

Living in Queer Times

By the end of the 1990s, the double crises of AIDS and affordability in the San Francisco Bay Area made gay, lesbian, and transgender/gender nonconforming social groups vulnerable to regional economic and cultural changes. Silicon Valley's economic boom in the late 1990s driven by dotcom companies in software, telecom, and networking saw a rapid growth in venture capital funding and new jobs that brought many young, relatively affluent tech-workers to the Bay Area. In San Francisco, the median income increased by 303 percent from 1989 to 2020, compared to a national increase of 133 percent.¹ During the same period, rents in the federal statistical area that includes San Francisco and Oakland rose by 215 percent.² Coupled with urban planning priorities that have historically directed redevelopment funds to neighborhoods around the city center since the 1960s, gentrification changed not only the demographic makeup of old neighborhoods but also their social structure and the cultural sphere.³ The wider Bay Area was not immune to gentrification pressures. Rents in traditionally working-class Oakland began to rise in the new millennium, as people who could not afford San Francisco rents started searching for more affordable places to move, displacing working-class residents, especially those living in majority black and immigrant neighborhoods.⁴

Economic and demographic statistics cannot fully account for how these changes affected LGBTQ+ people in the Bay. As homosexuality became more accepted in the urban public sphere, there were fewer constraints on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people who could afford to move outside the traditional territorial concentrations.⁵ Meanwhile, those most adversely affected by the affordability crisis were further marginalized. Already since 1990 the restructuring of the Bay's urban economies resulted in a diverse landscape of

physical spaces and LGBTQ+ organizations with sometimes competing priorities and tactics for achieving them. Nonprofit organizations that received public funding had to establish formal governing boards and produce detailed impact and spending reports.⁶ The San Francisco AIDS Foundation, for example, which began as a grassroots mobilization of gay rights activists in 1982 to address the immediate needs of people affected by the health crisis in the city, quickly professionalized its operations to secure the support of nongay public and private funders. Foundation support was instrumental for a wide network of health clinics, resource centers, and for several other actions, such as a syringe exchange program to reduce infection risk among intravenous drug users and a safe-sex public information campaign.⁷ Through intense debates and persuasive advocacy, these actions expanded the scope of what was understood to constitute appropriate uses of public funds and improved the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

The foundation's mission to respond to the AIDS crisis aligned with single-issue state and national political organizing by the Human Rights Campaign (established in 1980) and Equality California (established in 1998), among other gay and lesbian nonprofit organizations. By the end of the 1990s, activists organizing with these nonprofits prioritized achieving full assimilation of homosexual citizens within all aspects of social life in the United States. The 2003 Supreme Court decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* that struck down sodomy laws in the United States buoyed demands for social and political assimilation. These demands included gay, lesbian, and transgender access to the traditional heterosexual institutions of marriage and military service that historically fostered patriarchal stereotypes.

Meanwhile, other queer and trans groups criticized single-issue campaigns. They highlighted the multiple forces of oppression that marginalized gay, lesbian, and transgender people, who were disproportionately poor and people of color, faced in their everyday lives. Those oppressions included, for example, the criminalization of countercultural queer street life, institutional barriers to accessing welfare support, and lack of affordable housing. For them, assimilation was inadequate, and in certain cases counterproductive, to developing forms of mutual aid that could prefigure alternative social politics away from capitalist structures. Access to housing has been a central demand for marginalized queer groups' ongoing struggles to create fulfilling lives that transgress traditional social norms and expectations in the Bay at least since the 1990s.⁸ This chapter examines how more-than-urban queer and transgender kinship networks have animated "right to the city" spatial activism in the last twenty years.⁹ These activists often operate under the radar of mainstream gay and lesbian politics and tend to take a more insurgent position toward heterosexual society and urbanism.

Within environments of communal residential living in San Francisco and Oakland, residents have created mutual aid structures predicated on shared

nonmainstream cultures. Moreover, challenges to queer communal living in the context of advanced gentrification that characterizes the San Francisco Bay Area's regional landscape offer insights into how gentrification perpetuates economic inequality. The transformation of urban neighborhoods already by 1990 attracted property speculators who, over the next two decades, bought up available buildings in poorer, underinvested areas near those that had gentrified (such as the Castro, parts of the Mission and SoMa, Hayes Valley) speculating on future gentrification. The resulting scarcity of available units, whether real or manufactured to stimulate demand, led to even higher rents. Together with the lack of tenancy protections, these conditions pushed old residents out of gentrifying neighborhoods.¹⁰ Another characteristic of advanced gentrification in the last twenty years has been cultural homogenization: As more expensive cafes, bars, restaurants, and grocery stores have opened in previously mixed and low-income neighborhoods, lower-cost options to inhabit the increasingly privatized urban environment diminish.¹¹ This chapter presents evidence from changing design aesthetics in the physical environment of neighborhoods where queer and transgender people live and socialize, and the discourses surrounding them.

The relationship between gay and lesbian territorialization and gentrification has been a subject of debate in urban planning and policy since the first gayborhoods emerged in the United States in the 1970s.¹² Gays and lesbians have sometimes been viewed, especially by planners influenced by Richard Florida's "creative class thesis" in the early 2010s, as "settlers" who improve the "livability" of formerly low-income neighborhoods and thus become agents of urban regeneration—even if that means their eventual displacement.¹³ However, broader gentrification trends show that working-class neighborhoods gentrify due to a variety of factors and, in any case, established community institutions in gayborhoods, such as local merchants' associations, networks of bars, and other spaces that cater to specific LGBTQ+ needs, can present obstacles to development-driven gentrification.¹⁴ The historical development of LGBTQ+ territorialization in the Bay Area, including the assimilation of the most insurgent aspects of queer socialization and rights-discourse into mainstream society, demonstrates that the suggested causal relationship between territorialization and gentrification is at best circumstantial.

The social politics of the generation of people identifying as queer, transgender, or nonbinary in this chapter, many of whom came to the San Francisco Bay in the early 2000s or later, align their priorities with broader anticapitalist, antiracist, and anticolonial movements. Many express queer and transgender embodiments in nonbinary, anti-essentialist comportment, fashion, and sexual relationships that destabilize normative assumptions about gender and sexuality. Moreover, their spaces oppose racist and classist logics of urban development. Their distinct forms of placemaking include appropriations of spaces that are

dispersed across the regional landscape rather than geographically concentrated.¹⁵ They also involve aesthetic alterations to the physical environment through art that expresses nonmainstream cultures. Finally, this form of placemaking, which has some of the characteristics of more traditional gay and lesbian territorialization in the 1970s and 1980s but is not marked as solely queer, depends on fostering relationships through everyday interactions with other marginalized groups, especially immigrant communities and people of color. Sometimes that happens, as with the work of Gay Shame, in outright protests; sometimes, with Radical Faeries and other collectives, in collaborative forms of cohabitation and spiritual practice; and sometimes by way of formal structures like Community Land Trusts (CLTs).

The CLT model, which has existed since the 1960s in the United States, received renewed attention in the Bay Area due to the economic crisis of the early 2010s, when many residents facing evictions searched for innovative ways to keep their houses.¹⁶ CLTs pool together community resources, private financing, and government support in the form of grants to purchase land that individual homeowners can then rent, usually with ninety-nine-year leases. The terms of these rental contracts regulate the resale price of properties built on CLT land, if they reenter the market, to ensure long-term affordability. Extending CLTs as a form of queer collective ownership builds on the model's foundational principles, while expanding it to prioritize the cultural dimensions of intergenerational queer placemaking.

The story of how a group of queer and trans people of color took partial ownership of a building where they lived and worked in a gentrifying Oakland neighborhood through a CLT demonstrates contemporary entanglements among cultural expressions of queer-and-transness, nonmainstream embodiments, coalition-building, and real estate. When the group of building occupants faced the specter of eviction in 2017, they self-organized to purchase it with the help of Oakland CLT, which has operated in the city since 2009. The residents' campaign to collectively purchase and operate the Liberated 23rd Avenue Building, as it is now known, demonstrates how a group of queer and transgender people of color carved out a territory of exception from the dominant economic and cultural forces that are transforming the neighborhood. The interpretive framework for studying this and other physical sites in this chapter offers an example of a materialist analysis of queer collective living. This analysis highlights the affective and political subtleties at each site. Together, they constitute the landscape of contemporary insurgent queer habitation and citizenship that extends far beyond the Bay. During the three decades since 1990, queer and transgender territorialization in San Francisco and Oakland is characterized by experimentation and fluidity. The analysis of these spaces before they acquire more stable forms helps us imagine new ways of living that enable queer placemaking. These queer pockets create insurgent ruptures in

contemporary mainstream urbanism and offer potential openings for more systematic disruptions of the broader social, political, and cultural systems that they are embedded within.

GENTRIFICATION AND CULTURAL CHANGE

Gay Shame was formed in 1998 as a small, tight-knit collective of queer and transgender activists who, through street protests and an annual event that celebrated insurgent urban queer cultures, created alternative spaces that opposed the participation of large corporations such as banks and national retailers that sponsored Pride parades and gay and lesbian causes in New York and San Francisco.¹⁷ They argued that some of these companies engaged in real estate speculation and exploitation of cheap labor that continued to dispossess marginalized queer people while cynically using Pride to strengthen their liberal credentials.¹⁸ Besides pursuing broader political goals that included fighting economic disenfranchisement, resisting gentrification, and more recently advocating for prison abolition, Gay Shame activists also rejected cultural assimilation in their everyday lives.¹⁹ There was a gender-transgressive and anti-institutional cultural ethos, conscious of its historical emergence as an alternative legacy to the teleological post-Stonewall liberation narrative.

Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, a transgender novelist and activist who was a central figure in the group, explains that in the early 2000s Gay Shame did not have an official membership roster.²⁰ The key organizers were friends and lovers whose anti-establishment attitudes extended to casual cohabitation, recreational drug use, and disregard for bourgeois commodity fetishism. Gay Shame events, which besides protests included parties in squatted public land, were communicated through word of mouth, and attendance could be anywhere between ten and a hundred people. But, Bernstein Sycamore writes in her memoir, more intimate meetings that took place in residential homes were essential in strengthening bonds of friendship and camaraderie among collective members. These meetings affirmed their collective efforts to resist mainstream gay assimilation in their everyday lives.

Members bonded in a variety of ways, including processing narratives of violence collectively and noninjuriously and sharing a countercultural aesthetic in the music they listened to, the clothes they bought from thrift stores around the city, and the literature they shared with each other. Bernstein Sycamore's memoir also reveals the difficulties in prefiguring an alternative queer world while still living within the constraints of mainstream society and urbanism. During the period of about five years that the novelist lived in San Francisco, she describes how personal aspirations, passionate affairs that sometimes turned violent, and personality clashes eroded the foundations of her queer world. Bernstein Sycamore eventually relocated to Seattle.²¹ But though she and some other early collective members left

the San Francisco Bay in the 2000s, others continued the work of enacting nontraditional kinship structures that re-signified physical and psychological injury as a shared collective condition and the basis of political activism.²²

Changes to the city and its urban cultures are symptomatic of a broader shift in how new urban residents imagine and plan for the city. The valorization of private property and urban order over communal space leads to what novelist and cultural critic Sarah Schulman calls “the quashing of public life.”²³ Schulman explains that gentrification “enforces itself through the repression of diverse expression.” For example, special permits are required “for performing, for demonstrating, for dancing in bars, for playing musical instruments on the street, for selling food, for painting murals, selling art, drinking beer on the stoop, or smoking pot or cigarettes.”²⁴ Writing about New York’s East Village, Schulman also describes what she calls the “gentrification of the mind,” a cultural phenomenon that began in the 1980s when a radical queer culture was diminished due to the AIDS pandemic, the privatization of public spaces, and an influx of new residents without ties to the neighborhood or each other.²⁵ Unlike an earlier wave of artists and Bohemians who moved to East Village in the 1970s, many of whom were gay and lesbian, the new crop of white-collar residents in the 1990s did not share more than a superficial interest in local urban cultures and tended to foster no solidarities with the older residents who customarily organized to demand tenant protections.

In San Francisco, in the aftermath of the AIDS crisis, a comparable phenomenon unfolded in traditionally gay and lesbian neighborhoods. Heterosexual couples, for instance, rediscovered the beauty of Castro’s Victorian architecture and started moving there, filling the sidewalks with baby strollers, which critics of the Castro’s bourgeois transformation lamented.²⁶ The colorist movement of exuberantly painted façades with daring color combinations that transformed the Castro and other neighborhoods between 1968 and 1980 had helped to protect Victorian homes from demolition. But most of their renovated colorful façades were repainted by the turn of the century with gray, white, ochre, and light blue, for a more subdued, stately urban presence. Moreover, a 2012 ban on public nudity targeting the intersection of Castro and Eighteenth Streets, where longtime Castro residents socialized in the nude outside Harvey Milk Café, was sponsored by the area’s gay elected supervisor.²⁷ Meanwhile, elected officials, planners, and mainstream gay groups celebrated the intersection’s queer legacy in 2014 with the inauguration of a rainbow crossing, an abstract rendition of artist Gilbert Baker’s rainbow flag embedded in the asphalt. The vibrancy and occasional irreverence of queer life was notably absent from the crossing’s restrained, abstract aesthetic.

Similarly, the architects of Strut, a new health clinic and community center on Castro Street for the San Francisco AIDS Foundation that was inaugurated in 2016, employed abstract architectural symbolism paired with nondescript modernist aesthetics. According to one of Strut’s architects, who worked for Gensler, the largest company offering architectural services in the world at the time, the

building's glass façade signified "transparency, openness, and lack of shame."²⁸ The architect contrasted the symbolism of glass with the Victorian buildings along Castro Street, which, in the design team's view, were oriented inward for privacy. These are misleading generalizations. The Twin Peaks Tavern, the first gay bar with clear glass windows at the intersection of Castro and Seventeenth Streets, had strict "no-contact" rules in the 1960s to avoid police harassment, whereas adaptations of Victorian flats for gay and lesbian cohabitation in the 1970s turned the logic of the nuclear family on its head.²⁹ During the day, when exterior light renders Strut's glass façade semi-opaque, it reflects street life in front of it, at best. At worst, it establishes a barrier between the institutional realm of the nonprofit that it houses and the world outside. The building's design, confused and cold, reveals how architectural imagination is both limited by the "gentrification of the mind" and can unknowingly perpetuate it.

FAERIE URBANISM

Eric, who self-identifies as a queer man, lived in a San Francisco apartment for at least a decade until the early 2010s, when a rent increase forced him to leave the city.³⁰ However, Eric's experience with gentrification in the Bay Area, which increased the cost of living as it exiled queer social and cultural activities, had prepared him, albeit not without a sense of dread, for the course of actions that followed. The first thing he did was search a crime map of the entire Bay Area, on which a part of the far East Bay was deeply in the red, indicating a high crime rate. After filtering the neighborhood data to avoid specific areas with violent crime, he decided to rent a house there. Eric's new home in a Bay Area exurb was over an hour away by car and public transit from San Francisco. The location, he jokingly explained, fit his two main criteria: It was far enough away that it would take a few years for property prices to catch up and make him move again, and the high nonviolent crime rate suggested light police presence.³¹

Eric was a member of the Radical Faeries, a national, loosely organized intergenerational group of queer people who share a quest for alternative spiritual practices, seek to build alternative relationships based on empathy, and view the police as a manifestation of sociocultural oppression. They build nonhierarchical relationships of queer kinship outside heteronormative and patriarchal societal boundaries. Even though Radical Faeries first met in rural spiritual retreats beginning in 1979, one way in which they try to achieve their goals now is by operating a network of faerie houses and a handful of rural retreats around the United States, in France, and in Australia.³² Faerie houses are usually urban residential units where faeries home in the parameters of communal living and perform their spiritual practices.³³ They are also places where faeries who are new to an area and without many resources can find temporary shelter.

Eric set up his new home as a new faerie house. He was motivated, in part, by the Radical Faeries' history of building decentralized collectives that operated as loosely affiliated chapters responding to the needs of their members. He would respond to his own displacement by establishing a new queer nucleus in an exurban neighborhood. Eric's new faerie house highlights the inherent capacity of this kind of queer environment to insert itself in a new social and physical body and thereby begin a process of queering its surroundings.

The history of Radical Faerie spaces offers insights into current experimentations with collective property ownership that animate debates about queer and transgender resistance to displacement. Harry Hay organized the first Radical Faerie gathering in rural Arizona in 1979. (Hay had cofounded Mattachine Society, the first homophile organization in the United States, in 1950.) Despite Hay's effort to extend the call for participation to queer people living in rural areas, most participants of that and subsequent gatherings lived in cities.³⁴ For them, the natural setting signified a retreat from the constraints that urban environments posed for the development of queer spirituality. The Radical Faeries' world-making project in rural gatherings was rooted in the anticapitalist, antiracist, and anti-colonial work and rhetoric of gay liberation that the mainstream gay and lesbian movement in the 1980s had sidelined.³⁵

Radical Faerie spirituality was inspired by Indigenous, pagan, and other religious and cultural traditions. It prompted gathering participants to subvert capitalist notions of ownership and commodity fetishism by building relationships with the land based on animating the physical world through ritual. Radical Faerie culture was built on earlier prefigurative experiments with rural separatist gay and lesbian communities in the 1970s that rejected the urban gayborhood model of urban gay liberation.³⁶ Faeries' attitude toward land occupation, nonetheless, signified an ambivalent relationship with the legacy of settler colonialism. They acknowledged that they gathered on Indigenous land and studied two-spirit embodiment, a term that came into the English language in 1990 to describe people who traditionally fulfill a third-gender ceremonial role in Pan-American Indigenous cultures, to guide them in their quest for expressing queer sexuality and spirituality.³⁷ However, most of them were white gay men of relative privilege, who could move in and out of the rural and urban enclaves that constituted the faerie landscape.³⁸ Their rural gatherings were not spaces of exception, since they did not operate completely outside sociocultural norms and constraints, nor did they intend to. Rather, they gave their participants the conceptual tools and practical skills to build queer homes back in the urban environments where most of them lived.³⁹

The transfer of knowledge between these rural environments or queer spiritual bonding and urban spaces of everyday life continued in the subsequent decades. It was particularly meaningful in the 1980s and 1990s as AIDS devastated gay networks of peer support. Seeking a more permanent space to continue their spiritual

pursuit that included sexual experimentation as a form of social bonding, in 1987 a group of West Coast Radical Faeries established *Nomenus*, a nonprofit incorporated as a religious organization in California. *Nomenus*, which was based in San Francisco, purchased land in rural southern Oregon with members' donations, where they established a permanent retreat they described as a "religious sanctuary."⁴⁰ Meanwhile, back in San Francisco, the organization used a warehouse space on Folsom Street to hold monthly members' meetings and social events. These events often took the form of urban Radical Faerie gatherings where participants experimented with "innovative spiritual and sexual explorations."⁴¹ These events were meaningful ways for many faeries to cope with the psychological effect of AIDS. According to Buzz Bense, who was a registered sex educator and ran the Folsom space, events advertised as "mutual masturbation parties" helped curb the spread of the disease by promoting what medical experts considered safer ways to achieve sexual pleasure.⁴²

In 1989 the Folsom Street space was the target of two police raids that prompted its closure for significant periods at a time and the issuance, by organizers, of extensive rules for how event participants should engage with the space and each other. The rules included such detailed instructions as how to perform specific sex acts and how to clean up after group sex.⁴³ Public scrutiny of Radical Faerie events was antithetical to their ideas of self-determination and sociosexual experimentation, and the Folsom space was ultimately short-lived: it appears to have ceased holding urban faerie gatherings by 1995. Its existence revealed a conundrum with institutionalizing Radical Faerie culture through public visibility, which in this case was a consequence of its nonprofit status as nonprofit activities were state regulated.⁴⁴

Faerie houses are not regulated the same way because they are private residences. They constitute an alternative spatial network in cities across the United States where Radical Faeries live. There is no list of faerie houses and no official designation.⁴⁵ They could be anywhere, and faeries learn about them through word of mouth. Radical Faeries build intergenerational relationships and networks of peer support by creating a shared culture rather than a political movement *per se*. They continue to develop new ways to articulate and perform queer kinship by responding to the historical changes that have occurred in urbanism in the United States for over four decades. But, as the establishment and operating structure of *Nomenus* indicates, if Radical Faeries embrace fluidity and experimentation in their spiritual pursuits, those traits become difficult to translate into formal spatial configurations.

One such formal response, nonetheless, was at the center of a debate in 2017 about the future of Grand Central, a faerie house in the Castro. There, a collective of queer people organized social events, offered weekly community meals, and provided temporary shelter and support to homeless and newly arrived queer people in San Francisco, many of them artists. Oliver Sanford, one of the residents, explained in the local press that the space is "equal parts Love Shack and forested

pagan temple in the heart of the city,” and that some tenants had lived there for over fifteen years.⁴⁶ The “earthy” aesthetics of its domestic interior, with a mantle-piece filled with pottery, living room furniture surrounded by potted plants, rugs covering the floor, and soft lighting, were the antithesis of the institutional modernism of new and renovated buildings in the Castro. The apartment unit, which was located above The Sausage Factory, a popular old-time Italian restaurant on Castro Street, was rent-controlled. This meant that the owner could only increase the rent in low annual increments that kept it affordable for the tenants, some of whom worked in hospitality in addition to performing in drag shows in the city. Rent affordability enabled them to maintain a pluralist queer culture in the heart of a gentrifying neighborhood.⁴⁷

When Grand Central tenants learned that the impending sale of the building could lead to their eviction, they organized to create a plan for action. After consulting with tenant rights groups, they decided to establish a CLT, which would allow them to buy the building (provided the nonprofit organization they formed could qualify for a loan) and hold it in trust for future queer tenants. CLTs are a rare form of collective land ownership in the United States, mainly used in rural areas. The economic crisis that followed the bursting of the housing bubble between 2006 and 2012 began to popularize this model in cities in the United States and the United Kingdom.⁴⁸ An urban CLT successfully had been operating in San Francisco’s Chinatown already since 2000, and another in Oakland was established in 2009.⁴⁹ A group of Grand Central tenants sought assistance from the more established San Francisco CLT in their bid for building ownership. They set up an advisory board that included notable housing activists and advocates and created an online petition for individual donations, while also pursuing larger government grants.⁵⁰

Since the CLT model’s emergence in the late 1960s, it has been applied and theorized primarily as a mechanism to achieve affordable housing. A CLT typically purchases property through a variety of financing structures, which have recently included municipal and state grants, and holds it in trust for perpetuity. The model effectively separates land ownership from the land’s uses.⁵¹ The property may include buildings, but that is not a requirement for CLT establishment. The purchase effectively takes the land off the real estate market and decisions about its development, either by the CLT itself or, more often, by third parties that are usually nonprofits, rest on a governing structure.

CLT governance must include members of the organization, residents, if the land includes housing, and representatives from the community.⁵² This final provision can be the source of conflicts because the definition of community is rarely formalized among the groups and individuals who live in CLT properties. As the authors of a 1972 guide to “a new model for land tenure in America” put it, community generally refers to people who have or may have a stake in the entity in the future as residents or active supporters of the trust.⁵³ As a result of this loose definition that

anticipates future stakes, CLTs are sometimes controlled by professionalized boards that take the role of affordable housing developers with only tangential relationships to the people who live in the properties that the boards manage.⁵⁴

Still, CLTs include crucial provisions that prohibit rent increases beyond a pre-determined nominal percentage. It is common, moreover, for CLTs to purchase foreclosed properties to return them to local communities at affordable rates, as the one in Oakland routinely did in the 2010s. These practices institute a type of rent control that meets one of the ownership model's core goals of achieving inter-generational justice. The radical potential of CLTs to change capitalist relationships of property ownership to a form of postcapitalist commons requires changes in the way individual and collective responsibilities are distributed and performed, for example regarding the allocation of funds and maintenance. For collectively run properties, whether residences, businesses, cultural spaces, or community gardens, day-to-day operations become the real test for enacting alternative social structures. Their longevity depends on the material and emotional attachments that participants develop with the physical environment and each other because those attachments sustain the hard work of following through with long-term goals in spite of any group conflicts and institutional setbacks.⁵⁵ The queer CLT that was established in response to the threat of Grand Central's displacement sought to employ the model in the context of an existing tight-knit social group with a shared culture. According to its founders, it was better positioned than ad hoc housing coalitions to succeed. Although eventually the building housing Grand Central was purchased by a member of the former owner's family in 2018 and rent control remained in place, the idea of a queer CLT had already inspired a new way of understanding queer land ownership, and at that time the collective shifted its focus to creating a decentralized CLT network of queer urban spaces.⁵⁶

LIBERATING OURSELVES LOCALLY

A collective in Oakland followed a path similar to that of the Grand Central tenants when they faced eviction the same year due to the sale of the building where they lived, worked, and socialized. The building was located on Twenty-Third Avenue, in an immigrant neighborhood, and provided affordable housing for over twenty-five residents, many of whom were transgender and queer people of color. The Oakland collective, like the Radical Faeries and Gay Shame members before them, highlighted intentionality as an operative term, in their social media posts and in private communications, to explain their claims to physical space and how they built a queer culture around it. Intentionality is expressed as a combination of several factors. Politically and philosophically, collective members had to define the meaning of equality vis-à-vis property ownership claims. Culturally, they had to situate queer and transgender embodiments within existing cultures in the neighborhood where they were located. And finally, they had to grapple with

queer futurity—how queer social structures defy heterosexual society’s notion of reproductive time—in how they conceptualized intergenerational justice.⁵⁷

The two-story building where the collective operates, with commercial spaces on the ground floor and apartments on the first, is a few hundred feet north of the Nimitz freeway that traverses East Oakland, and near an elevated Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) rail track. The nearest BART station is Fruitvale, about a twenty-minute walk. Fruitvale was the center of the Bay Area Chicana movement in the 1960s and 1970s and its population is predominantly Latinx. That has been changing in the wake of the rapid gentrification of East Oakland since 2010.⁵⁸ The neighborhood where the building is located is host to a long-standing dynamic community organization, the EastSide Arts Alliance, which has helped give voice to disenfranchised Latinx, Indigenous, and black cultural producers and has fostered a sense of community among them since it was founded in 1999. Located on International Boulevard, EastSide Arts Alliance had a bookshop and cultural center with a small black-box theater that hosted performances, poetry readings, and dance events. It also supported a vibrant muralist art scene. Eastside also spearheaded youth arts programs including innovative efforts to achieve restorative justice through the arts, highlighting street art and Native American rituals as legitimate forms of public cultural expression.

Thanks to EastSide, the intersection of Twenty-Third Avenue and International Boulevard was already a neighborhood epicenter for radical cultural activities when a group of artists and activists who comprised Peacock Rebellion, an art collective, began to use space on the ground floor of the Twenty-Third Avenue building—just a few steps from EastSide’s headquarters—for their meetings and rehearsals after its founding in fall 2012. Peacock Rebellion considered performance a social justice tool, and its members described themselves as “a queer and trans people of color crew of artist-activist-healers.”⁵⁹ One of the art collective’s founding members was Samm, who had come to the Bay Area for graduate school in the early 2010s after a brief period working in Washington, DC, as a community organizer. They were attracted by the Bay Area’s political legacies and diverse queer cultures and intended to learn from activist experience and eventually transfer this knowledge to other parts of the country. But Samm realized that they were more effective with a microphone on stage than a megaphone in the streets. As a performer they “drew knowledge and inspiration from sixteen generations of storytellers” before them.⁶⁰ On Twenty-Third Avenue, they found an existing cultural and physical infrastructure that provided the appropriate stage for their work.

Practicing healing justice through performance and the visual arts is a key component of both Peacock Rebellion’s and EastSide Arts Alliance’s work. Healing justice refers to a set of principles for empowering people of color, disabled people, and survivors of physical and psychological trauma to seek appropriate ways to care for themselves and each other. For Peacock Rebellion, healing justice refers primarily to listening and prioritizing knowledge that comes from the interactions

of nonnormative bodies with the environment. This form of embodied knowledge describes physical bodies as intersection points between identity discourse and actions that take place in the physical environment.⁶¹ The healing justice process acknowledges the wisdom of practices by disabled and chronically ill individuals and groups, who reject normative healthcare models based on what they characterize as a mantra of “cure or be useless.”⁶² In this sense they re-signify disability as an opening to think about habitation differently, as a process of invention rather than a set of accommodations.

Peacock Rebellion established a board of elders composed of longtime activists in queer cultural resistance and the anti-eviction movement who helped the collective define its principles and guided their work. Board members also helped Peacock Rebellion navigate the complex world of funding sources and Bay Area nonprofits. This knowledge was vital for the collective to continue its work, as its members were keenly aware of the organizational hurdles and red tape they faced in their efforts to maintain flexible, grassroots-oriented programming.⁶³ To that end, they developed—among other initiatives—monthly listening circles for East Oakland residents to participate in what they called “rapid feedback loops.” Attendees gathered in Peacock Rebellion’s rehearsal space in the Twenty-Third Avenue building to engage in unstructured conversations on subjects of locals’ concern. During these events, collective members listened to the needs of neighborhood residents and empowered them to drive the kinds of initiatives the collective would work on. The events functioned as grassroots fora for recognizing queer of color experiences that had eluded larger organizations. For example, they provided opportunities for transgender femmes of color in East Oakland to talk about their needs and experiences, which were often misrecognized by other transgender and queer people elsewhere.⁶⁴

Besides Peacock Rebellion, the Twenty-Third Avenue building housed two other nonprofit organizations, a martial arts studio, and the residents of eight three-bedroom residential units. The Bikery, which occupied one of the storefronts, was a shop for bicycle repairs affiliated with Cycles of Change, a nonprofit organization that had been doing bike safety education events across Alameda County (which spans from Berkeley to Fremont in the East Bay) for over twenty years. Cycles of Change and the Bikery served and empowered disenfranchised youth in the area by providing them with means of transportation. Sustaining Ourselves Locally (SOL) was another group that occupied a storefront in the building since 2013. SOL was founded by Twenty-Third Avenue residents in 2003 to turn the back lot into “a full production organic garden, orchard, and space for building community.”⁶⁵ In 2018 it formally incorporated as a nonprofit, a process spearheaded by “queer and femme artists holding space for black creativity, sustainability, joy, grief, and imagination,” as they described it, with the mission to share sustainable practices and promote “social justice through education and community building.”⁶⁶ The group envisioned Oakland “as a hub for radical reparations,” its politics

of black liberation thus complementing Peacock Rebellion's vision for queer and trans emancipation.

Maven, who identifies as a gender nonconforming person with Indigenous Hawaiian roots, explains that when they discovered the Twenty-Third Avenue building by word of mouth upon arrival in the Bay Area in the 2000s, it gave them not only a place to stay but also the opportunity to "work with the land."⁶⁷ Maven found a group of like-minded queer people of color in the building and immersed themselves in political activism. In 2013 they joined other housemates in antiracist direct actions. That was when the Black Lives Matter movement was gaining national attention, as the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter in social media ignited widespread anger about the lack of accountability for the killing of seventeen-year-old black teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012 by George Zimmerman, who was acquitted in July 2023.⁶⁸ Black Lives Matter started as a spontaneous reaction to pent-up anger from systematic antiblack institutional violence, but as a movement it was guided by three Bay Area-based black queer women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, who created the digital and institutional infrastructure for collective actions based on their knowledge from long-term community organizing for social justice. As protests took place in cities throughout the United States, in Oakland, their home base, thousands of activists including Maven and other Twenty-Third Avenue tenants occupied freeways and sought to disrupt business as usual as much as they could. The intensity of political activism in Oakland in 2013 and in 2014, when antiblack police brutality was at center of public protests following the death of Eric Garner, a black man, in the hands of policemen in New York City, offered a sense of hope and the promise for a broader "coalition of the dispossessed" based on insights from black liberationist struggles. However, different groups experienced the material conditions of oppression, which include housing scarcity, rising rents, work discrimination, and police brutality, differently. As a result, frictions developed along the line of identity politics, divergent goals, and activist tactics.

Mobility constraints were important factors in how disenfranchisement operated in the San Francisco Bay Area. As evictions in Oakland and around the Bay remained rampant, homelessness increased, especially for those who did not have the means or opportunities to move either within or outside the Bay Area.⁶⁹ Resisting dispossession included urgent pleas for material and moral support for homeless encampments and other actions that included takeovers of physical spaces in Oakland. Maven explained that the trauma induced by a police arrest for their political activity prompted them "to get creative" about how they fought, and to cultivate a closer relationship to the land by tending the garden, both as therapeutic and political action.⁷⁰

Maven turned their attention to the Bikery, helped people at a nearby homeless encampment, and volunteered in the garden that SOL maintained in the rear lot of the Twenty-Third Avenue building. With mature trees lining the perimeter,

SOL had been maintaining an edible garden and a chicken coop, installed a small playground, and managed neighborhood after-school programs for sixteen years before Maven arrived. Urban agriculture was especially meaningful to Maven because it established a different temporality from street protests. What's more, the intergenerational transfer of environmental resources and knowledge was central to what they described as a "queer family." They explained that a sense of intergenerational kinship anchored their subsequent housing activism in the physical environment: "The people who started SOL had this grand garden idea; they did soil testing to make sure which areas are appropriate for growing food. I think there is a way that this place has held a lot of dreams and now we are seeing a lot of the fruits, literally, of other people's dreams."⁷¹ This sentiment is echoed in the claims that other queer groups have made regarding their right to remain in the places where intergenerational kinship networks were formed. Radical Faeries living at Grand Central, for example, also grounded their right to the space in precisely those terms.

In January 2017 Twenty-Third Avenue building tenants received a letter from the building owner, who announced her intention to sell the building. She was sympathetic to the causes spearheaded by the organizations housed there (her daughter had lived in the building for a short period in the past) and gave the tenants "first right of refusal," effectively encouraging them to buy the building.⁷² "First right of refusal" gives tenants the right to purchase the property where they live at the estimated market value before it enters the real estate market. Although not required in Oakland by law, other American cities such as Washington, DC, have included this tenancy protection right in local housing legislation.⁷³ In the Bay Area the absence of "first right of refusal" along with weakening of rent control provisions has contributed to the acceleration of gentrification, as properties that enter the market go to the highest bidders, who are often corporate real estate firms without local ties and operate on a bottom line to maximize company profit.⁷⁴ Maven and Samm explained that after the shock of receiving the news, the fear of displacement that was all too familiar to collectives and nonprofits in the Bay Area propelled them to organize a group of tenants to take immediate action.⁷⁵

If the tenant collective could come up with a down payment of \$75,000 (part of the \$1.5 million asking price) by May of that year, they would secure rights to the property.⁷⁶ At that time they did not have a collective decision-making body, but synergies had developed over the years with local nonprofit organizations, Peacock Rebellion's cultural activism, and EastSide Arts Alliance's outreach to local institutions, among others. The tenant collective was immediately set up an online call to solicit individual donations for a crowdfunding campaign to "liberate the 23rd Avenue building" from the real estate market, as they put it. Simultaneously, they searched for institutional partners from the world of housing nonprofits to help them better understand what collective ownership would entail. Within a few months, the crowdfunding campaign raised more than enough money for the

down payment, thanks to over six hundred individual donors.⁷⁷ Even the organizers were surprised by their success. They realized within a few weeks that collective ownership of the building was not a far-flung possibility but rather an imminent reality that they had the responsibility to manage as best they could. A member of the tenant collective, reflecting on the small donors' response, speculated that the particular moment when the call to liberate the Twenty-Third Avenue building went out was especially meaningful because it offered a concrete way to fight gentrification that was both symbolic and a potential model for future actions.⁷⁸

The campaign's symbolism was augmented by the ongoing discussion about the loss of Oakland's underground art scene, especially after a fire at Ghost Ship, an artist-run warehouse, killed thirty-six people in December 2016. This prompted a reckoning with the lack of appropriate affordable buildings for experimental cultural events, artists' housing, and workspaces. The causes of the Ghost Ship tragedy were the subject of a protracted legal battle that brought to the fore potentially criminal negligence during Fire Department inspections that failed to report dangerous architectural additions to the building.⁷⁹ Though reports about the causes took years to complete, the tragedy precipitated evictions from collectively run artist spaces all around the Bay Area.⁸⁰ The displacement and victimization of artists echoed the victimization of black residents and Chicanos and the erasure of neighborhood cultures that had marked Oakland's postwar history and had given rise to important grassroots political movements.⁸¹ The spatial politics of dispossession, again unfolding at a rapid pace, created an opening for the implementation of a reformist agenda. "I think our community desperately needed a win," an organizer, Eri Oura, explained.⁸² The key attribute of what bonded together the community, broadly construed, that Oura referenced is a shared queer culture, even if the particular paths to action were up for debate.

As they were fundraising, the group of tenant organizers also consulted several Bay Area housing justice nonprofits and eventually partnered with Oakland CLT, which had the resources and legal expertise to coordinate the process of buying the property. Oakland CLT had been established amid the foreclosure crisis in 2009 to buy single-family homes and help low-income residents to effectively buy them back with ninety-nine-year leases at prices that were significantly below market rate. (After the economic boom that followed the crisis, property prices in Oakland rose dramatically.)⁸³ Part of Oakland CLT's mission was to educate homeowners about sustainable financing and property management.⁸⁴ When the Twenty-Third Avenue building collective approached Oakland CLT, its board realized that the sense of intentional community, defined as a shift from individual to collective interest through sharing a common culture, which they sought to instigate in other Oakland sites, already underlay their efforts.⁸⁵ Oakland CLT enthusiastically backed the project and combined a loan from the Northern California Community Loan Fund, municipal assistance in the form of a grant, and money from the aforementioned crowdfunding campaign to buy the building.

The “Liberated 23rd Avenue Building,” as it was listed when the property title was transferred to Oakland CLT in November 2017, was the first multi-unit property that the trust purchased.⁸⁶ Managing the storefronts was outside the scope of the trust’s activities at the time, but the fact that three of them housed long-standing nonprofits with ties to the neighborhood demonstrated to CLT representatives and outside lenders that tenants had already established forms of deliberation to make collective decisions. According to Oakland CLT’s executive director, the collectively run spaces aligned with the organization’s goal to lay the foundations of a systematic transfer of tenancy rights to those most in danger of displacement as East Oakland was gentrifying.⁸⁷ Moreover, developing an intentional model for queer and transgender people of color to create and own their spaces would help reverse the narrative that, as a building collective member put it, in affordable housing work, communities of color only get to be clients or consumers instead of service providers. After the purchase, Oakland CLT and the tenant collective began the difficult process of deciding how to manage the residences, storefronts, and garden.

The slow process of establishing two cooperatives to run the building, one for the residents and another for the ground-floor commercial spaces, with administrative support from Oakland CLT, brought to the surface many unanticipated challenges. The building needed a costly structural retrofit. Applying for government grants required a considerable amount of work by tenant-volunteers, who also had to undertake regular maintenance and garden upkeep. In the summer of 2019, the small greenhouse in the rear lot, for example, was not in use, partly due to a disagreement between tenants and nonresident SOL members about how to manage the garden. Nevertheless, Maven stressed the importance of celebrating small victories, such as a completion of a wheelchair-accessible bathroom in the garden that they built with assistance from a community fundraiser.⁸⁸ In the context of transformative queer politics, these types of partial but complementary projects reveal the tools and labor required to sustain everyday acts of cultural resistance. The spatial tactics of the groups housed at Twenty-Third Avenue, as they relate to their members’ cultural bonds and insurgent politics, demonstrate how forms of queer territorialization can resist pressures to “assimilate or perish” that characterize cultural gentrification in US cities during the last twenty years.⁸⁹

SAFE SPACE

After the ownership transfer in 2017, Peacock Rebellion changed the name of their space on the ground floor of the Liberated 23rd Avenue Building to Liberating Ourselves Locally (LOL). It houses a maker space, a lending library, and it operates as a community center. LOL offers computers for building tenants and neighborhood residents, rents out DJ equipment, and offers an industrial sewing machine and two 3D printers for community members’ projects. Samm, who participates

in the collective that is responsible for LOL programming, highlights the centrality of enacting queer and transgender alliances in physical space through “making objects” that prefigure the members’ shared culture.⁹⁰ According to its description in social media, LOL is “a social justice-focused maker space led by a crew of hackers, healers, artists, and activists who are queer and trans people of color.”⁹¹ Their mission is to provide tools “for self-determination and community power” by “working on projects they love.”

In 2019 LOL organized monthly “maker days,” which offered workshops on sewing, printmaking, and other creative activities. These events also had what their organizers called a “radical tech” component. People employed in technology companies in the Bay Area went in to teach coding and apply their skills toward activist projects. According to Samm, they were people who did not want “to lose their soul in big tech.”⁹² The projects they undertook at LOL ranged from building technological capacity for social justice organizations, such as dedicated digital applications and websites, to art installations. In one of the workshops, participants learned to mount LED lights on placards that they could use during evening protests. Self-proclaimed “movement technologists” are part of a broader social movement whose mission is to use technology as a tool of liberation, especially for women and people of color.⁹³ In this sense, “movement technologists” in the Bay Area operate under the radar of Silicon Valley technology companies that dominate the local economy (and whose global influence certainly extends far beyond the region). They create digital spaces of dissent manifested in the physical environment through activist-run spaces such as LOL.

Another LOL event in 2019 was described as “a rapid-response slow-down day.”⁹⁴ Its objectives included making “a QTPOC [queer and trans people of color] rapid response health and wellness resource guide” that members of the community could use to navigate the landscape of nonprofit and governmental services. They gathered information about support services for healthcare, food insecurity, and legal representation. The event also sought to create a separate housing resource guide and participate in more practical tasks such as sewing curtains and tending to plants. Another activity planned for that day was to set up a studio to record podcasts. Participants who did not want to partake in any of these activities and faced a lot of stress in their everyday lives were still invited to “ask a Peacock to lead a guided meditation.” The breadth of activities planned reveals that the “rapid-response slow-down” event was primarily intended as an opportunity for queer and transgender people of color to share a physical space and build cultural affinity with each other.

The way the event organizers created an inclusive environment for each individual participant provides a glimpse into how the collective conceptualizes accessibility and safety. There was no economic barrier to participate as the event was free and Peacock Rebellion provided all the supplies required for the activities. Organizers welcomed attendees to bring their children, and provided toys,

coloring books, and other opportunities for children's activities, as lack of affordable childcare poses another barrier to participants with children who often feel marginalized even within community-oriented events. Moreover, the organizers emphasized that the LOL space was accessible to wheelchair and scooter users. A member of a designated safety team was stationed at the front door during the event to help wheelchair users enter, which was a thoughtful workaround due to the lack of a pushbutton to open the door automatically. To break barriers of entry for immunocompromised event participants, organizers ran air purifiers and asked attendees to arrive without wearing any fragrances. They emphasized that the paint, floors, and cleaning products that they used were fragrance-free and did not emit volatile organic compounds (VOCs), known endocrine-disrupting chemicals. This practice called attention to how environmental degradation creates inequalities directly affecting human bodies and offered a concrete example of practicing environmental justice. Finally, the organizers offered a separate room for those who needed a quieter, lower-stimulant environment, recognizing the different ways that individuals experience social interaction and the need for practical strategies to address potential trauma that is prevalent among queer and transgender people of color who are exposed to physical and psychological violence in their everyday lives.

Regarding LOL event attendees in 2019, Samm explained that although some programming was open to everyone, the collective specifically wanted to create a space centered around the needs of transgender femmes of color. According to Samm, during events that were open to everyone before then, "white folks often disrupted the space, taking up attention."⁹⁵ Non-queer-of-color identified participants sometimes also performed microaggressions, often due to ignorance of the appropriate code of conduct among people who have experienced trauma. Interestingly, the 3D printers that LOL offered free of charge and were expensive to rent elsewhere were often the object of conflicts, because they were particularly popular among some nonqueer visitors to the space, who vied for their use for their own projects. Creating community rules for sharing the space, which developed through its use, was an essential component of fostering psychological safety by shaping the space's distinctly queer public.

The large clear glass windows on the Twenty-Third Avenue façade ensure that activities inside the space are visible to passersby. LOL uses the windows to display the outcomes of "maker" events that represent the kinds of socially engaged art that people make there. In 2018 and 2019 much of this work centered around immigrant rights advocacy and transgender liberation. Although symbolizing the kinds of coalitions that the collective seeks to build in the neighborhood, which makes the LOL space itself a public manifestation of a defiant culture of dissent in a gentrifying environment, the collective's unambiguous politics that are on display at the windows can make its members targets of hate crimes. A collective member



FIGURE 19. *Culture Is a Weapon* mural on the south wall of the Liberated 23rd Avenue building in June 2023. Photograph by Lori Eanes. © Lori Eanes & Stathis G. Yeros.

interviewed for a local magazine described an encounter with an intruder in 2017. The intruder, who was walking on Twenty-Third Avenue, walked inside LOL's open front door to threaten the collective member, holding a sharp object against their neck.⁹⁶ They were able to talk the intruder out of harming them and he eventually left the space, but following the attack the collective formed safety teams to secure activities in the building. The procedural aspects of securing the space became a meaningful performance of collaboration and neighborhood solidarity.

The public visibility of cultural dissent to gentrification in the neighborhood is part of how the building functions as a creative artistic hub. A mural painted by a team of artists associated with EastSide Arts Alliance covers its southwest façade (fig. 19). At its center, a clenched fist breaks out of a stylized flower, flanked by six sections differentiated by color, that bleed into each other. The top section, which is also the most prominent when viewed from afar, contains the title "Culture is a Weapon," written with square letters that take up about a third of the mural's length. Their shadows are painted on the wall, giving them volume, visually, and symbolically adding weight to the phrase. On either side of the text, the portraits of two activists, a black male and a Native American female, complete the top section.

The other five sections depict different elements of Oakland's black, Asian, Latinx, and Indigenous cultural and political communities. From top right, these include the Black Panthers, traditional representations of Asian warriors, Indigenous ritual performances honoring the land, a jazz musician, female agricultural

workers, a filmmaker, a biker carrying a boombox, and finally, two portraits of Indigenous people, one of them in what looks like royal garb, in front of what appears to be Mesoamerican architecture. The Black Panther section, which includes three figures with clenched fists in the style of Emory Douglas's art, and a panther's silhouette that appears to leap out of the wall's surface, contains the only other prominent text besides the title: "ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE."

The mural was the product of a collective design and painting process organized by EastSide Arts Alliance in 2014. Rosa, one of the muralists, explained that the artists' goal was to represent the unity of marginalized and dispossessed communities in the San Francisco Bay Area.⁹⁷ The muralists shared sketches with each other that helped them make collective decisions about the different iconographic elements to be included and arranged them in themes. Each color represented a different theme. The themes included "knowledge of the self," which examined how different cultures were represented on the mural; "roots," which established continuity among cultures of political dissent in the Bay Area; and "weapons," which pointed to the tools of dissent that included protests, labor organizing, media, and music, among others.

For Rosa, self-empowerment through art was not only symbolic. Her biographical information reveals how investment by nonprofit organizations in communities can shape the forms that struggles for social justice can take. As a young woman growing up in the Bay Area, Rosa came to muralism after being arrested by the police and charged with "tagging," which led her to complete mandatory community service at EastSide Arts Alliance. There, she gained both technical knowledge in painting and learned about the political history of California's Chicano muralist movement. While continuing to paint, she also teaches graffiti and mural arts at a local youth center. As Rosa pointed out, graffiti is a way for people, especially disenfranchised young people, to "find a common vision for the stories they want to tell."⁹⁸ In this sense, communicating through graffiti is both a dialogic process and an aesthetic language. This is similar to how LOL's maker space was conceived as a laboratory of ideas for a queer future.

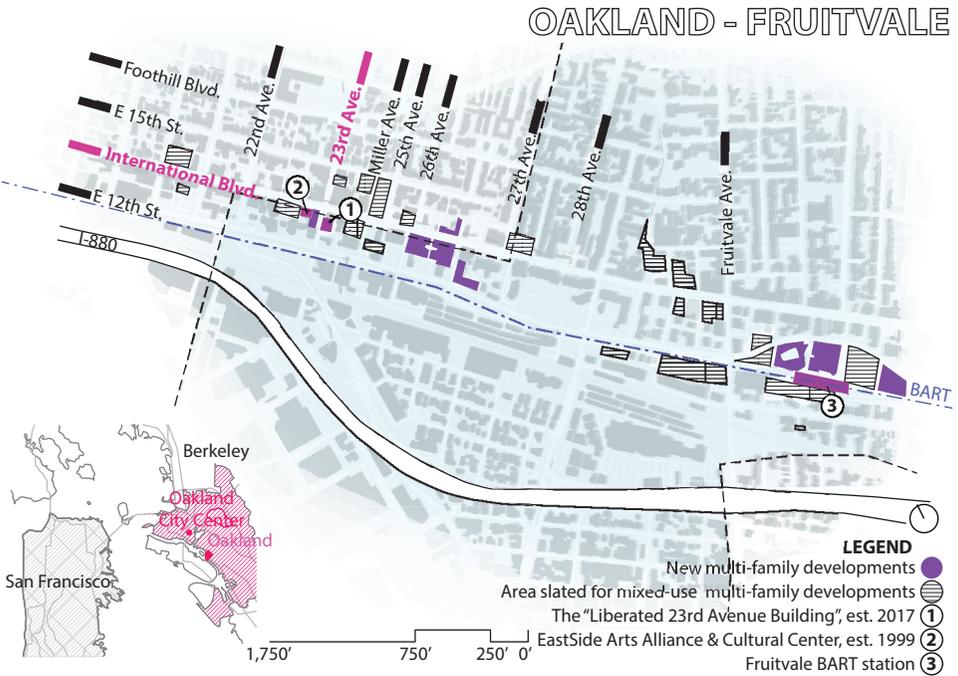
Grffiti and muralism can also be tools to achieve restorative justice, an approach to conflict resolution that seeks to bring opposing sides of a dispute in dialogue with each other. EastSide Arts Alliance spearheaded restorative justice as a form of cultural activism. During the two decades of its presence in the neighborhood, EastSide reached out to victimized young people, local business owners, and victims of police violence to engage them in the creative process. The organization's programs continue San Francisco Bay's legacy of political muralism with strong roots in East Oakland and San Francisco's Mission.⁹⁹ It is important to highlight that through these murals, new ideas, subjectivities, and political figures are incorporated into the historical fold of American liberation movements by borrowing elements from the visual language, techniques, and references of

previous generations of artists, thereby establishing the intergenerational transfer of knowledge that is at the core of the queer sociocultural quests described in this chapter so far.¹⁰⁰

Culture is a Weapon did not directly include queer and transgender-of-color iconography that could have been achieved, for example, by depicting a local figure that represents these groups. According to Rosa, the iconographic references were chosen by a group of nonresident artists. Nevertheless, the colors of the mural's six sections—red, yellow, blue, orange, green, and purple—are those of the pride flag ribbons designed by Gilbert Baker that has become a global symbol of the contemporary gay rights movement.¹⁰¹ In Rosa's account the colors of the six sections also symbolized two-spirit gender variance, referencing the traditional third-gender ceremonial role of people in Pan-American and Indigenous cultures.¹⁰² Rosa's reference to two-spirit gender to explain decisions about color choices (though it is not entirely clear how the colors chosen represent two-spirit cultural identity other than the association with the Pride flag) indicates that conversations among the artists during the mural's creation considered the representation of queerness and transness on the mural through the lens of indigeneity rather than as distinct identity categories. Indeed, indigenous Pan-American cultures are represented in more than one section of the mural. Viewed from the BART trains approaching or departing Fruitvale station, the mural's references to Oakland's radical political legacies and to queer culture through the color scheme are immediately recognizable.

In that sense the mural announces the neighborhood's cultural identity and anchors Liberated 23rd as a differential space within East Oakland's changing urban landscape, the term used by Henri Lefebvre to denote rifts in abstract space (which refers to space as it is construed and visualized by planners in capitalist societies).¹⁰³ These rifts disrupt the totalizing logic of abstract space and allow for the emergence of alternative ways of producing antihegemonic social spaces through everyday interactions. Representations of countercultural embodiment on the mural in addition to everyday uses of the physical environment in and around the building highlight how neighborhood organizations are able to create a rift in the abstract space of neighborhood planning.

Conceptualized as differential space, queering and transing processes in the context of contemporary urbanism demonstrate how people who share a common culture can employ their labor to shape the formal attributes of their spaces. These formal attributes, which include collective ownership and the visual aesthetics of queer-and-transness, develop in response to the local urban environment's material, symbolic, and aesthetic conditions. The transformation of the area bounded by Fifteenth Street, International Boulevard, Twenty-Ninth Street, and the Nimitz freeway (map 4) demonstrates the gradual encroachment of gentrification aesthetics in the area where the Liberated 23rd Avenue Building is located. This aesthetics



MAP 4. Map of East Oakland showing the location of the Liberated 23rd Avenue building in Fruitvale. The building's surroundings are rapidly being transformed by multifamily housing.
 © Gabriel Gonzalez & Stathis G. Yeros.

is marked by the design of new residential buildings that are transforming the neighborhood. These buildings have similar massing, which is determined primarily by building code, and their exterior elevations use similar uniform colors and materials.

A brand new eight-story residential building with affordable units managed by a Bay Area housing nonprofit on Twenty-Third Avenue provides a striking contrast to the mural-clad Twenty-Third Avenue building across the street. The brown panels that cover its exterior, and the heavy, uniform windows with matching vents, are manufactured by the same companies that provide cost-effective cladding solutions replicated by architecture firms all around the San Francisco Bay and lend their aesthetics to the new housing landscape of mid-rise conformity. Similar four-to-eight-story buildings all the way to Fruitvale BART station have laid the foundations for building what can be described as a continuous housing wall along the elevated train tracks and the Nimitz freeway, symbolically fencing the neighborhood in. In 2019 the city installed a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) line

along International Boulevard that can shuttle residents faster and more efficiently to BART and the downtown entertainment district. Historical patterns and current data indicate that these changes are signs of accelerating gentrification, if no further protections for existing tenants and homeowners are implemented.

The remaining sections of the area's dense low-rise residential landscape represent the particularities and cultural specificity of everyday life in the Bay's ethnic neighborhoods.¹⁰⁴ The confluence of cultures, ethnic, and racial differences were still visible in 2019 in the aesthetic landscape of International Boulevard, which was lined with commercial spaces catering to Latinx and Asian American residents. Many storefronts retained their signs in Spanish and Chinese. The cultural influence of EastSide Arts Alliance was visible in the murals painted on street façades. For Santiago, the coordinator of EastSide Arts Alliance's Visual Elements apprenticeship program, muralism conveys that the neighborhood "is not dead."¹⁰⁵ Santiago considered the murals as a form of speech that allowed residents to assert their presence and claim their right to stay in the neighborhood. But south of International Boulevard, the new multi-unit residential buildings that stand out from their surroundings for their uniformity already replaced old warehouses, discount retailers, auto-body, and construction supplies stores that marked the edge of the neighborhood on the side of the freeway.

These changes are driven in part by planning policy. The International Boulevard corridor was one of two Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy Areas identified in Oakland's 2015–2020 Consolidated Plan for Housing and Community Development as investment areas where the city, through grants from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and public-private partnerships, aimed to improve transportation, "remove blight," and change zoning laws to stimulate new housing.¹⁰⁶ The Consolidated Plan included some language that acknowledged concerns for the displacement of existing residents, but it did not include any concrete plan to stop it.¹⁰⁷ The plan explicitly did seek to address housing scarcity in Oakland, arguing that the densification of the International Boulevard corridor, investments in public transit, and other urban services to existing residents could spark new economic activity. Provisions for affordable housing units within the plan were also codified into building policies for housing developers. As of 2020, Oakland had made some inroads into the construction of new low-income housing by adding approximately 190 new units since 2015.¹⁰⁸ Municipal programs also helped low- and moderate-income residents stay in their homes by receiving financial support for emergency hardships. Municipal efforts to address homelessness and housing precarity continue with HUD's support.¹⁰⁹

Recent evidence, however, shows that affordable housing requirements do not always succeed in keeping old residents in the neighborhood.¹¹⁰ Existing low-income residents often do not have access to new affordable units due to the way tenancies are allocated via lottery. This destabilizes social and cultural bonds

among longtime residents. And sociocultural destabilization along the International Boulevard corridor was already evident in the decrease of black and Latinx residents by 66 and 51 percent, respectively, during the thirty-year period between 1980 and 2010, and the concomitant increase of the white population.¹¹¹

In 2019 the Twenty-Third Avenue building's southwest façade, where *Culture is a Weapon* was painted, bordered a lot occupied by an abandoned gas station. Seen from the BART train, the front lot created a visual opening that framed the mural. But that view was contingent upon future development plans. As the neighborhood changes, the new buildings register how cultural gentrification shapes the urban environment and muffles, when it does not altogether erase, the political messages embedded in it. Maven, the Twenty-Third Avenue tenant-organizer, gave a concrete example of how "gentrification of the mind" operates in the neighborhood. In 2018 the board of EastSide Arts Alliance asked Maven to advocate for the needs of residents to a local council member. When Maven explained the residents' priorities regarding the council's plans to renovate International Boulevard, they recall being confronted with the question, "Is this how you want your neighborhood to look?"¹¹² Maven's interlocutor, a council member's representative, was referring to the older buildings at the intersection of International Boulevard and Twenty-Third Avenue, which represented the colorful, heterogeneous character of the ethnic neighborhood. The offhanded denigration of the neighborhood's cultural aesthetics took Maven by surprise. They realized that in their new role as a tenant-organizer with the Liberated 23rd Avenue collective, they were placed in the middle of what they described as a broader "push and pull" between institutional stakeholders and had to defend the intersectional queer culture that they had built in the neighborhood and its aesthetic manifestations.

Self-determination based on shared cultures demonstrates how the queer and transgender groups and individuals who populate the spaces discussed in this chapter spatialized claims to the right to housing and urban life. The formal attributes of these cultures were articulated through processes that have historically included Radical Faerie spiritual explorations, communal living, collective ownership, and carving out maker spaces in gentrifying neighborhoods. These spaces are neither outright separatist nor aim to assimilate within mainstream entertainment and urban planning networks. Like other case studies in this book, they exist in an in-between state in more ways than one. A common characteristic among their inhabitants is how they conceptualize sexuality and gender identity as fields of possibility expressed in particular sets of practices. A generational difference that is evident in the queering and transing practices in this chapter is an explicit attempt to create alliances from below, based on housing activism, and recognizing shared vulnerabilities with victims of racist violence, segregation, and dispossession. The physical manifestations of these coalitions in the broader landscape of the San Francisco Bay expand the notion of queer citizenship explored in this

book. In this context, queer and transgender inhabitants of faerie houses and of spaces that continue to resist gentrification in East Oakland, along with their allies, mobilize their rights and responsibilities as queer citizens to develop novel forms of land tenure that fight dispossession and cultural erasure. The study of these spaces highlights a set of insurgent practices, legal frameworks, and forms of cultural production that animate current debates about queer urban social life. They also constitute a history in the making that has the potential to shape the future of urbanism.