

“We came here to get away from you”
The Loss of Seattle’s ‘Gayborhood’

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John Criscitello's poster concisely captures the sentiment rising in Capitol Hill's queer community.



John Criscitello's posters represent the growing resentment of the increasing straight demographic on Capitol Hill (Chin, 2015).

Stating, “We came here to get away from you” in simple black-on-white text (Criscitello, 2015), it manifests the frustration felt by LGBTQ+ individuals confronted by social and economic changes in what has traditionally been their neighborhood. What once was home to artists, low-income residents, and the LGBTQ+ community is now facing increased housing costs, fragmentation, and violence from a booming nightclub and bar scene. This paper will outline the ways in which Capitol Hill is changing by first addressing the methods and limitations of our research study, and investigating the characteristics of queer safe spaces; discussing the causes and effects of gentrification, community division, and violence; and finally conclude by describing future implications for LGBTQ+ safe spaces.

Methods and Limitations

¹ The terms “queer” and “LGBTQ+” will be used interchangeably.

Our study was composed of interviews, observational studies, and a review of print and online resources pertaining to the LGBTQ+ community on Capitol Hill. The six interviews are summarized in Appendix I, and the semi-structured questionnaire is included in Appendix II.

The observational studies consisted mainly of observing the interiors and exteriors of bars on Capitol Hill. Both gay bars and straight bars were included in the study. Additionally, the layout of Capitol Hill and the exteriors of businesses were noted.

Finally, our review of print and online resources included books, blogs, newspaper articles, and art. These provided us with historical context along with deeper insight into the issues facing the Capitol Hill queer community.

We hoped to gain a diverse perspective among members of the Capitol Hill queer community regarding sexual and gender identity, age, and race; however the small scope of the interviews conducted did not allow us to explore the intersections of the LGBTQ+ community fully. Capitol Hill neighborhood is a large and diverse community, and our results can only be useful in identifying major trends. Any applications of these trends to smaller groups within Capitol Hill may not be valid.

Analysis of Capitol Hill's Safe Spaces

Our research showed that “safe spaces” for the LGBTQ+ community were those spaces clearly designated as queer, either by being explicitly defined as such (i.e. gay bars, which have historically been the root of gay culture), or by physical traits of the clientele. The characteristics of a safe space are largely defined by experiences in straight culture, where straight spaces are “a reminder of being the ‘other’” (RI 2). As Mike Reis stated when interviewed by Eric Mandel, “we need a place to go other than straight places... A place to be ourselves” (Mandel, 2014). Those interviewed in our study mentioned similar characteristics; according to one participant, “being surrounded by other queer people is enough” (RI 2). Physical markings clearly also play a role, as another

participant in our study described the importance of a “visible presence of the lesbian community”, such as women with short hair or wearing plaid (RI 1).

Traditionally, these spaces have been gay bars and nightclubs (RI 2), likely due to the secrecy these venues have provided for stigmatized identities. Additionally, the alcohol and drugs that accompany the bar scene are a release for the negative psychological effects of belonging to an oppressed group, especially being “in the closet”. The close ties to the bar scene and the dependency on drugs and alcohol can make queer individuals more susceptible to substance abuse. For example, one of the interviewees recalls calling a bar “church” in his youth (RCI 1). Another downside to the gravitation towards bars and nightclubs is their inaccessibility to youth, the low-income community, and those struggling with drug or alcohol problems. Nearly all of those interviewed recognized the lack of safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth.

The results also indicated that a sense of safety was much more complex than a binary of safe:unsafe space. Spaces outside of designated queer spaces are “default straight spaces”. Even Pike and Pine, streets in the center of Capitol Hill are “quirky and artsy” but “don’t feel queer” (RI 2). We propose that Capitol Hill neighborhood, rather than being one large safe space, is a high concentration of smaller safe spaces, such as gay bars, LGBTQ+ resource centers, and other queer-centric spaces.

Finally, the spaces deemed “queer” generally cater to white male crowds. While each bar has a variety of clientele, it may be hard for marginalized identities *within* the LGBTQ+ community to “find a space” (RCI 2). One participant counted three designated lesbian bars in the 1990’s, one of which remains. In comparison to the multitude of gay bars, it’s clear that not all identities are represented equally within the LGBTQ+ spectrum. The white, male, middle-class audience financially contributes most to the bar scene; those not holding dominant identities may have more difficulty finding a space (RI 2; RCI 2).

Gentrification and Economic Changes

Gary Atkins describes Capitol Hill and Pioneer Square of the late 1970's as "a nascent community with almost no visible economic infrastructure," with queer-owned businesses "meagerly limited to gay and lesbian bars and sex businesses" (2003, p. 259). Movement to the suburbs had caused rent to decrease, which made Capitol Hill a viable option for queer individuals (Hill, 2003). The early 1980's saw the formation of small gay- and lesbian-owned businesses in the Broadway Market (Atkins, 2003, p. 264). Participants in our research described how "everything used to be local, 'scuzzy' businesses" (RCI 1).

Capitol Hill was "stigmatized" by the straight community, and "the stigma kept it queer" (RI 1). Attitudes towards early Capitol Hill are decidedly nostalgic among the queer community; labeled as both a "gay mecca" (CMI) and a "gay ghetto" (RI 1), Capitol Hill represents both the confinement faced by marginalized groups as well as the possibility for community found in this space.

The intrusion of chain stores into Capitol Hill is generally recognized as the catalyst of change in the queer community, namely QFC and Safeway grocery stores (Atkins, 2003, p. 261-262). Other chains, such as Urban Outfitters, now hold space on Capitol Hill. Seattle Central Community College, a religious institution, has expanded, bringing with it "young, straight people from middle-to-upper income families" (RI 1). The development and expansion of non-queer spaces has at its worst pushed out queer-owned businesses, and at its best diluted Capitol Hill as a queer space.

The tech boom in Seattle was also widely acknowledged as a changing factor. Capitol Hill's proximity to downtown and its reputation as a "trendy, hip place" make it an appealing location (RI 2), presumably attracting tech workers. The low rent that once made Capitol Hill a convenient home to the LGBTQ+ community also made it vulnerable to gentrification. All participants in our study described the transition from affordable housing to expensive condos. Stories of displacement of queer individuals are overwhelmingly common among the Capitol Hill community (RCI 2).

Together, the loss of LGBTQ+-owned businesses and affordable housing has ostensibly led to a loss of ownership in the community. Individuals seeking the experience of living in a queer community are dispersed by high cost of living (RCI 1). As queer individuals can no longer afford to live on Capitol Hill, nor find businesses that celebrate their identity, Capitol Hill's identity as the "gay neighborhood" has understandably diminished.

Effects of Greater Acceptance on Group Identity

The greater acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in mainstream society has had both positive and negative effects on the community, including invasion of queer spaces and fragmentation of the queer community.

Decreased stigma surrounding queer spaces, such as gay bars, has opened the door to appropriation of these spaces. The nightclub scene is drawing in a straight clientele, notably bachelorette parties in gay bars and men frequenting the Wildrose, a traditionally lesbian bar (RI 1). One participant mentioned that straight visitors to gay bars act like they're "going to a zoo" but don't realize the damage they're doing to the space (RI 2). Even in resource centers, well-intentioned allies may "dilute" the space or use micro-aggressions; therefore some exclusivity may be necessary to maintain the sense of a queer safe space (RCI 1).

Regarding fragmentation of the queer community, a review of relevant sociological literature explains the shift. William Robinson found that in a social group, there exist "prototypes" of ingroup members. Those within the group that are most similar to the prototype have the highest status in the group. A strong identification with a group correlates to a strong identification with the prototype (Robinson, 1996, p. 72). Within the LGBTQ+ community, this is undoubtedly a complex factor, as the many identities (seen in the length of the acronym alone) represent many distinct prototypes. These prototypes speak to the fragmentation in the queer community. As Robinson notes, differentiation between subgroups leads to less identification with the overarching social group (1996, p. 77). In this way, the representation of new identities in the queer community

may lead to less cohesiveness of the queer community as a whole. It follows that the lack of cohesiveness and group identity will hinder the development of *queer* spaces, although it may lead to further development of spaces for individuals identifying as trans*, bisexual, lesbian, etc.

As it's easier for queer-identifying individuals to find safe spaces outside of dedicated resource centers and bars due to greater acceptance in mainstream society, involvement in community resource centers has decreased (RCI 1). While the relative prevalence of safe spaces is undoubtedly positive, the lack of community may be seen as a downside.

Violence and the Nightclub Scene

Violence on Capitol Hill is generally thought to correlate with the growing nightclub scene. In the 1980's, hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community in Capitol Hill were planned incidents; now, with the nightclubs and bars drawing clientele from across Seattle, the perpetrators are already in the neighborhood and they are "opportunistic crimes" (SPD, RCI 1).

From the police perspective, the prevalence of nightclubs and bars makes the neighborhood an easy target for crime (SPD). It can be difficult to distinguish between hate crimes and general criminal activity (SPD). Regardless of whether the increased crime is from the nightclubs alone or represents a rise in violence against the queer community, the *perception* of the queer community is that violence against queer individuals has increased ("5 reasons for Capitol Hill's hate crime 'spike'", 2014). This undoubtedly leads to a decreased sense of safe space.

Implications for Future Development of Safe Spaces

Despite the increased acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in mainstream society, the need for safe spaces has not disappeared. The strains on the community caused by gentrification, decreased group cohesion, the booming nightclub scene, and general loss of ownership may be mitigated.

In their study of queer spaces in Atlanta affected by many of the same influences reshaping Capitol Hill, P.L. Doan and H. Higgins made several recommendations. Firstly, they suggest preservation of queer landmarks to increase visibility (Doan and Higgins, 2011, p. 21).

Additionally, they suggest greater protection for queer businesses, bars, and community gathering spaces against chain stores and city regulations (Doan and Higgins, 2011, p. 21). Our research findings support these results.

In considering the development of safe spaces, several approaches should be considered. Firstly, queer spaces in the bar and nightclub scene should be preserved either by making their stance as a queer space obvious, or by banning disruptive behaviors, such as bachelorette parties. Secondly, more focus must be given to creating safe spaces for youth and those pursuing a substance-free lifestyle. As less involvement is being observed in resource centers, these spaces for youth should require little commitment, and should serve the same purpose as a bar or nightclub: a place to have fun and be together. When designing alternative spaces, the intersections of class, ability, and race should be considered to make the spaces optimally inclusive. Finally, while the next 'gayborhood' may not be Capitol Hill, and may not even have a geographic center, the ties of Seattle's LGBTQ+ community should be maintained for the next generation of Seattle's queers to claim their space.

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Appendix I: Interviews

Resident Interviews were conducted one-on-one. Both participants were recruited by a posting in a “Seattle Queer Exchange” Facebook group targeting self-identifying queer residents of Seattle. For ethical reasons, the identities of the residents have been kept anonymous. The interviews with residents were semi-structured, with a predetermined script. The participants were allowed to review the notes at the end of the interview to ensure accuracy.

RI 1: Former Resident of Capitol Hill contacted via Skype, April 13, 2015.

RI 2: Current Resident of Capitol Hill; contacted in-person, April 14, 2015.

Resource centers were contacted directly to schedule interviews. Our interview with the Lambert House was a very informal round-table discussion with the three members of our research team and approximately six representatives of the Lambert House community present. The interview with LGBTQ Allyship was conducted one-on-one over the phone.

RCI 1: Representatives of Lambert House, a community center targeting LGBTQ+ youth between the ages of 14 and 22; contacted in-person, April 23, 2015.

RCI 2: Representative of LGBTQ Allyship, a social justice organization and resource center; contacted via telephone, April 30, 2015.

The anonymous community volunteers were casually recruited by visiting a resource center in person. Their identities are kept anonymous for ethical purposes, and the name of the resource center has been withheld, as they were not acting as representatives of the center.

CMI: Anonymous Volunteers; contacted on-person, April 25, 2015.

The representative of the Seattle Police Department (SPD) was contacted directly and the interview was conducted over the phone.

SPD: James Ritter, Seattle Police Department LGBTQ+ Liaison; contacted via telephone, April 25, 2015.

Appendix II: Interview Questionnaire

Introduction:

Thank you for deciding to participate in our interview project! We really appreciate your input. The interview should take 30-45 minutes. It is perfectly fine if you do not know the answer to a question, or do not wish to respond to a question, and you are free to leave at any point during the interview.

At the end, you'll have a chance to review the information from the interview and clarify or remove anything. If you have any questions or concerns about privacy or anonymity, please let us know, and we'll be happy to work with you.

Interview Questions:

- 1.) Describe your relationship to Capitol Hill, i.e. how long have you lived there, how long did you live there, how often do you go there and for what purpose?
 - Why did you decide to move to Capitol Hill as opposed to other neighborhoods in Seattle?
 - Why did you leave Capitol Hill?

- 2.) To what extent do you feel that Capitol Hill is a safe space for the queer community? Why?
 - Has this space become less safe? How and why?
 - What makes you feel safe here?

- 3.) What LGBTQ+ specific places (bars, community centers, etc) do you frequent?
 - What draws you to these places over other non-specific queer spaces?

- 4.) What do you feel is the attitude of the larger Seattle community toward the Capitol Hill community?

- 5.) What sort of qualities make a space safe for you?

- 6.) What sorts of safe spaces or neighborhoods are needed for members of your community?

- 7.) What sorts of changes have you seen in the community?