstore operations, but new sources of conflict emerged in how to run a feminist business that was accountable to anticapitalist and antiracist principles. As a movement space, ICI actively sought to include diverse viewpoints about everyday operations and maintain multiracial membership. Some complained that labor was distributed inequitably, and as reflections on this turbulent decade for both ICI and the US women's movement reveal, women of color collective members accused other members of "white privilege" in being able to navigate institutions of the state more freely and using that privilege to chart broader feminist strategy.³⁹ However, there was no formal process for resolving disagreements, and by the end of the decade significant tensions mainly along racial lines began to create a rift among collective members.

In 1981 the bookstore moved to a larger nearby storefront on Fortieth Street and Broadway Avenue where it had more space for events and could house a much larger collection of books. Around the same time the rift among members widened and accusations of racism within the group created an openly antagonistic environment. The following year, a public split among collective members, a group of whom locked the rest out of the bookstore protesting a culture of political antagonism, led to a year-long arbitration. This in turn led to the incorporation of ICI as a business and the formal transfer of its ownership to a smaller group of former collective members. The restructured bookstore operated from the same location until 1989, when financial difficulties led to its closure. Meanwhile, three of the women who were expelled from the ICI collective in 1982 established Mama Bears, a small feminist bookshop on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, which was in operation until 2003.

Another important movement-space with roots in the ICI collective was *Old Wives' Tales*, a feminist bookstore that lesbian couple Carol Seejay, a former ICI collective member, and Paula Wallace established in 1976 in San Francisco. *Old Wives' Tales* was located on the Valencia Street corridor in the Mission, where a few years later Streicher would open *Amelia's*. In the mid-1970s the majority of Mission residents were Central and South American immigrants who had built cultural spaces and political organizations that contributed to the establishment of a distinct neighborhood identity.⁴⁰ Organizations fighting for immigrant rights, along with literary and artistic circles in the Mission, opposed dominant white culture and the United States' imperialist engagements in Latin America throughout the 1960s and 1970s.⁴¹ In that context, when lesbian feminists first started moving to the Valencia corridor in the mid-1970s, a shared anti-establishment ethos created synergies between long-standing organizations and new lesbian feminist spaces.

For Seejay, *Old Wives' Tales* filled a gap in the anticapitalist and ethnically diverse network of spaces:

We looked for a storefront in the Mission. The boys were all moving into the Castro, but the Mission was what most dykes could afford. And it was important to us to locate the store in an area that made it easily accessible to women of color, to women traveling by public transit, and to dykes and feminists. The intersection of Valencia and 16th Street was a movement nexus: home to the George Jackson Defense Committee, the Tenants Union, Rainbow Grocery (the newest stepchild in the people's food system), the Roxie Cinema, and the Communist Party Bookstore . . . And, for a bonus prize, there was a laundromat next door. Women could come on a Saturday, do their laundry, buy their groceries, browse the store, and buy their books all in one fell swoop.⁴²

Seejay conceptualized *Old Wives' Tales* as a center for lesbian feminist social and political life. She understood the importance of meeting in physical space. *Old Wives' Tales* organized literary events (especially when it briefly annexed an adjacent space in the late 1970s) and regularly distributed up-to-date lists of lesbian and lesbian feminist events taking place around the Bay Area. Seejay also maintained a comprehensive printed list of affiliated spaces and organizations that women could pick up. In 1976 she began writing *Feminist Bookstore News (FBN)*, which started as a newsletter about the state of feminist publishing that she sent to subscribers across the United States. She also forged connections with other bookstore owners and publishers by attending national conferences, such as the Women in Print gatherings. Social networks, she understood, were powerful. When she eventually transferred the lease and business ownership to a small collective that ran *Old Wives' Tales* from 1982 to 1995, she continued to produce *FBN*. The newsletter became a forum for the development of new directions in feminist publishing, employed a group of dedicated lesbian feminist contributors, and maintained an up-to-date list of feminist bookstores in the United States and abroad. By the 1980s the almost fifty-page-long trade publication's wide circulation was not limited to feminist bookstore owners and publishers, demonstrating its reach to a broader literary audience. *FBN* was published every two months until 2000, when a drop in subscribers led production to cease.

Seejay's departure from *Old Wives' Tales* in 1982 followed activist burnout and internal strife within the collective about how to run a nonhierarchical anticapitalist business while engaging in capitalist structures.⁴³ However, unlike public accusations of racism within the ICI collective around the same time that led to the year-long arbitration and some local press coverage, there were no public reports of criticism of the former *Old Wives' Tales* management. Seejay was aware of debates about the underrepresentation of women of color in feminist publishing, which was skewed toward white lesbian feminist voices. These debates informed not only what titles the *Old Wives' Tales* carried but also how bookshelves were organized. The books were organized thematically,

encouraging racial and class mixing within the bookstore rows. Other feminist bookstores chose to organize books in categories that emphasized racial and class differences, but what they all had in common was an active engagement with the institutional basis of racism and other forms of discrimination and a commitment to addressing them directly.

Historian Kristen Hogan has called the thirty-year period of international feminist organizing around the establishment and collective operation of bookstores and independent presses the “feminist bookstore movement.”⁴⁴ This movement was spearheaded by lesbian feminists and lasted from the mid-1970s to the mid-2000s when chain bookstores and online retailers drove most of them out of business. During this period, feminists created networks of mutual support by carving out movement-spaces where they prefigured antiracist and anticapitalist social structures, with all the contradictions that such projects entailed. These ideas were not limited to bookstores. ICI, Old Wives’ Tales, and other individual bookstores functioned as meeting places and feminist resource centers that were integrated within larger urban landscapes of women’s spaces and organizations (though in some smaller cities they were more isolated). In the context of lesbian feminism, the handful of feminist bookstores in the Bay Area played a significant role in how lesbians inhabited the urban public sphere, placing homosexuality within a larger matrix of social oppressions that could not be addressed through single-issue political campaigns.

PLANNING FOR THE WOMEN’S BUILDING

In 1970 a group of five feminists who had met at the First Coalition Women’s Conference the previous year established San Francisco Women’s Centers (SFWC), a nonprofit aiming to provide organizational support to other feminist groups.⁴⁵ The founders, who had previous fundraising experience, realized that the large number of newly formed women’s organizations, affinity groups, and collectivities at the turn of the 1960s often lacked the experience and access to resources that a nonprofit dedicated to those goals could provide. But although SFWC was incorporated as a nonprofit from the beginning, they were not able to raise any funds during the first three years and therefore did not sponsor any projects during that time. This was in part because many activists within the women’s movement and other radical organizations in the early 1970s mistrusted the corporate structure and government oversight of nonprofits. Government investigations—alleged and verified—into the actions of feminist leaders and activist Gloria Steinem’s ties to the CIA that was a subject of much debate in feminist circles fueled this culture of mistrust.⁴⁶

In 1973 Barbara Harwood and Jody Safier, a lesbian couple active in the women’s movement who were not part of the original collective, decided to take over the organization’s empty corporate structure with the founders’ support and attempted to revive it. During the first year they worked from an office in their living room. The plural, “Centers,” deliberately invoked a decentralized network

of women's spaces in the city and, according to Harwood and Safier, foregrounded their priority in building coalitions among women's groups.⁴⁷ The organization intended to operate explicitly behind the scenes, enabling activists to pursue their own goals.⁴⁸ In 1974 they moved to a small office on Brady Street, near Market, where they employed a single intern. SFWC began sponsoring consciousness-raising meetings and information sessions about achieving economic independence, among other initiatives. In 1975 they became a fiscal sponsor for the short-lived Feminist Federal Credit Union of the Bay Area, which provided loans to women's organizations who did not have access to other financial institutions.⁴⁹ SFWC also sponsored the Women's Switchboard, a volunteer-run service providing information about resources for women and local events to callers in English and Spanish. By 1978 SFWC counted almost a thousand contributing members.

The need to move to a larger space that could house more staff was crucial for the organization to grow further. Moreover, two years earlier, SFWC's involvement with planning the national Conference on Women and Violence in San Francisco demonstrated the difficulties with hosting events about women's rights and their sexuality in spaces rented from other nonprofits.⁵⁰ The organizations that SFWC approached to host talks in their spaces had strict rules against political advocacy and were reluctant to open themselves up to regulatory scrutiny. This would ultimately constrain what the women could talk about during conference events. As a result, a group of SFWC members started a campaign to find a space large enough to house offices and host women's events and cultural activities.

The building campaign, which lasted approximately three years, illuminates different views among SFWC members about the political project of feminism and the role of lesbian feminists within it. The idea of establishing a single building as a central convergence point for the feminist movement raised concerns about fixing a particular view of what it meant to be a feminist, thereby formalizing entry criteria and providing grounds for exclusion. Because many of the key organizers were lesbians, one of the concerns was how heterosexual women would view the endeavor and if they would support it. Some SFWC members also worried about allocating the organization's limited funds to a speculative project with uncertain outcomes.⁵¹ Mercilee M. Jenkins, who conducted oral histories with key organizers of the building campaign, dramatized this process in her play *She Rises Like a Building to the Sky*, which demonstrates the fundamental dilemma about claiming physical space that was at the core of these debates:

ANNA: We'll form a Building Collective.

LOUISE: Just what we need, another collective.

ANNA: Tell me why you still don't think it's a good idea.

LOUISE: I just want you to realize the risk we're taking. This is 1979. The 60's are over. Milk and Moscone are dead. Ronald Reagan'll probably be our next President.

ANNA: So what does that mean we should do?

LOUISE: Conserve our resources. Be aware we're not going to have the support we once did. People are already saying the Women's Movement is dead.

ANNA: Is that what you think?

LOUISE: No I don't, but I don't like being declared dead and I know that means something. They wish we were dead and they think they can make us go away.

ANNA: That's why we need a building, so they can't make us go away.⁵²

The building campaign went forward, assisted by a combination of the need for a self-governed space to host feminist events, a broad interest in establishing a symbolic presence for women in the city, and the dedication of a few key organizers with grant-writing and fundraising experience to the project.⁵³ A building committee examined the options of renting or purchasing a space.

In 1978 the idea of women operating a building that would house activist organizations, art, and performances for other women was not altogether new. A group of artists and art teachers, spearheaded by Judy Chicago, had established the Woman's Building in Los Angeles in 1973.⁵⁴ Its name paid tribute to a structure designed by Sophia Hayden for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago to exhibit work by female artists from around the globe, thereby positioning the building and the art in a lineage of feminist spaces and artistic production in the modern era, retrieving them from obscurity within traditional art and architectural histories. The SFWC building campaign organizers looked at the Los Angeles example as a guide, but their own endeavors differed in ownership and operating structure. SFWC's eventual decision to purchase a building was in part responding to the limitations of the operating model of the Los Angeles Woman's Building, which did not own its space and went through several costly moves.⁵⁵

The SFWC building committee came across Dove Hall, a four-story building on Eighteenth Street near Valencia in the Mission, in 1978. Completed in 1910, it had originally housed spaces for gymnastic demonstrations and sports training for members of the Turn Verein, a German American cultural and sporting association. The local German American architect Reinhold Denke designed it, employing characteristic features of the Mission Revival style popular in hotels and other spaces in turn-of-the-century California, such as heavy massing, plain stucco walls, and ornate tile trim. He also introduced Teutonic design elements, such as arched windows, balconies, and a Bavarian door canopy over the main entrance.⁵⁶

In 1935 the Sons and Daughters of Norway purchased the building to use it as a center for the Norwegian immigrant community, but since the 1960s, there was no need for its services any longer, and they started renting out the space to other groups for events. The building had a monumental presence among mid-rise residential apartment buildings on Eighteenth Street. Its interior included a

double-height auditorium with a proscenium stage, a smaller performance space, a commercial kitchen, and a few smaller rooms on the third and fourth floors. The old elevator, electrical fixtures, and other interior details needed repair, but the overall design and interior organization appealed to the women of the SFWC building committee. Mounting a robust fundraising effort, they raised the down payment within six months.⁵⁷ Dovre Hall's purchase was finalized in 1979.

The hall's complete transformation to the Women's Building of the Bay Area took much longer. With ownership, the responsibility for maintenance and improvements fell to SFWC, which began to cultivate a base of private donors that included individual subscribers, institutional support from foundations, and government grants.⁵⁸ They formed a building council that oversaw preparations to welcome the first tenants to the building in May 1979. A core group of fewer than ten women who comprised the space committee organized targeted fundraising for specific, building-related tasks and took on some of the renovations themselves. They organized volunteers to install new carpets, paint rooms, create a space dedicated to childcare, and demolish a wall to bring in natural light to one of the performance spaces. The volunteers worked alongside professionals, who were all women and were hired for specific projects. For example, Seven Sisters Construction Company oversaw the wall demolition. Wonder Women, an electricians' collective, gave electrical advice and extended electrical lines to the basement storage space. The building council also hired a construction specialist to help make the first-floor bathroom wheelchair accessible and advise on the installation of braille signs throughout the building.⁵⁹ The space committee approached Linda Rhodes, an openly lesbian architect and activist, to draft blueprints for the renovations necessary to conform to the city's building code. She also helped to devise ways to house as many women's organizations as possible in the building's 20,000 square feet of usable space.⁶⁰

The costly building campaign put significant pressure on SFWC's finances during the first few years of the building's operation. For a few months in 1979, SFWC could not pay its staff, and relied exclusively on volunteer labor. A combination of cutting operational costs, increased institutional funding, and new revenue from the groups that rented space in the building allowed the organization to balance its budget in 1980.⁶¹ SFWC owned the Women's Building, which was one of its sponsored projects, but did not run day-to-day operations during the first year. Those were the responsibility of building staff. Based on an early pledge by the Women's Building planning committee, at least 50 percent of the building staff were women of color. Because the majority of SFWC staff, who were responsible for strategic planning, were white middle-class women, concerns about institutional racism underlying the relationship between the two entities surfaced during committee meetings. This led the SFWC and the Women's Building to merge in May 1980, creating a more diverse combined staff that shared long-term planning, financial, and operational responsibilities.⁶²

The building council, which included Women's Building staff and tenant representatives, made decisions about rental policies, building improvements, and organized community outreach events collectively. The council's work during the first three years was marked by turning the building into a hub for feminist activities, while addressing broader concerns about racism and class hierarchies within the women's movement (familiar from women's organizing in feminist bookstores during the previous decade). For example, they organized events about unchecked white privilege in feminist organizations, one of which, in 1979, led to actionable items such as planning outreach activities to Latina women in the Mission, learning to speak Spanish, organizing a lecture about African women's heritage, and "using involvement in the Mission as a beginning to involvement in other third world communities and cultures."⁶³ One of the challenges that they faced in day-to-day operations was how to enact pluralism in selecting tenants and allocating space for activities in the building. The list of tenants during the first year included the Coalition for the Medical Rights of Women, the Feminist Media Network, Options for Women over Forty, the SF School of Self-Defense, SF Women Against Rape, Women Library Workers, Wages Due Lesbians, Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media, and Lilith Theater, among others.⁶⁴ Conscious of potential conflicts among tenants with different views about feminist politics, the council organized tenant meetings and informal opportunities, such as potlucks, to socialize with each other and build a culture-in-common within the building.

Allocating space to tenants was a significant part of the building council's role as a political and cultural instigator. Before a substantial renovation in the early 1990s, most of the usable space consisted of conference rooms and event spaces that were designed to meet the needs of the athletic and social club predating the Women's Building. These had to be subdivided into smaller office spaces, often separated only with movable partitions. The council sought to put tenants with perceived affinities in mission near one another to foster opportunities for collaborations (fig. 12).

In the Women's Building's first two years, it was a target of multiple, politically motivated physical attacks. An act of arson on the evening of February 14, 1980, for example, injured a security guard on the first floor, and firefighters had to evacuate a woman from a fourth-floor office window.⁶⁵ The fire destroyed several offices on the third and fourth floors, including the childcare room, which had to be entirely refurbished. It also caused extensive damage to windows, carpets, and lighting fixtures. Only a few months later, bomb threats led the building to implement heightened security measures during events. Nevertheless, an improvised explosive device detonated in front of the main entrance in the early morning of October 8, 1980, when the building was empty.⁶⁶ It destroyed two glass doors and damaged the decorative tile finishes. More bomb threats followed in November and December of the same year.

PRELIMINARY PLANS FOR INITIAL TENANTS

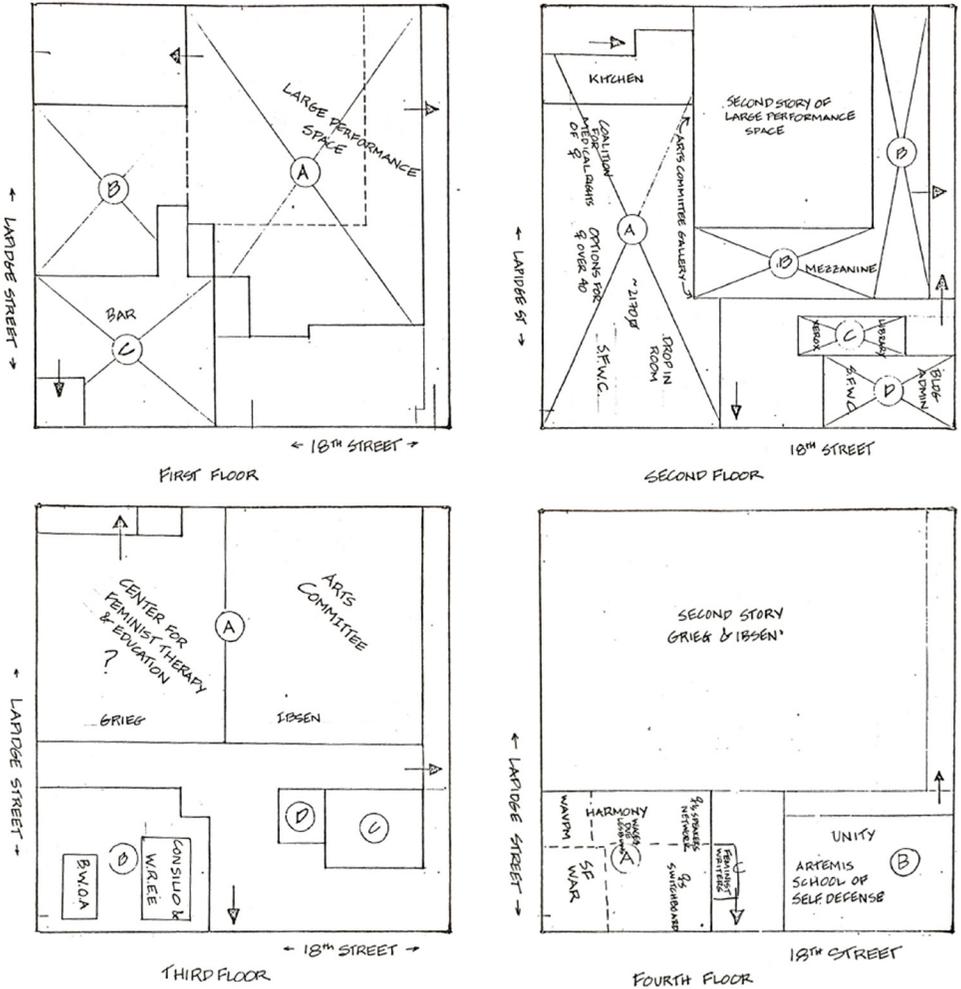


FIGURE 12. Space-allocation diagrams for the initial tenants on the second, third, and fourth floors of the Women's Building, ca. 1979. Women's Building Records 2014-126. © SF GLBT Historical Society.

The building council organized a series of community meetings and attributed the attacks to fringe vigilantes empowered by the rightward shift in national politics.⁶⁷ To address it, they reached out to neighborhood residents and local organizations to form coalitions that would operate on two fronts. They would fight right-wing violence while also addressing police harassment of youth in the streets of the Mission. A brief takeover of the building by Mission youth

in 1979 had tested the organization's relationship to the local community, and the building council sought to demonstrate—and enact—a long-term commitment to the neighborhood.

The Mission had been the core of the city's sizeable Latinx population since the 1960s, politically, culturally, and demographically.⁶⁸ Initially it was home to mostly working-class residents of Central American descent who relocated to the area from other parts of the city and the Bay Area after World War II, as some of the white population who lived there (who were mainly Irish-Americans) left for the city's outer neighborhoods and suburbs. It also became the first stop for Latin American immigrants to the city, many of whom were not documented and therefore do not appear on official population counts. In 1966 Mission residents organized politically to achieve representation and a degree of neighborhood community control over the distribution of War on Poverty funds for the redevelopment of public infrastructure.⁶⁹ Debates about community control over decisions about the Mission's future galvanized a generation of Latinx residents to demand their right to shape the neighborhood based on their own priorities. These included support for renters (who made up most residents), provisions for families, and representation of their diverse cultures in the physical environment.

Early discussions about gentrification—the displacement of working-class residents as wealthier “gentry” moved in—were already underway during city-level debates in the late 1960s about the projected economic activity from the construction of two transit stops in the neighborhood for the planned Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) suburban railway system. Resident activists argued that the example of the redevelopment of other neighborhoods with concentrated racial and ethnic minority populations, such as the Western Addition and South of Market, demonstrated how driving out old residents through housing demolitions, and providing amenities that catered to wealthier new residents, skewed their demographic makeup toward whites.⁷⁰ And they were not wrong in some of their predictions, demonstrated in landlords' attempts to capitalize on redevelopment spurred by the BART stations—despite community control safeguards. During the first three years from 16th Street BART Station's operation in 1972, over 130 fires were reported within a three-block radius, leading to the displacement of hundreds of residents.⁷¹ This was only the beginning of antigentrification fights in the Mission and elsewhere in San Francisco that have lasted until the present.⁷²

In the 1960s and 1970s, tenant rights activism animated a strong grassroots movement with important victories including rent control (capping the percentage a landlord can raise the rent year-to-year) and local government commitments to increase the number of public housing units.⁷³ Except for the construction of some new public housing—a relatively small number compared to those that were demolished in the 1950s and early 1960s—efforts to boost the supply of affordable housing have been thwarted by the new reality of fewer funds for public construction in the 1970s and 1980s. The passing of California Proposition 13 in 1978,

which limited municipal tax revenue from property ownership in the state, further limited the options for city planners to enact social building policies.⁷⁴ Instead, local governments sought to attract tax revenue from a crop of wealthier residents moving in and seeking private funding for neighborhood public infrastructure improvements, which accelerated gentrification.

By the time of the Women's Building opening in 1979, Latinx residents' struggles for their right to inhabit the Mission had resulted in the creation of an oppositional political and cultural consciousness to new white residents and institutions without local community ties. However, this was hardly a homogeneous community, and divisions along national lines pitted immigrants from different Central and South American countries against each other (and led to some gang violence). To address these divisions, Mission community organizers highlighted "La Raza" as a Pan-American cultural identity with roots in Chicano culture that transcended national borders.⁷⁵ Gay and lesbian inclusion in this community was also a controversial subject, though the efforts of GALA (Gay Latino Alliance), the first Latinx gay and lesbian organization in the city that was active from 1975 until 1983, attempted to change that. GALA sought to establish a distinct gay/lesbian Raza identity through political organizing and fundraising. Regular dance parties raised funds not only for gay and lesbian causes but also for broader issues affecting the Latinx community. Notably, although GALA organized at least one fundraiser at Amelia's in the late 1970s, there is no record of any events taking place in the Women's Building.⁷⁶ Instead, they mostly used the American Indian Center on Valencia Street at the opposite end from the Women's Building for fundraisers.

If at first the Women's Building council focused mostly on feminist and lesbian politics, it was clear during the building's first few years of operation that it had to address Mission neighborhood politics. The council led an effort to create programs for Spanish-speaking women and, beginning in January 1982, it was publishing a bilingual edition of its newsletter, and local residents were involved in, and beginning to shape, the building's mission views.

BUILDING IDENTITY

The building's physical presence in the city and its organizational priorities changed over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, reflecting broader changes within the feminist and LGBTQ+ movements. Nonprofits professionalized rapidly in part due to the need to fundraise in the absence of government support. To that end they streamlined their message about equality and increasingly focused on mainstream assimilation, for example by foregrounding demands for women's and LGBTQ+ citizens' rights as American citizens. This assimilationist turn brought to the fore contradictions and inequalities within the two movements. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, lesbian feminist organizations and women's groups creating intentional communities often excluded transgender women.⁷⁷ In the

Bay Area, transgender rights had been actively debated as part of gay liberation since the mid-1960s. There is no evidence in meeting notes and newsletters from 1978 to 1980, two years of heightened organizing activity and changes in the Bay Area women's movement, indicating how Women's Building founders and women involved in the feminist bookstore movement addressed transgender people's presence in these spaces.

Transgender participation in the women's movement and within lesbian feminist organizations was a contentious subject already since the early 1970s, and Women's Building founding organizers, who were active in the lesbian feminist movement, were aware of it despite the lack of written evidence. Nationally, divisions among feminist organizations had formed around the participation of transgender women in the movement already since 1973, when the subject was hotly debated at the West Coast Lesbian Feminist Conference in Los Angeles (the largest gathering of lesbian feminists to date, attended by more than twelve hundred women).⁷⁸ Transgender women's exclusion was linked to the broader exclusion of heteropatriarchal proxies from women's spaces, as some considered transgender women proxies by virtue of having lived part of their lives as men. The exclusion of transgender men, many of whom until then presented as butch lesbians, and of their partners and lovers from environments where they had found community until then, also challenged essentialist conceptualizations of "woman" as a natural, prediscursive identity.⁷⁹ There was hardly a unified view on this matter, nor on the a priori exclusion of all men from feminist public events. Some political separatists, lesbian feminists among them, constructed visions of women's spaces and territories with ethnocentric characteristics.⁸⁰ Jill Johnston's influential book *Lesbian Nation*, published in 1973, offered theoretical justification for such visions.⁸¹ This often led to cultural insularity, with women's spaces either forming "liberated spaces," such as the ICI collective, or rejecting urban life altogether in favor of forming rural experimental communities. The Women's Building entered those debates and was shaped by them.

During planning for the Women's Building, the first major decision that the building council had to make collectively was about the presence of men. The majority favored excluding men as a symbolic prerequisite for operating a building for and by women. However, some countered that the organization would have more support for their demands, including more fundraising potential, if they had an open-door policy for allies.⁸² The decision to let men attend events in the building but to rent space only to women's organizations was a compromise. Building proposals and reports sent to donors streamlined the narrative and presented the organization as a group of women seeking cultural representation, social inclusion, and opportunities to become "equal, productive citizens."⁸³

A 1979 building proposal that was likely used for fundraising highlighted the building's central location and accessibility by public transit to argue that it would provide a space for women from all over the Bay Area to "build skills to become

economically and emotionally self-supporting and responsible.”⁸⁴ A core part of the mission was to enable dialogues among organizations that provided practical support, advice, and training. Another goal was to assist women artists to create and show their work in the building. The confluence of uses would enable women to “develop a distinct woman’s identity.”⁸⁵ The authors presented women as an interest group to make their demands legible to government and institutional funders that included the Hewlett and Cowell foundations. The merits of interest group pluralism within multicultural democracies such as the United States were actively debated in the political arena of the 1970s and presenting the organization’s work within that framework would have resonated with a broad political base.⁸⁶

The political success of interest groups relies on the processes and outcomes of collective decision-making to uphold the principles of participatory democracy. The situated politics expressed in debates in and about the Women’s Building reveals how everyday life and decisions about physical space complicate the abstract vision of an egalitarian society that celebrates social and cultural differences. If the campaign for the building is understood as a form of insurgency at the scale of the city, this insurgency is already historically embedded within inegalitarian logics of interest group pluralism. For example, the historical marginalization of minorities due to race, class, or ability led to their underrepresentation in political discourse and public space. Rather than supplanting these logics by declaring the Women’s Building a liberated territory, the building council acknowledged their social effects and asked how everyday habitation by a diverse group of people could create opportunities for coalition-building.

The 1979 building proposal asserted that equality would be achieved by establishing a space for women to be with each other while recognizing that it operated within the constraints of mainstream society and urbanity:

An essential step in moving into the mainstream and becoming a productive member of society is by participating in activities that enhance one’s self-concept of identity. Women must gain a sense of their identity as women before becoming contributing community members. As immigrants coming to this country needed a neighborhood base for ethnic and personal support, and as Black Americans needed to establish a feeling of pride, self-respect, and identity as part of a Black community, so too do women need such opportunities.⁸⁷

The authors of the building proposal sketched out the central tenets of building a collective woman’s identity. They described community as a social subgroup that required active contributions rather than mere passive membership. They also argued that women’s cultural identity was analogous to the experiences of immigrants and people of color (an analogy that seems, unfortunately, to flatten ethnic, class, and racial differences within the category of women). Finally, they implicitly suggested that place can shape a person’s identity.

This understanding of a universal woman's identity collapsed meaningful differences among women and certainly did not reflect the view of everyone involved with the building campaign. In fact, universalism's blind spots were intensely debated in newsletters and building council meetings in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Nevertheless, the emphasis on a universal woman's identity in early planning documents explains the curious absence of any mention of homosexuality as one of the types of women's oppression, given that many SFWC members, and certainly many of the women involved with the building campaign, identified as lesbian or bisexual (the planning committee even included a few couples).⁸⁸ When event attendees and women's organizations, who started moving into the building in 1979, brought their own views to the feminist cultures that were forming in and around the building, any monolithic understanding of woman's identity quickly disappeared. In 1980 the building council drafted a new mission statement collectively, acknowledging the need "to provide a women's center where all oppressed people can freely express themselves and work to create a free and non-oppressive society."⁸⁹ The council took over the publication of SFWC's newsletter, which became a forum for the discussion of topics such as indigenous women's rights, black feminism, and disability rights. The newsletter addressed these topics by reporting on the work of the organizations housed in the building. In that sense, the newsletter became an extension of the building as a site of intellectual and political debate.

Over the years, divergent theoretical positions about the feminist movement and women's roles in intimate relationships led to public arguments about what constituted proper uses of the building. In 1980 the building council took a controversial decision to prohibit women police officers from renting space in the building.⁹⁰ Council members debated the topic over two days and decided that the presence of policewomen in uniform in the building violated the organization's purpose to engage women in dialogue and open cultural expression toward the goal of nonoppressive society. They cited police violence in the Mission and against gays and lesbians as reasons to exclude policewomen from the building. Another public controversy concerned the use of space in the building by Samois, a lesbian feminist S/M group. Samois, which was founded in San Francisco in 1978, had approximately ninety members in North America and Europe and intended to host an informational session about the organization during the 1981 Gay Freedom Day for locals and visitors. After a series of meetings with building council members to explain their mission of sexual liberation, Samois rented a space in the Women's Building. However, they were blindsided by a last-minute demand from building staff to provide guarantees that they would not demonstrate violent sexual acts during the event, to which they objected on principle.⁹¹ In the end, the event took place in the building's kitchen, with minimal privacy and frequent interruptions.

Samois communicated their discontent with their treatment at the Women's Building with letters to feminist organizations and contributions to public fora.⁹²

This ignited a larger discussion about lesbian sexuality. Their view of sexual play as a field of possibilities that did not preclude consensual violence was at odds with the antipornography movement at the forefront of feminist activism at the time.⁹³ When Samois applied again the same year to host an event at the building without constraints to the free expression of their ideas, their application was rejected right away. A council member affiliated with Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media threatened to resign if the space was used to “celebrate lesbian sadomasochism,” as she put it.⁹⁴ The Samois controversy raised important questions about how the building council’s decisions shaped a feminist public. By establishing a formal process for access, the council controlled what forms social and cultural expressions feminism could take.

The building’s architectural symbolism—and its subversion—further shaped how feminist cultures were expressed in urban space. Paradoxically, even though the symbolism of converting what was primarily known as the Sons of Norway social club to the Women’s Building can be viewed metaphorically as a gender-transgressive process (by virtue of changing the building’s perceived gender), the building’s new identity followed mainstream logics of binary gender and of what traditionally constitutes architectural merit.⁹⁵ A building proposal drafted at the planning stage stated that preserving the building’s Mission Revival style would provide “a valued service to the neighborhood and the city.”⁹⁶ This framing belies an attempt to legitimize the building’s civic function through a traditional patriarchal framework whereby the intrinsic value of its architecture depended on a style with colonial underpinnings. Moreover, in the early 1980s, council members advocated for the building’s inclusion in the register of the city’s historic landmarks. Their pragmatic argument was that historic landmark designation could result in attracting more funds for renovations, but the designation also created a narrow framework for valuing its historical significance, and in the 1984 affirmative decision there was very little mention of the building’s use for women’s organizations. The landmark designation protected only the building’s exterior features associated with its hybrid Mission Revival style, which were considered permanent and worthy of preservation.⁹⁷ Importantly, this did not extend to what was painted on the exterior walls, which enabled the transformation of the building with feminist iconography in the following decade.

The treatment of the historic facade as a blank canvas created an opening for rescripting the building’s cultural identity with murals. Mission muralism flourished from the late 1960s well into the 1980s as a place-based form of artistic production that allowed Mission residents and new immigrants from Latin America to embed their cultures within the neighborhood’s built environment through a shared representational style associated with “latinidad” that transcends regional differences.⁹⁸ With roots in Chicano culture and references to Pan-American iconography, the artists associated with Mission muralism, under the cultural leadership of La Galería de la Raza, also expressed political critiques

of US engagement in Central America, anti-immigrant policing, and, a little later, gentrification.⁹⁹

The idea of creating a mural that would celebrate the legacy of women political organizers and cultural producers that fit within that tradition was included in a 1980 list of objectives that aimed to “enhance the cultural and aesthetic appeal of the building” toward reaching the goal of cultural and economic self-sufficiency.¹⁰⁰ The transformation of the building’s exterior began in 1983 with Patricia Rodriguez’s *Women’s Contributions* painted on the second floor of the Eighteenth Street façade. The mural depicted Katherine Smith, a Native American activist; Dolores Huerta, a leader in the movement for the rights of farmworkers; Louise Nevelson, a sculptor; Marva Collins, a celebrated African American elementary school teacher; and Polly Bemis, a Chinese American immigrant and homesteader. Although this iconography put the building in dialogue with the international women’s movement, it did not do much to embed it within the cultural traditions of its immediate neighborhood.

The question of how event programming could better represent the cultural traditions of women in the Mission remained part of ongoing outreach efforts. These included, among other efforts, distributing questionnaires to better understand the needs of local women and offering services specifically for immigrants and mothers, whose needs could be different from those of the white middle-class lesbians who made up most of the collective’s early members. By 1990 the neighborhood and the building had meaningfully influenced each other. The 1994 painting of *Maestrapeace*, which replaced *Women’s Contributions*, prefigured new ways to conceptualize the politics of gender and sexuality for a new generation of feminists (figs. 13 and fig. 14).¹⁰¹ While *Women’s Contributions* had reflected the feminist consciousness of the early 1980s, celebrating individual women’s accomplishments, *Maestrapeace* constructed a broader frame for feminist politics celebrating women representing multiple social, cultural, and political movements, especially movements of the Global South. As such, it can be seen as a form of public protest that inserts the building into the Mission’s political muralist tradition. Its creators, *Mujeres Muralistas*, had already demonstrated their commitment to Pan-American cultural ideals, feminist consciousness (they were an all-women group that rejected women artists’ subordination to men in older, traditional artist collectives), and had honed their iconographic references in other Mission murals throughout the 1970s.¹⁰²

The majority of the individual figures depicted were women of color and the geographical scope of women’s accomplishments was global. Over time the organization itself developed stronger ties with the Mission’s Latinx community and the Bay’s lesbian community. This continued after 1996, when the new executive director, Esperanza Macias, who belonged to a younger generation from the original founders and identified as “an out Latina lesbian from Oakland,” spearheaded a new lesbian community center in the building and programming for the “les/bi/trans/dyke community.”

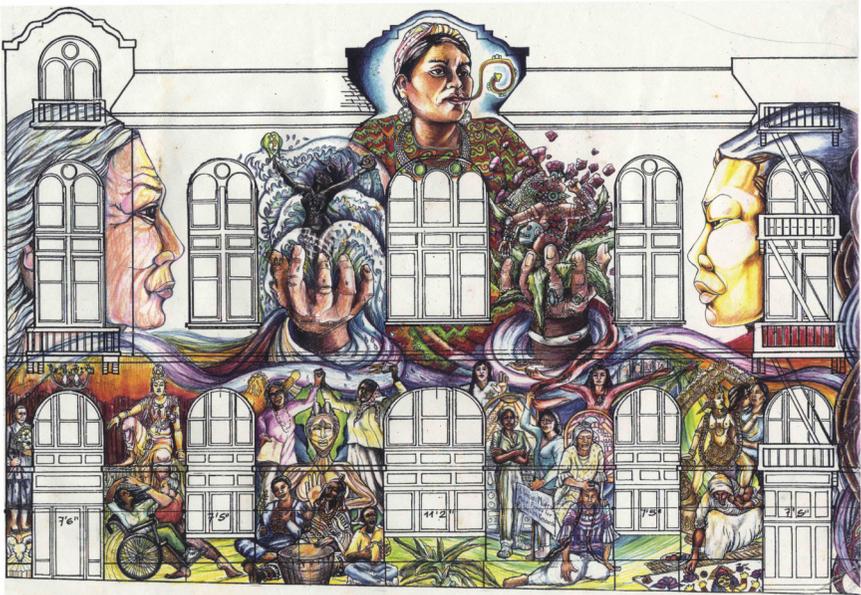


FIGURE 13. Mujeres Muralistas, *Maestrapeace*, sketch for the Women's Building mural, Eighteenth Street façade, ca. 1993. Maestrapeace Artworks Records 2008–50. © SF GLBT Historical Society.

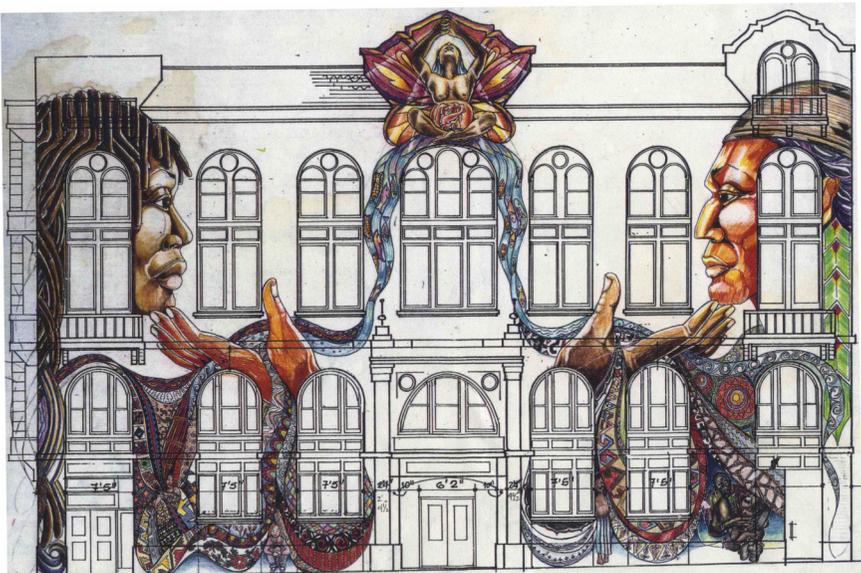


FIGURE 14. Mujeres Muralistas, *Maestrapeace*, sketch for the Women's Building mural, Laidge Street façade, ca. 1993. Maestrapeace Artworks Records 2008–50. © SF GLBT Historical Society.

On the mural, *Mujeres Muralistas* collapsed “abstract space”—the high-level conceptualization of feminist space as a social and political category beyond any single building—into a continuous field of feminist relationships across temporal and geographical boundaries.¹⁰³ In *The Production of Space* Lefebvre argued that the body, with its attendant physicality, sensuality, and sexuality, “can take revenge” on the homogeneity and indoctrination of abstract space.¹⁰⁴ The feminist field that the mural constructed anticipated the intersectional analysis of oppression that transformed feminist and queer thought during the two decades after its completion.¹⁰⁵ Meanwhile, “lived space,” defined as enacted relationships in physical space among women in this case, is bounded by the contingencies of everyday habitation. Representations of feminist space on the mural created opportunities for interpretation, suggesting the possibilities of unexpected kinship among women of different races, classes, and sexual identities. These opportunities were realized (or not) in everyday interactions.

Over decades of active engagement with the needs of Bay Area women to inhabit the urban public sphere as full citizens, economically independent and culturally self-assured, the Women’s Building, along with feminist bookstores in the 1970s, helped to create a particular feminist public. Located in the Mission, where an earlier lesbian public had transformed a three-block portion of Valencia Street into a lesbian territory, the Women’s Building absorbed and was shaped by institutions of lesbian social life in San Francisco. Some of the lesbian feminists who were active in strategic planning and everyday operations at the building had also experienced the successes and failures of the feminist bookstore movement in the 1970s. By testing out theories of sexuality and feminism in everyday interactions and collective decision-making about the meaning and uses of feminist space, women’s spaces built the foundations of coalitions for the right to urban space that have animated queer social movements from the 1990s to the present.