

Epilogue

This book has explored the historical queering of the Bay Area's landscape to understand how this process shaped contemporary urbanism in the United States and how queering urbanism, in turn, informed insurgent rifts to later twentieth-century understandings of the national political community that queer citizens had helped create. Urbanism refers to the production of the physical environment over time through decisions in everyday life that assign symbolism and political meaning to the urban landscape. In this sense, urbanism reflects and is a product of broader cultural dynamics in American society. Queering urbanism focuses on how queer people have historically shaped this landscape by occupying, appropriating, and altering physical spaces. Queering processes are as old as cities themselves. Historically, people who did not conform to social norms about gender and sexuality carved spaces out of mainstream urbanity where they could have sex and socialize. These spaces usually operated in secrecy and under the threat of violence. Since the country's founding, homosexuality in the United States was criminalized as social malaise, and periodic sweeps of homosexual hangouts in cities coincided with political campaigns about safeguarding morality. In San Francisco, the political persecution of homosexuality persisted well into the twentieth century. Yet in the last sixty years, the queering of the city has been publicly celebrated.

Queer cultures and LGBTQ+ politics in the Bay Area have received considerable attention from political theorists, sociologists, historians, and critics. This work has demonstrated that gay, lesbian, and transgender communities organized politically to pursue their rights to open participation in urban public life. To do so, they formed coalitions with other disenfranchised groups and leveraged their local political power to establish lasting institutions that gradually became embedded within the Bay's social life. Nevertheless, in these accounts, physical space

often appears as a container for social relationships or as a passive entity shaped by the forces playing out within the political sphere. In this book, I have foregrounded how different queer groups engaged with physical space to demonstrate that queer cultures emerged from spaces with distinct aesthetic and organizational characteristics, which led to articulating specific political demands. The uses and symbolism of physical spaces reveal how queer politics are enacted in everyday life. Exploring the Bay Area's landscape of queer habitation reveals meaningful differences among queer groups with divergent political projects that are essential to understanding why queering urbanism must always seek new tactics and different ways of living in the city that unsettle earlier assumptions, never reaching a telos.

The queering processes described in this book are chiefly expressed through modes of territorialization. During the period between 1965 and 2020, queer territorialization included public space occupations, building alterations, and neighborhood transformations. For example, a group of young gay and gender nonconforming people in the Tenderloin in the late 1960s, many of whom self-identified as drag queens, built a distinct material culture around a few residential hotels, public sidewalks, and the local branch of Compton's Cafeteria, which functioned as a public living room of sorts. Within the area of a few urban blocks where the police largely confined them, they developed queer group consciousness. One of the demonstrations of this new political consciousness was a riot that broke out in August 1966 at Compton's when police attempted to expel some of the queens who defended their territory.

As the public visibility of urban gay cultures increased during the following decade, new forms of territorialization emerged. Gay men in the Castro created a distinctly gay residential neighborhood following the model of San Francisco's traditional ethnic neighborhoods. The local merchant association was instrumental in building "soft" gay power, demonstrating the economic benefits of gay presence in the city. Castro's village iconography and its insular gay culture produced the "Castro clone" as the dominant gay embodiment in the late 1970s. Clones were mustachioed, muscled gay men in jeans and tight T-shirts who were part of the open public cruising culture during that time. They were typically white, middle class, with enough time to go to the gym regularly. Many of those who did not fit this image, and especially people of color, were often refused entry to bars and clubs in the neighborhood.

Another form of queer territorialization in the 1970s developed along Folsom Street, where leather bars, gay bathhouses, and sex clubs became laboratories for new forms of sexual intimacy. This sexual landscape changed dramatically during the AIDS crisis. Still, a decentralized network of leather spaces exists today, demonstrating the reach of urban queering across time and space.¹ During the AIDS crisis, queering the city took new political meanings as gay men responded to pernicious homophobia disguised as medical concern, and the devastation of their social circles. The San Francisco AIDS Foundation, which was founded in

the early days of the crisis, was instrumental in coordinating access to individual healthcare providers, clinics, and nonprofit organizations throughout the Bay Area and transferring knowledge among them. Its activities offer an example of territorialization as infrastructure building.

The spaces that lesbian feminist groups built all around the Bay Area in the 1970s and 1980s were less geographically concentrated than gay urban life before AIDS. Feminist bookstores spearheaded by lesbian feminists who were active in the women's movement represented nodes within a network of women's spaces that included women's theater groups, art classes, and education centers, among others. Still, a small lesbian territory had formed in the Mission by the mid-1980s that, unlike the Castro in the 1970s, was characterized by an active engagement with the politics of gender, race, and ethnicity.

The most consequential forms of queer territorialization for contemporary urbanism, however, are not tethered to geographically bounded gay and lesbian neighborhoods. Queer cultures may concentrate on a single building in an immigrant neighborhood, an urban garden, or a network of parties—ephemeral queer spaces that take over existing clubs and are advertised through social media. This notion of territorialization is a spatial counterpart to nonbinary embodiment. As embodiment can entail acts of transformation, such as changing one's gender or removing binary gender markers, territorialization can call into question seemingly stable spatial constructs. Acts of transformation can denote new uses but can also refer to changing aesthetics of surfaces, for example, through murals. I discussed two murals in this book, *Maestrapeace* at the Women's Building in the Mission and *Culture is a Weapon* at the Liberated 23rd building in Oakland, which employ symbolism to visualize the worlds their inhabitants seek to create. These acts of transformation affect how people and objects interact to create meaning.²

Some of the spaces I analyzed—bathhouses, sex clubs, bookstores—were ephemeral and acquired the specific meanings their inhabitants ascribed to them only within the historical conditions I identified. Others, such as Victorian homes, plazas, and clinics, have maintained their physical presence in the Bay Area. Still, their cultural and political meanings changed because of the generational and economic shifts that have reshaped the urban landscape in the last fifty years. These spaces carry queer embodied knowledge that informs ways of inhabiting the city and articulating political demands. In the San Francisco Bay, the sedimented histories of queer habitation reveal the plurality of political projects that inform contemporary struggles for urban space.

Some queer people choose not to engage with normative institutions of the state and mainstream urbanity, such as planning commissions, diversity initiatives, and urban regeneration projects that shape and perpetuate sociocultural norms.³ In this view, oppression is dispersed within asymmetrical relationships that have historically reproduced inequality, even when government agencies, for instance, employ the language of diversity. Others used territorialization to

stake claims to physical space and occupy a seat at the table of urban decision-making. This book has contextualized both of these political attitudes toward the urban as insurgent articulations of queer citizenship. Queer citizens work with and against the nation-state to produce intelligible subjects with rights and obligations. Within the heterogeneous terrain of contemporary urbanism, demands based on queer citizenship coexist with other insurgent appropriations of space and forms of urban governance. The violent erasure of queer cultures from contemporary urbanity and the dispossession of queer, transgender, and gender nonconforming people of color from the spaces where they have created networks of support are ongoing. These conditions underline the urgency to communicate historical research findings on how queering operates to subvert mainstream urbanism in ways that inform on-the-ground activism.

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On a sunny Saturday in May 2022, almost a year after completing the first draft of this book and a few days before I moved away from the Bay Area after living there for sixteen years, I biked from my home near the Castro to the National AIDS Memorial Grove in Golden Gate Park. I was there to talk to volunteers during a “workday” when they collectively maintained the ten-acre secluded park area where the Grove is located.⁴ The monthly events had taken place on and off for over thirty years. They provided opportunities for people touched by the disease to come together, maintain the landscape, and participate in a commemoration ritual. The events, which had an important community-building component, had just resumed after COVID-19 upended social life in San Francisco for almost two years, taking on additional meaning after the long period of social distancing had triggered memories of loss and loneliness.

When I arrived at the park, I followed the blue dots on Google Maps to the pin that dropped on a small meadow between the tennis courts and the California Academy of Sciences. The meadow is recessed in a shallow valley surrounded by mature trees, accessible through a carefully maintained path that traverses it on the north-south axis. The first thing I saw when I approached the tree hedge from the north was a granite boulder that marked one of the memorial’s entrances. A volunteer was cleaning an accessible map of the Grove engraved on a stone plaque near the entrance. He welcomed me and explained the day’s schedule, which had started with an early breakfast in the meadow, after which volunteers worked solo or in small groups, pruning the vegetation and maintaining the Grove’s infrastructure.

When I arrived, the day’s work was almost complete, and the “workday” volunteer who was my guide to this peculiar memorial service told me to relax and take everything in. That day, approximately 100–150 people volunteered their time to work in the Grove. They included people living with HIV, family members and friends of those who had died, LGBTQ+ activists, and younger queer people. Children ran around the meadow, contributing to the lively atmosphere. Sometime in



FIGURE 20. The Circle of Friends at the AIDS Grove–National AIDS Memorial in 2023. Names of people who died of AIDS are carved into the stone circle, where remembrance rituals take place. Photograph by the author. © Stathis G. Yeros.

the late afternoon, a bell rang to summon everyone to form a circle, hold hands, and debrief about the day's work. That was an opportunity for the volunteers to renew their commitment to maintaining the Grove collectively and to the lives memorialized there. A smaller group gathered at the Circle of Friends, an open-air gathering space that functions as the memorial's centerpiece. Hundreds of names of people who died of AIDS and their loved ones are engraved on the Circle's flag-stone paving (fig. 20). There, volunteers performed an intimate ritual reading of the names of those they had lost to AIDS over the last forty years.

A small group of people affected by the disease, which included architects and landscape architects, began planning the Grove in 1987. They envisioned a space where they could process collective grief and remember the lives of those they had lost. After the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department identified a seven-and-a-half-acre section of Golden Gate Park (which later grew to ten acres), group members volunteered to design a memorial garden. The volunteers slowly combed through the overgrown vegetation, as the selected section had fallen into disuse because of budget cuts earlier in the decade. They drained the stagnant water and built paths, including an accessible entrance with a ramp. They reintroduced native plant species, making sure that there were at least a few plants in bloom every season throughout the year. Benches were placed throughout, some of which were in secluded areas for visitors who needed privacy to reflect

and remember. Over the years, family members, friends, and life partners sponsored the placement of granite stones engraved with the names of those they had lost to AIDS.⁵ In 1996 the Grove was designated as the first and only National AIDS Memorial through an initiative led by San Francisco congresswoman and later House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and signed by President Clinton. Even after the memorial designation, volunteers guided by landscape professionals continued to perform its upkeep. “Workdays” remained an important part of the commemoration practices spearheaded by the initial group of volunteers, most of whom were themselves lost to the disease.

Between 1982 and 1999 more than 18,000 people, the majority of them gay and bisexual men, died of AIDS in San Francisco.⁶ The degree of social devastation is hard to overestimate. Before effective drugs were developed in the mid-1990s, receiving an HIV diagnosis meant almost certainly an agonizing death. This added to the urgency to form new activist groups and organizations. The network of spaces that addressed the needs of people living with HIV included the dedicated inpatient area at San Francisco General Hospital, where the “San Francisco model of healthcare” was pioneered, individual clinics, hospices, homeless shelters, and other forms of housing. Their day-to-day operation required the mobilization of a large part of the city’s heterosexual population as well, and the support of elected representatives.

During the first two decades of the crisis, government inaction in the face of AIDS and the stigmatization of homosexuality sparked public protests that included marches and picketing, familiar from an earlier phase of the gay liberation movement. A new form of urban protest emerged in the mid-1980s intended to humanize gay men’s plights to cultivate empathy for their cause. These protests deliberately sidelined erotic representations of homosexuality. During the previous decade, homosexual iconography and discussions of gay sexual practices in bathhouses and public parks were visible manifestations of gay public cultures in the city. The desexualization of this landscape does not mean that gay people stopped having sex or that gay sexual practices were no longer a subject in national public discourse. Rather, by focusing on other aspects of gay social life, such as political organizing and, to a certain extent, gay domesticity, urban AIDS activism reshaped the meaning of queer citizenship in the United States.⁷

Public art about AIDS also operated through empathy at the intersection of protest and movement building. One of this period’s most well-known community artworks is the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Cleve Jones, a political activist in San Francisco who had worked for Harvey Milk in the late 1970s, conceived the Quilt in 1985 as a participatory project to memorialize the lives of people who died of AIDS and advocate for government support to fight the disease. The Quilt consists of individual fabric panels measuring three by six feet, the typical size of a human grave, stitched together in groups of eight. As the Quilt grew, the construction of panels took on a communal character. Stitching workshops took place first at the

Women's Building of the Bay Area and later in a dedicated space on Market Street. The workshops at the Women's Building, the feminist organization in the Mission spearheaded by lesbians in the late 1970s, demonstrate the broader coalitions that San Franciscans formed in the face of the medical emergency. Over the years, individual panels became more and more elaborate with embroidered images, messages, ribbons, teddy bears, and, on a few occasions, fabric pouches with the deceased person's ashes.⁸ Besides family members and friends constructing panels for their loved ones, some AIDS patients created their own panels to be included in the Quilt after their passing.

The NAMES Project, the organization that coordinated the Quilt's construction and its public showings, organized installations, usually paired with quilt-making workshops in cities all around the United States. The Quilt is perhaps best remembered today through its monumental installations on the National Mall in Washington, DC. The first occurred on October 11, 1987, when volunteers unfolded almost two thousand panels and then took turns reading the names of the people represented on the Quilt aloud. Since then, the Quilt has traveled to Washington several times and has been displayed in dozens of other cities around the country. As the focus on community outreach about awareness and prevention shifted from the urban epicenters of early activism to underserved communities, especially in the southern United States, the NAMES Project moved its headquarters to Atlanta in 2000, where the Quilt was stored for twenty years. With more than fifty thousand panels to date, the Quilt is the largest community art project in the world. As it is made primarily out of fabric, it is also a fragile artifact, requiring frequent repairs, which can be costly. In 2020 the National AIDS Memorial took over the NAMES Project and relocated the physical panels to San Francisco to perform storing, maintenance, and community outreach tasks. The remaining collection of objects associated with the project, such as cards, letters, and personal mementos, is part of the National Archives in Washington, DC. The Quilt has been fully digitized, and its panels are searchable on a dedicated website through the National AIDS Memorial.⁹

In June 2022 the Memorial organized the largest installation of the Quilt outside Washington, DC, in Golden Gate Park (fig. 21). The event provided an opportunity for friends and relatives of people whose lives are interwoven as part of the Quilt—who are not only gay and include many women, transgender/gender nonconforming, and heterosexual men who died of AIDS—to remember and celebrate them together. It was also an occasion to reflect on the project's legacy and to look into the future. During the last two decades, most of the Quilt's criticism has focused on its overreliance on empathy that can mute the radical political message of institutional reforms to address structural inequalities in accessing healthcare and other resources.¹⁰ Critics have also pointed out that it is predominantly associated with white cisgender gay men, and its memorial function has not been equally adopted in communities of color.¹¹ As political speech in the



FIGURE 21. Installation of the NAMES Project–AIDS Memorial Quilt at Golden Gate Park in June 2022. Photograph by Terry Schmitt. © Alamy.

national arena, the Quilt has achieved broad consensus about addressing AIDS as a national emergency, leading millions of people to see AIDS patients as children, parents, siblings, friends, and lovers and not just numbers in grim statistics. To do so, Quilt-makers have also tended to sanitize some of the raunchier aspects of gay erotic cultures, focusing instead on sentimental images and messaging (with some exceptions).¹²

Evidenced by the three thousand Quilt panels during the installation, the signs and symbols of the vibrant queer cultures that have shaped the Bay Area's queer landscape during the last fifty years are striking. The memorialization of individuals is part of the Quilt's power to elicit emotional responses from its viewers. Meanwhile, the memorialization of a collective queer culture demonstrates its value as a historical document. As a form of political activism, the Quilt has embedded queer lives and collective cultures within the late twentieth-century historical construction of a community of national citizens. Undoubtedly, some of the people commemorated on the Quilt, many of whom were only referenced by their first name due to the social stigmatization of homosexuality, were not United States citizens. However, they became part of the national story through the queer cultures they participated in.

The Quilt and the Grove, the National AIDS Memorial's two projects, both operate at the intersection of remembrance and advocacy. The Memorial's program of events, online resources, and fellowships address ongoing medical and

social challenges and focus on overlooked histories of the crisis. For example, a recent oral history video project highlighted the effect of AIDS among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and another focused on transgender people living with HIV. Importantly, the Memorial is also an organization with a physical site and is the steward of a physical artifact. The Grove is part of a public park with a history as a site for gay public sex and as a countercultural movement nexus due to its association with 1960s hippie gatherings. The Memorial's function adds another layer of meaning to the park as part of the city's queer urban landscape. The Memorial's physical and discursive spaces demonstrate how queer people, urban cultures, and politics have left an indelible imprint on American society, urbanism, and national citizenship.