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ARCH 409: Egalitarian Metropolis

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Cultural Production for Detroit's Queer Population

In the context of American cities, an egalitarian metropolis might strive to be a functioning community in which all of its members benefit from equal access, equal representation, and collective participation. An egalitarian metropolis does not yet exist within Detroit. However, in contrast to a now-common ethos of Detroit as a site of urban ruin, there remains a strong commitment to community-based values and a historical legacy of urban perseverance that define its residents. The term "egalitarian" attributes an equal value to all the parts of a whole. However, this goal of urban equality cannot be achieved without leveraging institutional systems of *inequality* that have defined every urban fabric of the United States since its inception. The egalitarian metropolis must also embrace principles of equity—the understanding that communities of diverse backgrounds and ways of living will require diverse urban strategies to support them. To achieve notions of an egalitarian metropolis, I am focused on the historical processes of cultural-placemaking within Detroit's LGBTQ population; engaging those histories in the participatory-planning efforts of Detroit's future narrative.

In his 1903 essay *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois describes notions of a "double-consciousness" existing for Black inhabitants of the United States. His definition of this term forms a spiritual critique of the environment through which people of African descent experienced a post-Reconstruction America. Double-consciousness, with varied abstraction in

application, describes a persistent disconnect between the internal sense of "self" and the socio-political or cultural context our physical bodies might engage. In the context of Du Bois' writings, double-consciousness exists specifically for the bodies and minds of marginalized individuals living within broader oppressive power structures. Du Bois makes the important distinction that this dissonance between an inner sense of self and a "true" sense of consciousness is not a biological default of Black bodies, but rather a product of the socially-constructed oppressive landscapes that inform the psyche in its environment (Du Bois 38).

Du Bois' theoretical framework for a double-consciousness recognizes that human emotion, human interaction, and the ways we move throughout our environments are all interconnected phenomena. When situated within our country's broader urban histories, it becomes clear that the consequences of a double-consciousness—as experienced by marginalized individuals in urban life—have spatial implications for how we navigate and create our built environments. Therefore, the effects of a dual state of emotional being are not only psychological, but architectural. The desire for community and a sense of place, especially through the lens of oppressive institutions, causes us to engage our urban landscapes in ways that do not always conform to rigid spatial binaries or western, capitalists constructs of urban territory.

Spatial binaries—the distinction between public and private realms, and the social decrees of what does or does not belong in either—have historically allowed the built environment to reinforce the social consequences of institutions onto the urban masses. The socio-spatial conventions embedded within planned urban space inform how we might build community, perform social rituals that generate meaning, or establish a sense of identity in

cohesion with our environment. The socially-constructed institutions of white supremacy, heterosexuality, and late-stage capitalism have all—through both historical and contemporary mechanisms—policed the existence of queer bodies as they traverse arbitrarily gendered, racialized, and Western-coded boundaries. In the United States, queer populations that exist outside of the sexual or gendered conventions of Heterosexuality have still been able to establish collective moments of community through acts of spatial resistance—resistance to policing and resistance to erasure. Thus, the perseverance of community, and specifically in the contexts of queer cultural-production, have historically depended on leveraging both "deviant" and creative spatial practices.

To situate examples of these ideas within the history of Detroit, I will first focus on the city's Ballroom community. Underground ballroom culture originated in New York City throughout the 1920's and 1930's as a ritual of predominantly white, queer men gathering in secrecy to perform in drag. The following decades saw this practice expand to most large urban centers in the United States, as well as growing participation from Black, Latinx, and trans members of the LGBTQ community. With ballroom culture still being a widespread cultural practice to date, it has assumed complex spatial and social functions that foster queer art, self expression, kinship, and empowerment (Bailey 494).

Ballroom culture's modern identity in Detroit began in the late 1960's and early 1970's. This period was marked by the beginning of a post-Stonewall era in queer political consciousness, the rapid expansion of white suburbia, and deepening racial divisions. Black and Latinx members of New York's ballroom scene had been facing mounting challenges at the intersection of queerness in a heteronormative society, as well as a culture of racial prejudice from white members of the ballroom community (Bailey 494). Through mobilizing efforts, the

modern identity of ballroom culture emerged in Harlem as a departure from the predominantly-white practice. These earliest founders, as well as a number of ballroom's participants today, were working-class Black, Latinx, and Trans residents determined to establish an inclusive sense of community. From this point forward, ballroom culture became a sanctuary for authentic expression that critiques various systems of institutional heterosexuality as well their implications of whiteness.

This new, deliberately race-conscious art form was quickly adopted by queer communities of color elsewhere in cities like Detroit. Today's ball culture consists of elaborate performance competitions that happen at community gatherings, and a sophisticated structure of kinship through ballroom "houses." In essence, modern ballroom culture is a spatial reckoning with the double consciousness encountered by its members that live life both authentically and in disguise.

In addition to its cultural benefits, the spatial practice of ballroom culture is significant in its development from societal margins . The ballroom events themselves, in addition to their planning, preparation, and house structures, require the active involvement of the community and social interaction. Born from ostracization in urban institutional realms, Detroit's ballroom culture can be considered a spatial reclamation of urban margins. Through collective action, ritual, and artistic expression, Detroit's ballroom scene has provided a queer space for the experimentation and creation of distinctly-queer communities.

The various rituals of ballroom culture encourage an expression, and more importantly a critique, of the gendered, racial, and economic conditions that actively target queer communities of color in public urban life. Through balls, notions of "performance" become spatial mechanisms of empowerment. The performance, the gathering of an audience, and the exchange

of ritualistic knowledge all demonstrate ballroom culture's ephemeral yet crucial hand in a participatory agency of queer community. In Marlon Bailey's article, *Engendered Space: Ballroom Culture and the Spatial Practice of Possibility in Detroit,* they reference "geographies of exclusion" that exist in urban memory of marginalized people, specifically at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality for Black members of the LGBTQ community. They explain that this is the factor which compels Black members of the Ballroom community to create their own spaces of inclusion, affirmation, and celebration. Through this lens, Ballroom space transcends its easily-discernible benefits to the community and serves as a spatial platform to construct new social, spatial, and political imaginaries.

Outside of the practice of ballroom culture, communal infrastructure for Detroit's LGBTQ residents has taken shape in a series of queer-identified neighborhoods. Throughout the course of the twentieth century, three distinct neighborhoods assumed identities as queer spaces in Detroit: Downtown, New Center, and Palmer Park. Examples of cultural infrastructure within these spaces have ranged from bars, book stores, galleries, sexual cruising grounds, performance spaces, barbershops, and locally-owned restaurants. The identity of these communities are both spatial and cultural; both uniquely resilient and terrorized. Their formation did not come through recognition in large-scale planning efforts. Rather, they materialized through collective action and in spite of a city government that was negligent-at-best, and predatory-at-worst. These neighborhoods materialized through a queer-coded double-consciousness in navigating both social and geographical terrains of Detroit's urban fabric. Shared sentiments of perseverance and a desire for community became agents of spatial change as queer residents endured the consequences of urban life in the twentieth century.

Today, the Detroit region's largest concentration of predominantly LGBTQ+ communities, businesses, and resources are located in the suburban cities of Ferndale and Royal Oak. Early research into this community's history revealed a century of northward migration from Detroit's downtown, to Cass Corridor, then to Palmer Park, before crossing 8-Mile Road to its present-day location in the 1980's. Given the historical and ongoing complexities of racial segregation, suburban expansion, and neglectful practice in Detroit, this pattern of migration reflects an interconnected history of policy-making, urban disinvestment, and urban destruction. These forces have not only targeted Detroit's queer populations, but exacerbated gendered, class, and racial tensions existing amongst their members.

In pursuit of Detroit's own egalitarian metropolis, it is important to register queer urban life as a dynamic socio-cultural process. In doing so, we might reject notions of permanent material solutions or fixed-social conditions being solely responsible for Detroit's present-day conditions. Understanding Detroit's history; through its divisions of race, gender, class, and sexuality; will inspire a critical approach toward culturally-cohesive strategies in an incredibly diverse landscape of people, perspectives, and interests. Participatory methods of community-building and decision-making can prove effective at linking diverse populations and ensuring a landscape for the continued creative growth and experimental ways of urban life. An emphasis on participatory-planning methods engages certain crucial questions at every phase of decision-making: Who should be considered, and what are their needs? Who has agency in this conversation? Who is accountable for its creation, resources, and maintenance? And, what kind of reparations will set the conditions for future progress to begin?

Transformative place-making is a conceptual approach that attempts to leverage the discrepancies of access, equity, and representation within decision-making. In the article

Transformative Placemaking: A Framework to Create Connected, Vibrant, and Inclusive Communities, Jennifer Vey details the concept of transformative placemaking as both an integrated and iterative process in speculating the future of cities. There are three core components outlined in this placemaking strategy: scope, scale, and integration.

The scope of transformative placemaking addresses the need for place-based opportunities for wealth and resources in a community (Vey and Love). In the context of Detroit's queer urban fabrics, the scope of "transformative" thinking could energize and empower individuals by embracing the unique characteristics of diverse community landscapes, and recognizing the value in existing cultural assets. Transformative placemaking approaches scale as a loose measurement of geographical boundaries and heavier emphasis on the market possibilities of a region. For the history of queer neighborhoods that have emerged and evolved with Detroit, this provides an opportunity to analyze how isolated instances of cultural infrastructure impact the broader urban context and its formation of a communal heritage. Qualitative metrics like this provide a more in-depth analysis of what a specific community's values encompass, and offer insight into what features of the existing urban landscape hold meaning to Detroit's existing queer fabric.

The final component of transformative placemaking applies an integrated method of problem-solving across disciplines. As the spatial and political urbanisms of queer identity might exist outside of conventional spatial binaries, a diverse network of voices and experiences will need to be understood for change to have a meaningful, unifying impact on the community it serves. It is through this pretext of integrative problem-solving that I believe Detroit is especially equipped to engage transformative placemaking strategies. One potential resource in Detroit, and its metropolitan area, is the expansive network of academic institutions, possessing a broad

network of intellectual interests in sociology, architecture, planning, and economics. Outside of academic institutions, community members from around Detroit's neighborhood can lend personal expertise in the established practices and rituals of the environment, and how to best utilize urban space in benefit of their own established urban practices.

As a communal resource, queer spaces can facilitate the exchange of knowledge and the building of a distinctly-queer identity. As important as the product itself is the processes through which it is achieved. The participatory nature of Ballroom culture highlights a perseverance and longing for a sense of place. This collective social ideal informs how queer individuals might navigate an ever-evolving urban landscape seeking to alienate them.

Moving beyond the instances of isolated social rituals, examining the roles of neighborhoods in Detroit's queer narrative provides insight into the spaces and landscapes through which marginalized communities have been able to establish a sense of collective heritage. From Downtown Detroit, to New Center, to Palmer Park, and Ferndale, cultural infrastructure for Detroit's queer residents—in the contexts of its formation and meaning—have repeatedly challenged the built environment as more than a series of ephemeral interventions. Cultural-planning and histories of placemaking are crucial factors in understanding the potential of urban space. Awareness of the conditions that both define and inspire queer urban life can help us unlock limitless potential for diverse, cohesive strategies toward urban world-building.

In the contexts of an Egalitarian Metropolis, learning from Detroit's history while engaging the needs and values of its current residents positions the future of Detroit as an opportunity for cooperative action. Questions of an equitable and just cultural strategy—one that suits the diverse, ever-changing community that already exists within Detroit's borders—must engage a queer-coded consciousness of urban space.

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