

Entryways to Queerness: Exploring the Architecture of Sexual Racism

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Environmental Design
2021

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Abstract

This research analyzes how racial discrimination against black, indigenous, and other queer people of color presents itself through the entryways of queer bars. Queer bars and clubs have been safe havens for sexual orientation and gender identities, places of no harassment due to the relentless efforts that fought for love and unity, against heteronormativity during the late 1960's.¹ Although there has been a fight against heteronormativity, there is still an internal battle of racial discrimination within the queer community that has not been prioritized.

Racial discrimination throughout the queer community is unfortunate and it is a consistent experience for BIPOC queer users throughout the spaces of queer bars. Throughout the 1960's and 1970's, charging extra for cover, turning off the music, and raising prices on drinks are all forms of discouraging BIPOC queer users from using white queer bars.² Although this discrimination does not present itself in the same form today does not mean it no longer exists. The importance of an entrance in relation with a queer bar can be the transition between heteronormativity and homosexuality, while also including or excluding a user from a space based on their race or ethnicity. This research combines both race and sexuality to address the sexual racism that presents itself in the built environment by posing the question, how do the entrances of queer bars in Denver represent racial discrimination against BIPOC queer users?

In developing this research, I determined a set of queer bars in Denver for a series of site visits. Throughout these site visits, a set of qualitative research questions were answered based on the themes of transitions and thresholds, architecture and sexual racism, and signage. These qualitative research questions were then answered based on observations at the sites. These

¹ Frank, Walter M. 2014. *Law and the Gay Rights Story: The Long Search for Equal Justice in a Divided Democracy*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. 32.

² Sam Lefebvre. *SF's First Black-Owned Gay Bar Offered Refuge from Racism in the '90s Queer Scene*. KQED, June 4, 2019.

observations would then be used as a tool to analyze the sexual racism that presents itself at queer bars.

The timing of this research has taken on a unique, and important role during the time of COVID-19. Across the United States the world-wide pandemic has caused various queer bars to shut their doors.

The contributions of this research give back to the LGBTQ+ community by bringing attention and dismantling the explicit or implicit discrimination that takes place throughout these spaces. This research also demonstrates how environmental design can address social issues, focused on race and sexuality.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION: DRAFTING QUEERNESS	5
Destabilizing Heteronormative Architecture	6
The Frame of Sexual Racism	9
Queer Bars and Sexual Racism	12
The Entrance of Sexual Racism	15
RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODS: DECODING THE VISUALS OF SEXUAL RACISM	19
Methodological Framework	19
FINDINGS: THE ARCHITECTURE OF SEXUAL RACISM	23
Lipstick Nightclub	23
Pride and Swagger	29
Denver Sweet	34
Trade Gay Bar	40
Blush & Blu Bar	44
Potrero Nightclub	48
CONCLUSIONS	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY	53

Introduction: Drafting Queerness

This research recognizes how sexuality is embodied and, I argue for the importance of understanding and highlighting queer bars and their spatial qualities in relationship with sexual racism. These bars are analyzed through the lens of race by spatially analyzing how white capital, a form of appreciation for white people, results in social and cultural advantages throughout queer bars. These advantages may include but are not limited to political rights, economic opportunities, and other conditions of resources that otherwise would not be granted to someone of a different race or ethnicity. This research takes white capital and seeks to understand how it can become spatially embodied. In exploring this it also uncovers the sexual racism of space which is the specific racial prejudice enacted in sex or romance.³ In decoding the sexual discrimination of these spaces, the entrances of queer bars are specifically focused on since these are primary hotspots for where sexual racism takes place. Chong-suk Han writes in, “They Don't Want To Cruise Your Type: Gay Men of Color and the Racial Politics of Exclusion” that,

“Standing at the door of various gay bars, I've been asked, on several occasions, by doormen if I was aware that it was a gay bar. One doorman added one particular instance after I answered in the affirmative, ‘You must want a drink.’ In these instances, unlike other instances of blatant racism that I discuss below, it just didn't occur to the doormen that being gay and Asian was within the realm of the possible.”⁴

Han highlights, that this problematic assumption that if gay men are white, then non-white men must not be gay.⁵ This research accounts for experiences such as Han's and analyzes how the

³ Callander, Denton, Christy E. Newman, and Martin Holt. 2015. *Is Sexual Racism really Racism? Distinguishing Attitudes Toward Sexual Racism and Generic Racism among Gay and Bisexual Men*. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 44 (7): 1991.

⁴ Han, Chong-suk. 2007. *They Don't Want to Cruise Your Type: Gay Men of Color and the Racial Politics of Exclusion*. *Social Identities* 13 (1): 55.

⁵ Ibid. 55.

experience of sexual racism is embodied in the entrances of these queer bars and other spatial elements. More specifically this research analyzes how the entryways of queer bars can enforce sexual racism towards black, indigenous, and other people of color.

Destabilizing Heteronormative Architecture

Queerness, according to Dastagir in "LGBTQ Definitions Every Good Ally should Know," states that the term queer originated as a slur but has now become an umbrella term that describes how people reject binary categories of gender and sexual orientation. This includes individuals who embrace identities and sexual orientations outside mainstream heterosexual and gender norms.⁶ By creating a queer space, it takes the rejection of heteronormativity and transcribes it into a space that rejects the categories of sexual orientations and other binary types of gender.

The hardships suffered by queer folk due to the enforcement of heterosexuality motivate the creation of queer spaces. Heterosexuality is strictly related to the sexual or romantic attraction to someone of the opposite sex.⁷ Failing to recognize how heterosexuality is manifested in built form influences the issue of heterosexism. According to Dastagir in "LGBTQ Definitions Every Good Ally Should Know," heterosexism is the system of oppression that considers heterosexuality the norm and discriminates against people who display non-heterosexual behaviors and identities.⁸ Bars, restaurants, and even healthcare facilities have all been spaces where heterosexism is enforced.⁹ The discrimination in these spaces is what transforms it into a heterosexist space which is again a motivation to create queer spaces.

⁶ Dastagir, Alia E. 2017. *LGBTQ Definitions Every Good Ally should Know*. USA Today (Arlington, Va.). 1.

⁷ Ibid. 2.

⁸ Ibid. 2.

⁹ Casey, Logan S., Sari L. Reisner, Mary G. Findling, Robert J. Blendon, John M. Benson, Justin M. Sayde, and Carolyn Miller. 2019. *Discrimination in the United States: Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Americans*. *Health Services Research* 54 (6): 1454.

Manifesting queerness into a built form can take on various interpretations. One of the earliest queer spaces was the Men's House in the Sepik River, New Guinea region.¹⁰ In this region, the famously known "Men's House," was described as an elaborate piece that transcended the local village that would stand for many decades to come.¹¹ According to the historical written accounts, ceremonial rituals would be hosted in this space, with men only being allowed to participate.¹² These rituals included men having sex with younger men as an establishment of bonds in this culture. These bonds described how sex in this space united the body as a form of the politic of power throughout the culture.¹³

I use the Men's House example to demonstrate how space can be transformed into a queer space based on its use and occupation. The Men's House disguises its expression of homosexuality by excluding women from witnessing or experiencing these rituals. The homosexuality of the space was preserved, including the dignity of the males participating in these ceremonies. Conducting these rituals in a closed-off manner is what safeguards the values in upholding heterosexual society.

The Men's House of the Sepik River region in New Guinea being one of the earliest documented queer spaces has programmatic elements on how queerness can be freely expressed while at the same time safeguarding queer expression from the norms of heterosexual society.

Men's House in New Guinea, an early example of a queer space, is a building or physical manifestation that challenges existing heterosexual forms by creating spaces that reject binary categories of gender and sexual orientation. Ideally, every space should be a queer space where heterosexuality is not prioritized or preferred. The creation of a queer space criticizes the already

¹⁰ Betsky, Aaron. 1997. *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*. 1st ed. New York: William Morrow & Co. 27.

¹¹ Betsky, Aaron. 1997. *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*. 1st ed. New York: William Morrow & Co. 28.

¹² Ibid. 28.

¹³ Ibid. 28.

existing built form for not providing for the needs of queer users and instead produces a space that does.¹⁴

Embedded heterosexuality into the built form creates an environment that enforces heterosexual norms, including the intolerance of any queer identities. The social model of rejecting queerness in any form created a hostile environment for queer folks. For queer men, there were oftentimes restrictions that did not fit their queer gestures or means of expression. As a result of this, it caused them to create a corrected form of behavior to ensure their safety and ultimate survival. This correct behavior is what is considered passing as “straight.”¹⁵ The hostility created from these environments would require queer folk to create their own spaces to help ensure their identities were protect.

Architecture can represent a cultural imprint of its citizens, but it still lacks the blueprint that includes its citizens' sexual or gender identity. The cultural imprint of sexuality is heavily centered around heterosexuality when it comes to architecture.¹⁶ Architecture with an imprint of heterosexuality is a form of retaliation against queers that comes from these spaces. This retaliation is the explicit or implicit discrimination used against queer folk from entering or even utilizing a space which is otherwise known as heterosexism.¹⁷

Queer struggle of maintaining, controlling, and claiming physical space, is a direct result from heterosexism especially during the mid-twentieth century.¹⁸ During the 1930s in New York City, queer life had a more significant influence on the city's culture.¹⁹ Resulting from this were measures taken by New York City officials to exclude a homosexual activity or involvement from

¹⁴ Ibid. 12.

¹⁵ Betsky, Aaron. 1997. *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*. 1st ed. New York: William Morrow & Co. 9.

¹⁶ Sanders, Joel. 2019. *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*. London: Routledge. 1.

¹⁷ Dastagir, Alia E. 2017. *LGBTQ Definitions Every Good Ally should Know*. USA Today (Arlington, Va.). 2.

¹⁸ Ibid.1.

¹⁹ Ibid.1.

the public sphere.²⁰ Without sufficient public space for the expression of queerness, areas such as the club, the salon, and momentary spaces such as the “tearoom” or public restrooms became temporary spaces that would become queered through their occupation.²¹

The repurposing of heteronormative spaces into queer spaces especially took during the modern movement of architecture, leading up to the ‘Gay Rights Movement’.²² The impact of this not only resulted in more queer occupation but also the ironizing, decorating, and destabilizing of modernist architecture as described by Aaron Betsky in *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*. These spaces separated from the societal heterosexual programming of what could or should be expressed. Architecture would become a medium to fulfill the needs of queer folk by reclaiming power from the heterosexism that was spatially embodied in these spaces while at the same time preserving queer identity and community.²³ This research then takes the ideas of queer space and analyzes them through the lens of racism to further investigate the sexual discrimination that takes place throughout these spaces.

The Frame of Sexual Racism

This research acknowledges how race and ethnicity affect a person’s access to other forms of resources and power throughout the queer community. Race being the biologically genetic characteristics linked to particular physical traits that include skin color, eye color, hair color, or texture and the socially constructed idea of people who share biological characteristics.²⁴ Ethnicity is considered a social category of people who share the same cultural heritage, which frequently

²⁰ Ibid.1.

²¹ Ibid.1.

²² Sanders, Joel. 2019. *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*. London: Routledge. 2.

²³ Ibid.1.

²⁴ DeFronzo, James and Jungyun Gill. 2020;2019. *Social Problems and Social Movements*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. 108.

involves a language and a common religion.²⁵ To account for these races and ethnicities, the acronym BIPOC is used to represent black indigenous and other people of color that don't classify as white.

In this research, understanding the context of whiteness helps understand the explicit and implicit forms of discrimination that result from it. Throughout the queer community white capital is a form of appreciation for white people that results in social and cultural advantages such as political rights, economic opportunities, and other conditions of resources that otherwise wouldn't have been granted to someone of a different race or ethnicity.²⁶ This idea stems from racism which is the belief that one race is superior to other races.²⁷ While white capital is the appreciation of whiteness, white privilege is the direct socio-economic advantage that results from being white.²⁸

Although this research does not limit itself to these definitions, it influences the framework for this thesis research. Throughout this research, I analyze how white privilege and white capital affect the social issue of sexual racism within the queer community and how it becomes apparent through the study of queer bars.

Although the broader umbrella term of "queer" may appear to include accepting all queers of different races, it is a misleading façade.²⁹ This is considered a "queer blind spot," by Muñoz observed in "Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics."³⁰ This priority of white queerness is noticeable throughout queer culture, including what is taught, cited, and studied,

²⁵ Ibid. 108.

²⁶ Kendall, Frances E. 2006. *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race*. New York: Routledge. 90.

²⁷ Ibid. 108.

²⁸ Kendall, Frances E. 2006. *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race*. New York: Routledge. 91.

²⁹ Couzens, Jimmy, Berenice Mahoney, and Dean Wilkinson. 2017. *It's just More Acceptable to be White Or Mixed Race and Gay than Black and Gay : The Perceptions and Experiences of Homophobia in St. Lucia*. *Frontiers in Psychology* 8: 943.

³⁰ Muñoz, J. E. (1999). *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

centered around analyzing white lesbians and gay men.³¹ Muñoz offers the notion of “disidentifications” as a means to interpret politics based on race, class, gender, and sexuality.³² I use this as an example of how the priority of whiteness is inscribed within the queer community and how it does not account for other BIPOC queer users. Queer folk face discrimination for their sexual preference or gender identity; however, BIPOC queer folk face another layer of discrimination based on their race or ethnicity. Identifying as black, indigenous, or as a person of color puts someone at a much more significant disadvantage when identifying as queer compared to someone who is queer but identifies as white.

White capital, described as an appreciation for white people, also becomes apparent as a form of “preference” throughout the queer community. This preference ultimately causes the issue of sexual racism. The privilege of choice by queer white folk is a dangerous tool. It is described as “the rules of taste reinforce structures of power,” which is the excluding of gay men of color.³³ Resulting from this is that whiteness becomes a form of currency creating the queer marketplace of desire. In this marketplace, whiteness has a sense of value that disregards any other non-white individual.

The issue with sexual desires is that race is an ascribed status, not one that is achieved which contributes towards maintaining racial hierarchies. Sexual capital being a set of values within larger societal values influenced mainly by the social constructions of race, ethnicity, age, and class.³⁴ Chong-suk Han and Kyung-Hee Choi expand upon this idea in, “Very Few People Say “No Whites”: Gay Men of Color and the Racial Politics of Desire” that “race is a consistent gauge of

³¹ Yep, Gust A. 2003. *The Violence of Heteronormativity in Communication Studies: Notes on Injury, Healing, and Queer World-Making*. *Journal of Homosexuality* 45 (2-4): 39.

³² Ibid. 41.

³³ Han, Chong-suk and Kyung-Hee Choi. 2018. *Very Few People Say “No Whites”: Gay Men of Color and the Racial Politics of Desire*. *Sociological Spectrum* 38 (3): 150.

³⁴ Han, Chong-suk and Kyung-Hee Choi. 2018. *Very Few People Say “No Whites”: Gay Men of Color and the Racial Politics of Desire*. *Sociological Spectrum* 38 (3): 147.

desirability that spans across diverse sexual fields within the queer community leading to widespread incidences of sexual racism.” They highlight the racial hierarchy within the queer community throughout the sexual field, where a group of individuals brings differing levels of sexual capital. Han and Choi further explore “sexual racism” through other LGBTQ+ members who have experienced this racism. This research successfully builds off sexual field theory by examining the structural factor of race and how it impacts micro-interactions throughout the queer community. The issue of discrimination is that several scholars, including Berube, Armstrong, McBride, and Tennis, all agree that contemporary queer life is marked by high levels of racism directed toward queer folk of color by white queers.³⁵ Sexual racism in contemporary queer life can also be a set of negative sexual attitudes, sexual exclusion, or fetishization of those who are non-white men.³⁶ The new racism that takes place throughout the queer community is no longer in the blatant segregated spaces but instead through taste and preference based on racialized assumptions and desire. This research analyzes these racialized assumptions and desires by conducting a spatial analysis of queer bars and how their entryways promote or condemn sexual racism.

Queer Bars and Sexual Racism

Although new racism no longer primarily takes place in the form of blatant segregated spaces, there are still spaces influenced by the taste and preference of racialized assumptions and desire. Queer bars are one of these spaces that, unfortunately, have this influence.

Queer bars are the center of the queer community as they are a permissive and protective institution. They allow patrons to separate themselves from the larger society and provide a safe

³⁵ Ibid. 3.

³⁶ Ibid. 146.

space to help them handle the straight world's disapproval.³⁷ The spaces of queer bars have also become places of organizing and activism for gay civil rights.³⁸ Queer bars were outlets for freedom of expression, while also representing some of the first spaces to be collectively engaged for social change. Queer bars developed to survive against the persistent social, legal, and sexual persecution of lesbian, gay, transgender identities, intersex, non-binary, bisexual, and other queer bodies. Heteronormativity was a threat to the development of queer spaces and, as a result, caused queer identities to cultivate areas that remained hidden from police crackdowns and continued regulation against queer existence.³⁹

As queer bars continued to develop and populate during the mid to late twentieth century, race and ethnicity started to play a role in developing queer bars. The priority of whiteness, unfortunately, disadvantaged those who are queer but non-white. The sexual racism of these spaces made it a necessity for queer bars to create a space catered explicitly to non-white groups. Examples of this were seen in the early development of the “gay nightlife” in San Francisco.

The city of San Francisco had some of the first BIPOC queer bars in the United States’ history. N*Touch, at the time of its opening, was the only gay bar in North America centered around Asian Men.⁴⁰ N*Touch is one of many BIPOC queer spaces that resulted from the exclusion of BIPOC queer folk from predominantly white queer spaces. Another bar that developed throughout San Francisco was a Black queer bar, the Pendulum, which was the only bar for gay African

³⁷ Noel, Jacob, Thomas. 1978. *Gay bars and the Emergence of the Denver Homosexual Community*. The Social Science Journal (Vol. 15, No. 2). 59.

³⁸ Ibid. 59.

³⁹ Branton, Scott E., and Cristin A. Compton. *There’s No Such Thing as a Gay Bar: Co-Sexuality and the Neoliberal Branding of Queer Spaces*. Management Communication Quarterly 35, no. 1 (February 2021). 70.

⁴⁰ Mattson, Gregg. 2015. *Style and the Value of Gay Nightlife: Homonormative Placemaking in San Francisco*. Urban Studies (Edinburgh, Scotland) 52 (16): 3151.

Americans.⁴¹ The themes of this bar were stylistic practices which included baggy jeans, RnB music, and logos of urban streetwear.⁴²

Other examples catered around the non-white identity, specifically the Latinx identity, were highlighted by Jose Esteban Muñoz. The distinct features of queer Latinx Bars are described as unique, dynamic experience for Latinx queer users. The examples that Jose Esteban Muñoz specifically highlights are two queer Latinx bars: La Plaza and Silver Lake Lounge. La Plaza has a ranchera or country-western theme. This theme is not frequently interpreted as the “sanitized, glamorous country-western feel” that has become a theme around fashionable, middle-class, white gay circles. La Plaza is an authentic Latinx queer club as it provides a platform for transgender bodies to take the stage. Jose Esteban Muñoz specifically focuses on transgender folk in La Plaza and how their drag performances give tribute while also embracing their Mexican identities. The performances given in drag by the transgender folk are performed through Spanish anthems that specifically pay homage to where they originated from in Mexico. The stories of their performances narrate migratory crossings, both legal and illegal, and show a different reality that speaks explicitly to the Latinx queer community.

The description of this space disregards the need for any “white queer spaces” when marginalizing BIPOC queer folk can create their own areas of support. These queer bars show how the sexual racism embedded into queer white bars caused BIPOC queer folk to leave these spaces to create their own space catered around their racial or ethnic identity. By doing this, these non-white queer spaces gained economic and social power, which sexual racism usually took away from them.

⁴¹ Ibid. 3153.

⁴² Ibid. 3153.

The Entrance of Sexual Racism

This thesis research focuses on the "new" racism in the form of racialized assumptions and desires throughout queer bars. More specifically, it focuses on the entrances of these spaces by connecting the relationship between queer identity and race.

The closet holds various meanings, but this thesis draws influence from the Oxford English Dictionary definition, which defines the closet as “a small room in a domestic setting, providing space for private retirement, away from public sight.” This definition derives from a white, patriarchal, heteronormative European culture, and it is a definition that is challenged by this research.⁴³ The expression of "coming out of the closet" is frequently considered a person's first public affirmation of their sexual preference, encompassing many aspects of gender identity and sexual preference. The space of the closet hides as much as it creates through its offered darkness. This darkness provides as much room for secrecy as it does for exploration.

This "hidden space" is the secrecy of queerness, which is an identity hidden throughout the greater heterosexual context. An example of this is heterosexuality as an influencing factor throughout many domestic households. This dominant influence of heterosexuality causes the expression of queerness to hide in the small room, or "closet" for queerness to open, it must become vulnerable, visible, and expressive.

Aaron Betsky emphasizes the importance of closet rooms in his account of architecture and same-sex desire of 1997. He describes these spaces as spaces where the user's identity can start to become defined and become constructed as a profound identity. Closeted rooms provide a sense of self-discovery, and this sensation of self-discovery is explored through the offered freedom of the

⁴³ Gorman-Murray, Andrew and Matt Cook. 2018. *Queering the Interior*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 190.

closet's darkness. The darkness of the closets symbolizes the secrecy of queerness where it can thrive without it being shared or spotlighted.

Esteban highlights the role of a threshold between the queer and heterosexual world. Esteban describes an entry into a queer bar as an experience that is otherworldly. The threshold that Esteban highlights is of a gay club in Dayton, Ohio, where,

“Here men forgot about the oppressive blue-collar city they called home and imagined a world where they could be free from shame and embarrassment. Neither place was mine. I observed both from the outside. My utopia existed at the doorway on the threshold of neither space at one time and in both simultaneously.”

Esteban tells the story of balancing identity. The interaction with the threshold of a queer bar can demonstrate a lack of confidence in accepting queer identity, while entering the room indicates a complete and total acceptance of individual sexuality. Standing at the threshold reflects a lack of confidence in one's sexuality restraining the user from entering the space.⁴⁴ A threshold serves as a shield against the heterosexual world, and it is an invitation to further exploration.

Although a threshold can serve as a shield against the heterosexual world, it does not fully protect from the discrimination of sexual racism.⁴⁵ Racist policies are cloaked in queer businesses such as queer bars to escape the stigma of racism by ultimately maintaining racial borders.⁴⁶ I use examples from the Castro district in San Francisco, to describe racist occurrences at the entrances of queer bars. San Francisco's Castro district being transformed from, an economically depressed Irish-Catholic neighborhood into a politicized gay neighborhood.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. NYU Press, 2009. Accessed November 11, 2020. 105.

⁴⁵ Han, Chong-suk. 2007. *They Don't Want to Cruise Your Type: Gay Men of Color and the Racial Politics of Exclusion*. *Social Identities* 13 (1): 58.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 58.

⁴⁷ Boyd, Nan Alamilla. 2011. "San Francisco's Castro District: From Gay Liberation to Tourist Destination." *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 9 (3): 237.

Michael Kinsley, a former bouncer at the Badlands, a bar in the Castro district, stated he was left with the responsibility, to stand guard and judge whether to allow entrance into the bar.⁴⁸ The owner of Badlands, Les, would mask these judgments as 'Badlands' and 'non-Badlands' customers.⁴⁹ In these titles, there were characteristics associated with what would be considered undesirable customers.⁵⁰ In the experiences of Michael Kinsley, he found that the majority of the customers that were consistently denied admission or escorted out of the premises were black.⁵¹ These discriminations were all made at the discretion of the owner which the bouncer had to then follow through at the entrance of this bar.

Another tactic implemented throughout the Castro district to limit BIPOC queer users into white-owned queer bars was demanding multiple forms of identification from BIPOC queer folk. The most apparent incidents were that black men were required to provide two forms of identifications at the door while white men were only needed to show one at Badlands.⁵²

This discrimination tactic throughout the Castro district of requiring various forms of identifications from non-white patrons has a long history in practice.⁵³ The Mine Shaft is another example of a Castro bar that required up to three forms of identifications for queer men of color during the mid-1970s. In an interview with Richard Marquez in 1991, Rodrigo Reyes recalls that throughout the early 1980s, bars would ask for an excessive number of identifications from people of color as a racist, discriminatory practice. Rodrigo Reyes states that requiring up to two or three picture identifications of Latino gays at the same time was not reasonable considering that they were a marginalized group and lacked access to such forms of identifications. The owners of the bars

⁴⁸ Ibid. 58.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 58.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 58.

⁵¹ Ibid. 58.

⁵² Ibid. 58.

⁵³ Horacio N. Roque Ramírez. 2003. *"That's My Place!": Negotiating Racial, Sexual, and Gender Politics in San Francisco's Gay Latino Alliance, 1975-1983*. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12 (2): 232.

would know this and weaponize it as a strategy to not provide these services to this group in order to create priority to white queer folk who were the dominant group at the time.⁵⁴

These examples provide a glimpse of Castro's LGBT community's long-standing struggle regarding racial discrimination and exclusion against BIPOC queer folk. This racial discrimination and exclusion are not constrained to the boundaries of Castro district but instead stem into other queer communities. This research closely examines the entrances of queer bars in Denver, Colorado, and how racial discrimination and exclusion still occur in these spaces.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 232.

Research Design and Methods: Decoding the Visuals of Sexual Racism

Methodological Framework

This thesis research draws upon qualitative research methods that recount interactions and experiences throughout the built environment and reveals underlying complexities evoked from buildings.⁵⁵

An example of this research model that I am following is from Donna Wheatley, in “Architectural Research Methods” where she investigated the spatial qualities of workplaces and the intentional corporate branding achieved by different stakeholder groups' different perspectives.⁵⁶ The primary analysis of this research focused on how corporate clients' goals and values can be embodied in the built form.⁵⁷ This research tries to analyze the spatial qualities and how to make them more suitable for both the culture throughout the work practices and the employees' sensibilities.⁵⁸ This research model shows how observations can be a set of data analysis collections for what space evokes, what users experience, and the direct correlation between the built form and its effects on the individual's sensibilities and experiences.

This thesis research builds on this framework by analyzing the spatial qualities of queer bars and their entrances. This research examines what spatial attributes of a queer bar make it less or more sexually racist by considering the sensibilities of BIPOC queer users.

To build the framework of this research, an initial set of exploratory site visits of queer bars throughout Denver, Colorado, were conducted to determine what spatial qualities would make sense

⁵⁵ Wang, David and Linda N. Groat. 2013. *Architectural Research Methods*. Second; 2. Aufl.; ed. Hoboken: Wiley. 215.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 216.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 216.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 216.

in the analysis of this research. After completing a set of exploratory site visits and conducting a literature review, I decided that there was an existing gap of knowledge that did not analyze queer bars from an architectural and racial lens.

I then explored the intersection between race and sexuality by explicitly focusing on how the entrances of these queer bars reflect sexual racism. I focused on the entryways of queer bars since I found it to be a consistent location throughout these queer bars where BIPOC queer users accounted for experiencing sexual racism.

I then developed a list of queer bars throughout Denver that I would visit and analyze. Due to the time restrictions of this research, I decided to visit six queer bars in total to provide an adequate analysis. After determining the list of queer bars, I then developed a series of qualitative questions based on different themes that would help me analyze the sexual racism of these spaces.

The themes of these questions were based on transitions and thresholds, architecture and sexual racism, and signage. The themes of architecture and sexual racism were centered around the aesthetic features and the overall composition of the entrance and how it might be catered towards welcoming a specific group of people. Architecture and sexual racism also seek to understand how some queer bars may express, hide, or protect their patrons from specific racial and ethnic identities or how it instead embraces them. Transitions and thresholds focus explicitly on the entrance and what different experiences are captured when the door is open or closed. Another important aspect of this research is signage and how its symbolism plays a role in promoting body types, races, or ethnicities. The signage analysis of these queer bars also considers any cultural significance or relevancy that possible symbols may communicate.

In completing these steps my intentions with this research method are to compile in detail the confrontations of sexual racism experienced in these queer bars. With these observations it brings into light the underlying connections in a space, regarding sexuality, and racism. I interpret

these spaces as they are rather than trying to change them. I am attempting to make sense of them by analyzing sexual racism by studying various physical elements of the space and focusing on the entrances.

As a result of this approach the method that resulted from this research is based on asking an open-ended research question, then shaping the question after further exploring the issue. After defining the question, it translates into how this research question would be answered.

The primary tactic to investigate this research question are the reflections of these spaces. I also incorporate site-visits and photo documentation as a secondary tactic for this research. Since this research is not so heavily focused on standardized measures such as survey questionnaires or interviews, I acknowledge that I am the primary measurement device in the study. The analysis of this research is also a blend of both words and visual material to further describe the spatial elements of the queer bars that were studied and their relationship with sexual racism. The reflections of this research are intended to be informal and flexible in a way that conveys the story of each space. This not only creates a narrative of each space, but it also brings back the stories altogether to create a narrative of the sexual racism within the queer community of Denver.

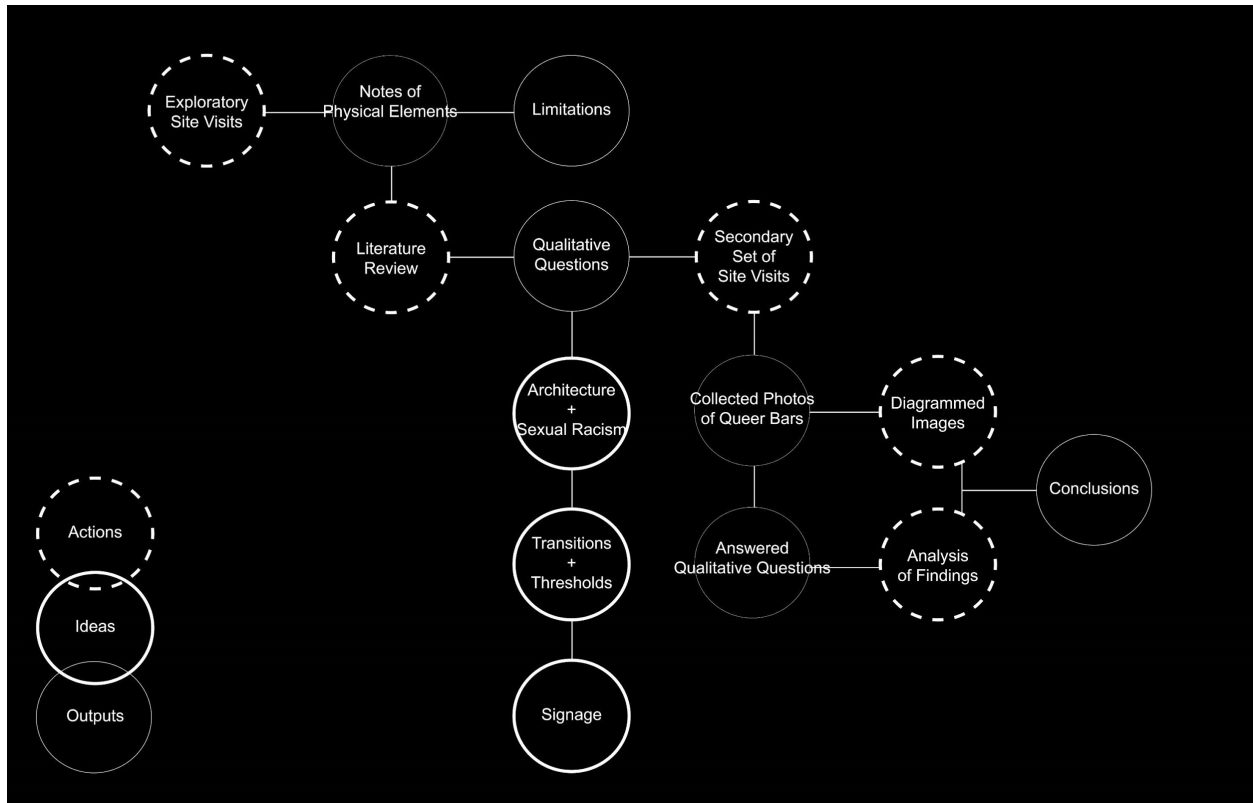


Figure 1. Research Method Diagram.

Findings: The Architecture of Sexual Racism

Amid the 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic, this thesis research brings in a different perspective of the queer bars that are highlighted. The bars that were visited in this research lay dormant yet are filled with life. The queer bars were empty, but ready to be celebrated. The new implications of “social distancing” and quarantine orders have drastically limited the engagement throughout the queer community. Without being able to gather at queer bars it adds more of a strain to the queer community considering that historically these spaces have been used to provide safe and appropriate contexts for the expression of queer identities. This research provides a time stamp to the life of these queer bars during the time of a global pandemic.

This research analyzes the queer bars of Lipstick Nightclub, Pride and Swagger, Denver Sweet, Trade Gay Bar, Blush & Blue Bar, and Potrero Nightclub in Denver, Colorado. The following findings highlight how sexual racism takes on different forms and how queer bars incorporate other spatial elements such as symbolism to combat sexual discrimination.

Lipstick Nightclub

The physical conditions of Lipstick Nightclub were falling apart. The building had various scraps of siding panels and roof shingles that were hanging off. Although no entrance particularly cued a transition into space, the signage appeared to be the ultimate marker in defining the space. The location is in a dense commercial setting coming right off the street of Colfax.

The sign "lipstick" towers over the building giving the impression that space was an actual store for lipsticks or even presenting itself as an underground women's wear shop. Although the doorway is not the physical focus of Lipstick Nightclub, the signage of the nightclub represents the

space. The white background of the sign and the neon blue lights oppose the typical red or pink hue to depict lipstick color, so it is not confused for the liquor store next door.



Figure 2. Roadside business sign. Lipstick Nightclub, Denver, Colorado.

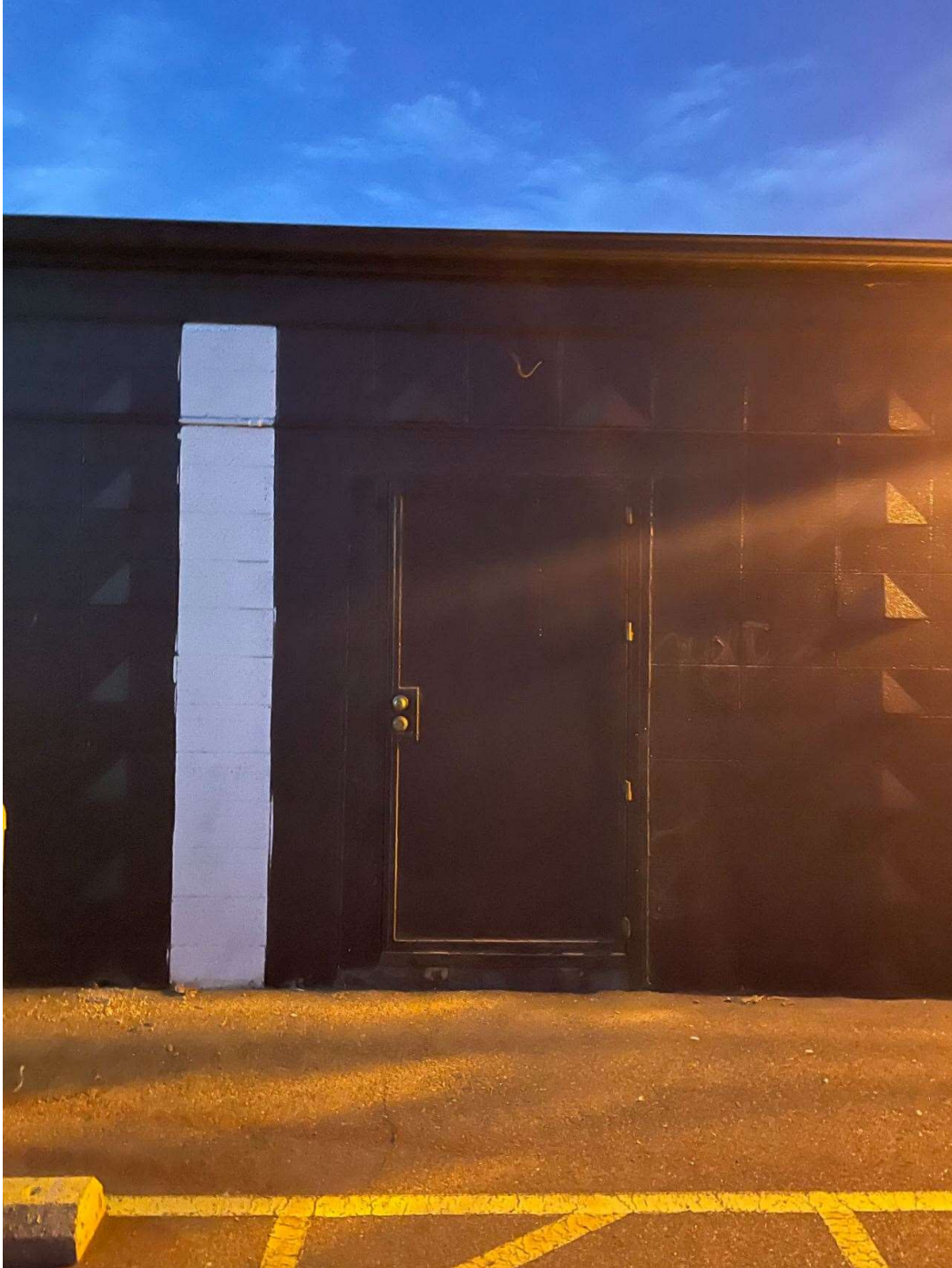


Figure 3. Southern Entrance to Lipstick Nightclub. This side exposes the concrete materiality of the space.

This nightclub gives off the impression that this is possibly somewhere someone's heterosexual husband would go to if he wanted to get away from his wife to satisfy a specific kink. The gates around Lipstick nightclub and lack of windows do not give the impression that this is a

space that furthers one's sexuality but rather indicates that it is a space trying to preserve it. This bar gives the impression that it is closed off to the outside heterosexual world. As I walked around the site, I realized that the north face of the building facing Colfax was painted white while the south-facing side of the building is painted black. The entrance found on the south side of the building is what I believe to be the main entrance of the building. The actual entryway itself is elevated six inches off from the ground and comes straight off the parking lot with immediate interior access.



Figure 4 North Side of Lipstick Nightclub. Uncovered and exposed extension of the nightclub.

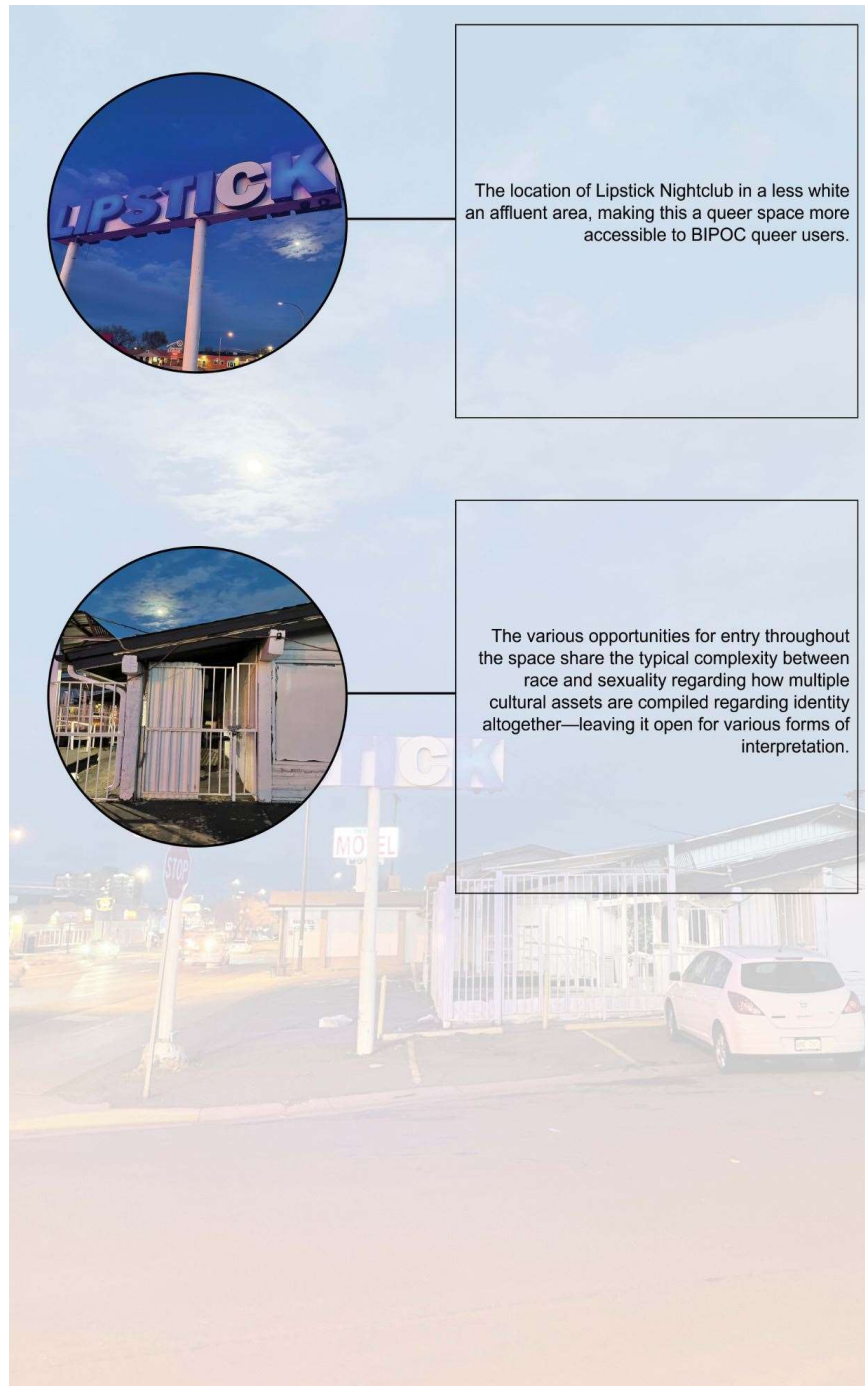
The entryway is all black, and it blends in with the rest of the wall. Right next to the entrance is a singular stripe of white which is the same color as the rest of the building. The entry is very secretive, but the building's context makes it seem as if the building has been abandoned. With no

posters or indication of what space holds, it creates this mystery of what life continues inside the room.

Although this entryway does not necessarily combat "white norms," it communicates some uniqueness and personality to the space challenging the perception of a typical queer bar. Often queer bars have been perceived to be overly commercialized, but this is only a recent trend. Queer owners and those who wished to open venues for the greater good of the LGBTQ+ community had limited access to platforms. As a result of these, queer bars often opened in small venues and not in the best conditions. Lipstick Bar reflects that struggle as its venue appearance is not in the best of conditions. It is only recently when queer bars started to become overly commercialized due to capitalist interests. As a result of this, the more commercialized space generally meant higher prices for the bar's services to create a better profit, and as a result, it brings in a clientele with a higher income. Unfortunately, this higher-income clientele throughout the queer community is a predominantly white male.

Lipstick presents an appearance of being protective of itself. Located on Colfax Street, one of the busiest streets in Denver, the bar itself has gates surrounding it, making it challenging to enter from the north side.

There were people of various backgrounds passing by the space, making me think that the location of this space is in a somewhat more diverse area of Denver. Since the site of this bar is in a relatively more diverse place, it means that this queer bar is accessible to even more BIPOC queer users. Although there were no direct indicators of sexual racism from the exterior, it poses how the interior of the space may or may not perpetuate forms of sexual discrimination.



The location of Lipstick Nightclub in a less white an affluent area, making this a queer space more accessible to BIPOC queer users.

The various opportunities for entry throughout the space share the typical complexity between race and sexuality regarding how multiple cultural assets are compiled regarding identity altogether—leaving it open for various forms of interpretation.

Figure 5 Lipstick Nightclub Diagrammatic Analysis.

Pride and Swagger

From the street view, the LGBTQ+ flag waves freely in the air, right next to the "Pride and Swagger" sign. This bar is found on the lower level of a multi-use building while also surrounded by other older residences. Pride and Swagger is at the center of this neighborhood, suggesting the possibility that this neighborhood stems from acceptance and love. The doors at the space were unfortunately still closed due to COVID restrictions in the area. The windows of Pride and Swagger allowed me to glimpse inside to understand the lively atmosphere that was once found inside of it. The perimeter of the bar is also surrounded by other miniature pride flags that outline its perimeter. All these details make the entrance to this space feel like a literal transition away from the heterosexual world. The entrance of this space then becomes the physical focus of the bar because it uses the details from the perimeter of the bar and incorporates them into the entrance. Pride and Swagger expresses its openness and freedom by stretching the use of the bar into the sidewalk, allowing for the space to become that much more visible.

This bar is a multi-use building, and it has a contemporary-styled entrance with steel framing and glass. The entrance to this place directly calls for zero tolerance of homophobic, transphobic, xenophobic, racist, and sexist users, making it feel that much of a safer space. This entryway makes it so everyone who needs a safe space can do so without having to worry about the other parts of their identity. This bar sets a precedent of what a queer bar can do to condemn sexual racism. The opening of this space explicitly stating that it is against racism and other forms of discrimination.



Figure 6 Pride & Swagger, Denver, Colorado. Eastern balcony area unoccupied due to COVID restrictions.

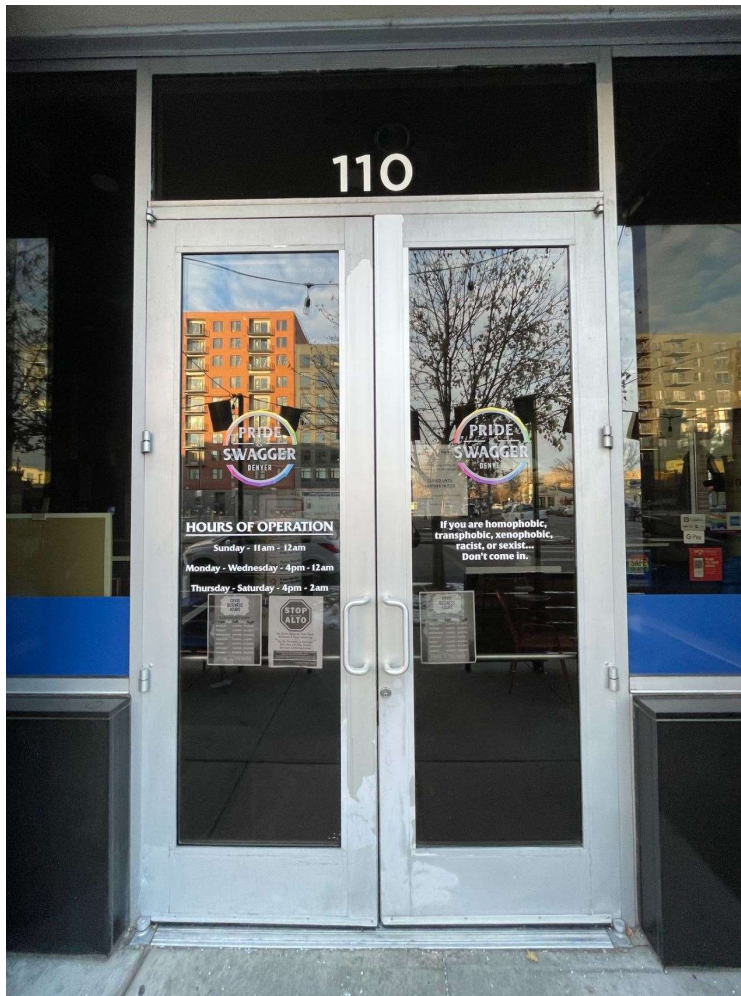


Figure 7 Pride & Swagger Main Entrance.

In contrast with the Lipstick Bar, this bar is heavily commercialized, and because of this, I was not expecting it to have an anti-racist agenda. This bar takes the appropriate steps in ensuring a safe experience for its patrons. With the space being a unifying place for all backgrounds, I think it promotes more diversity and inclusivity than exclusion. The statement found on the door to the bar is an indicator that helps BIPOC queer users feel safer. This statement on the doorway is an effort to dismantle hatred by explicitly calling it out and leaving zero tolerance. The safe space even recognizes in a tiny sticker on the window that it is a safe space for victims of Anti-LGBTQ crimes.



Figure 8 Pride & Swagger unoccupied during COVID closure.



Figure 9 Pride & Swagger Diagrammatic Analysis.

Denver Sweet

The bar itself seems to be in a business or commercial district in downtown Denver. There also appear to be no other nearby buildings that overshadow it or overlook it. The bar itself stands out from its surroundings because it is one of the few buildings on that side of the street. With the unforeseen conditions of COVID-19, the doors of the Denver Sweet were closed to the public. One of the issues that run rampant throughout the LGBTQ+ community is the pandemic health crisis of HIV. 'The Denver Sweet' does an exceptional job of incorporating awareness on this issue through a mural on the south-facing side of the building. The mural itself brings attention to the HIV crisis by stating, "Together we will end HIV." Right below this quote is the same quote, but instead translated into Spanish, saying, "Juntos terminaremos con el VIH." This specific building element is vital to highlight and recognize because the health crisis that is acknowledged includes both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking users. Since this is an issue that runs rampant throughout the queer community, it is always essential to include other members of the queer community and by translating the quote into Spanish is one way of showing that solidarity and unity. The Denver Sweet brings awareness to the issue and is also inclusionary on the statement by providing a translation for local queer Spanish-speaking users who also sympathize. This building is a two-story building, but as far as the building's actual physical appearance, I believe that the entrance of the building would not be the fundamental physical focus on the building itself. The reason for that is that the mural is the primary focus on the structure, and although it might be a temporary mural, it still manages to focus on the building instead of the entrance.



Figure 10 Denver Sweet, Denver, Colorado. The logo and the pride flag being the primary branding elements of the space.

In contrast to the colorful mural found on the side of the building, this building has an uninspiring entrance with a black-framed exterior with etched glass windows. Above the door is also the pride flag and the Denver Sweet logo, a bear paw print with an animated bear icon at the center licking its mouth. Throughout the queer community the term, 'bear' refers to a group of gay men generally higher in weight while having a surplus of body hair, including heavy dark facial hair. The Denver Sweet includes its logo above the space entrance, indicating one thing: the appreciation or idolization of bear queer body types. Incorporating the bear icon into the logo itself directly references the queer bear body types that are primarily appreciated and celebrated. It is difficult to

conclude anything about the entrances because of the gloomy dark color palette of black and other shades. If anything, the logo of the Denver Sweet, which includes a bear, can signal one other thing. The 'bears' throughout the community typically identify themselves as white. Incorporating the bear character into the logo communicates that this space idolizes or appreciates that specific type of queer user, that is generally white.



Figure 11 Denver Sweet South Mural. This mural shows various skin colors being a representation of the promise this bar has in upholding diversity.

The mural on the south side of the building seems to be idolizing a white-bodied figure, but surrounding the same model is also a series of other arms stemming from the center. These arms happen to be different skin tones, promoting diversity and inclusion, but at the same time, why is it that the figure at the center is not Black instead, and why do the darker shades of skin come almost as a second thought?

I believe that this space might be signaling to bear body types, but at the same time, there needs to be more context and possible evidence on who would possibly use this space. There seems to be no signs of racial discrimination; instead, there is a promotion of racial diversity and an overall sympathetic effort for fighting against HIV. Comparing and contrasting other queer bars that were visited, the 'Denver Sweet' takes on a different approach to promote diversity and inclusion at a larger scale. The mural is an indicator of how to encourage a space for all while at the same time attempting to be anti-sexually racist.



Figure 12 Denver Sweet Main Entrance. This entrance has a non-transparent view of the interior of the space, including the lower windows.

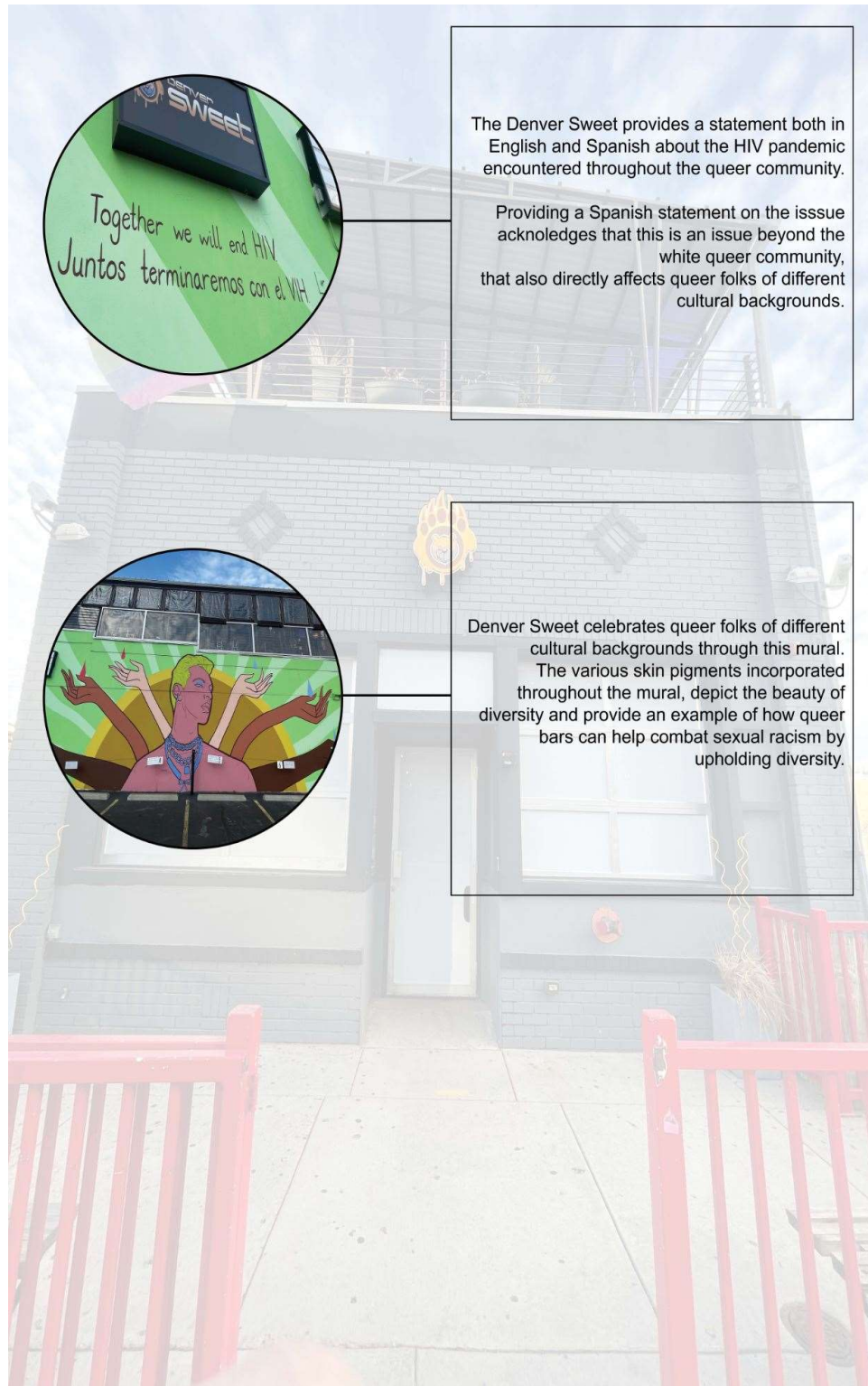


Figure 13 Denver Sweet Diagrammatic Analysis.

Trade Gay Bar

Located close to downtown Denver, Trade Gay Bar is an “LGBTQ+ fetish and kink bar,” as described by their website. Although the entryway of the room does not highlight or acknowledge these specific intentions, I believe that the greater context offered by their website promotes the space as one that idolizes queer white folk. This bar uses the image of a white queer male as its main promotional image and identity. The use of the image implies many things: these are the primary users found throughout this space or rather the type of queer users that are prioritized throughout this queer spaces.

The building of Trade Gay Bar seems to have been previously occupied for another use. The entrance is black and has a small rectangular window that gives a glimpse into the life of the space. The black color scheme to the building is very daunting; the door blends into the building instead of being the piece that stands out. I think that the appearance of the building makes it appear as a more secretive and closed off space to the public rather than one that appears open and welcoming. The bar itself identifies itself as a neighborhood gay bar, but even though it is a neighborhood space, the entrance of the building does not make it seem like it is a typical neighborhood space. This considers how the entries compare to other public areas that also orient themselves around their specific communities. If the bar were to create a sense of more openness through a redesign of the entrance, it would make it that much more welcoming. I find that this space does something unique with its doorway, where it is plain to compliment the appearance of the bar overall.



Figure 14 Trade Gay Bar, Denver, Colorado. One of the only queer bars that had their doors open to the public even though there were COVID restrictions.

Trade Gay Bar was an example of a queer bar that is not expressive of itself through its overlaid black surface and other dark features that allow it to fit in with its surroundings instead of standing out as these queer hot spots. Although there is no specific template on what a queer bar should look like, many are expressive of queerness by, for example, incorporating the pride flag,

which represents every queer identity within the LGBTQ+ community. Queerness is still something that is not entirely accepted by society. Unfortunately, there is still a need to protect queer users, which is accomplished through the dark appearance of Trade Gay Bar by hiding the fact that it is a "gay" bar. There are no other indicators of the space that promote it as a queer space. This gay bar serves as an example of how its space can hide and protects the queerness of the space and its users.

Although the physical appearance of the building does not actively promote whiteness, it does to some extent encourage whiteness based on their promotional material for social media and their website. I think it is essential to consider this because it is again highlighting the white gay male. It raises questions on why the white gay male and why they are being promoted over other identities? The website also makes it known that the "bear" body type figure is the one they like to celebrate. Even in acknowledging this body type, it is only white queer males that are marked or recognized. Although there is a significant promotion of this space using their online platforms, I would argue that this space offers secrecy through a less expressive physical appearance, including the entrance.

For Trade Bar, no physical signage specifically highlights body types, races, or ethnicities. Their website promotes the 'bear' body type, which suggests the importance of white queer males among their clientele. This racial discrimination may not be explicit, but there is still an implicit means of discrimination promoted by the bar itself.

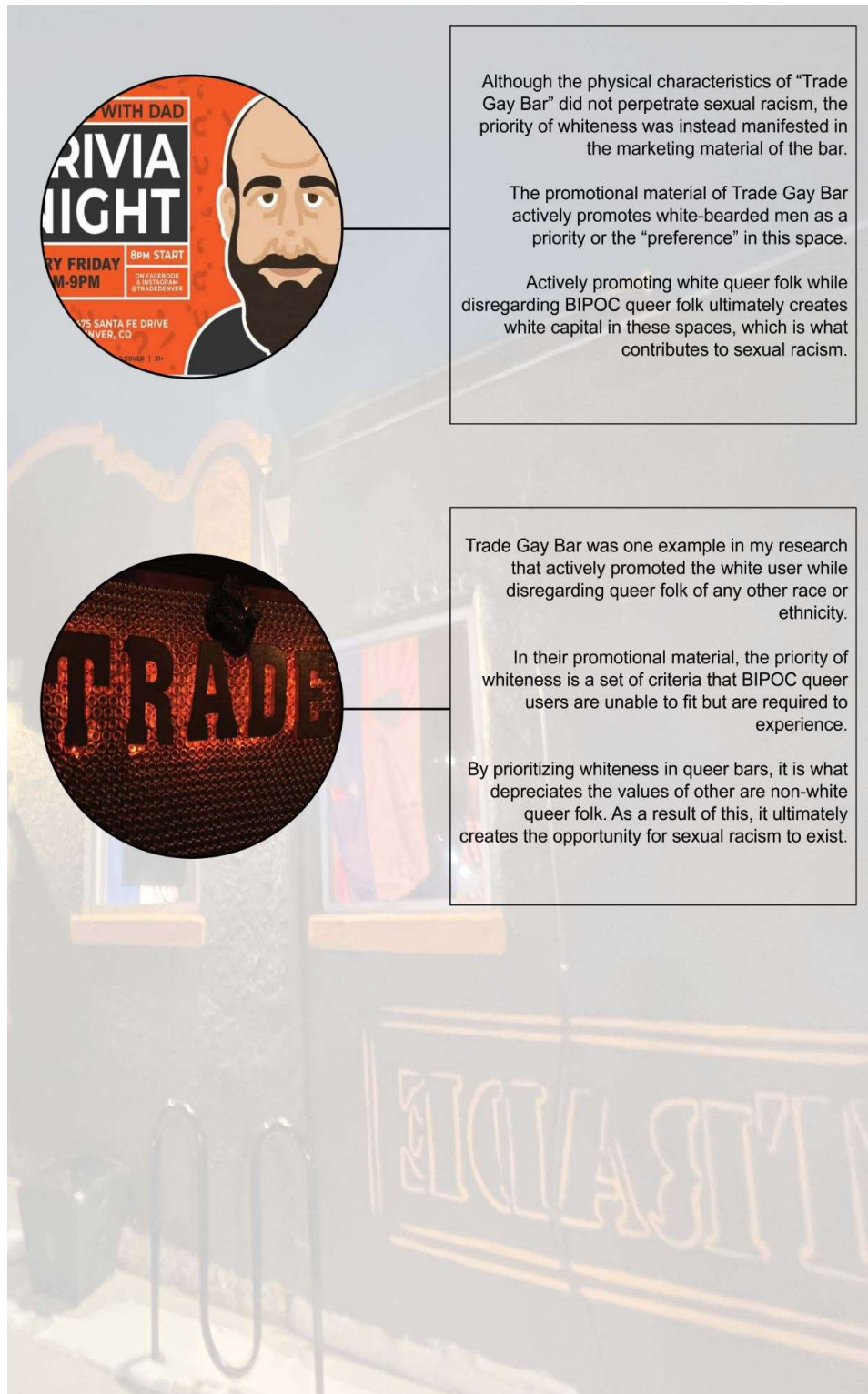


Figure 15 Trade Gay Bar Diagrammatic Analysis.

Blush & Blu Bar

Located right across the street from another LGBTQ+ resource center, Blush & Blu Bar is tucked away between a local Asian diner and the famous Voodoo donut shop. This space is located on the famously known street of Colfax Ave. in Denver, Colorado.



Figure 16 Blush & Blu, Denver, Colorado. Boarded up with wooden panels, it seemed like the space was undergoing renovations since this location has transparent windows to look inside of it.

Upon visiting the site, it was unclear where the entrance was since space was being renovated and covered up with wooden panels from the ground up. Typically Blush & Blu Bar has a

coating of rainbow stripes across the bar's entire front facade. At the time of the site visits, the bar was not only closed, but it did not have its typical trademark appearance. This was the bar's method of making it known that they were temporarily closed but always here for their community. With the range of LGBTQ+ flags that exist, I believe that is a way of raising awareness about the different identities found throughout the community. This example prioritized the colors of the transgender flag, which brings attention to transgender folk. Transphobia runs rampant and with the bar expressing their support of transgender folk. It also makes a promise that the bar is a safe space for them. Unfortunately, transphobia exists even in the queer community. Still, this space indicates that it will not tolerate transphobia through the promise of the colors on the exterior.

The doorway of the space still being the physical focus of the building due to its central solid alignment with the rest of the elements of the building; it redirects the users towards the center and gives a sense of direction with the colored lines that gather at the center of the door. According to Blush & Blu's website this queer bar in specific is unique as it is one of the few remaining lesbian bars in the United States, enriching the context around it and its importance.

The doorway of the space still being the physical focus of the building due to its central solid alignment with the rest of the elements of the building; it redirects the users towards the center and gives a sense of direction with the colored lines that gather at the center of the door. The entrance is typically a clear glass door. At the time of this site visit, the entry was covered in wooden panels painted over with a pink, black and blue.

This space enforces or counters white norms as there seem to be no other elements of the entrance or the space that can communicate it as such. With transgender folk being some of the most targeted for hate crimes, it is alleviating seeing a public space promote the support for protecting transgender lives. Communicating it boldly and expressively through the outward

appearance of the queer bar is a step forward in reducing the negative stigma against transgender folk.

From the entrance of the building, there is no promotion of whiteness. At the site visit, the only elements that the bar consisted of were the painted wooden panels. The entryway and the remaining appearance of the rest of the building are expressive of identity, which is an indication that this space is a space that is free and open for the expression of love.



Previously Blush & Blu had the pride flag embedded as part of its unique space identity, being that beacon and symbolic space for the local LGBTQ+ community.

Today, Blush and Blu have more specifically embedded the transgender and bisexual flag colors into the forefront of its appearance.

In doing this, it acknowledges the bisexual and transexual identities that frequently go unnoticed.

Blush and Blu being a predominantly white lesbian bar asks what else can the physical appearance of the space accomplish to become less sexually racist.

Although there is symbolism embedded into the colors of the bar's appearance, it still fails to account for the sexual discrimination that occurs under the umbrella of these identities.

Figure 17 Blush & Blu Diagrammatic Analysis.

Potrero Nightclub

Potrero Nightclub, one of the gay Latino nightclubs found locally in Denver, Colorado. The scene is lonely and almost desolate. Potreros is another example of space vacant of the vibrant queer life that it once used to host. The bar is run down with pieces of wood that are seemingly falling apart, but the exterior is not what matters, but instead what the space holds together for its community. There are tables flipped upside down, chairs misplaced, and outside gates swinging open in the wind. The building comprises of two stories with the entrance of the building average, hidden, and tucked away into one of the cut-out edges of the building. Potreros nightclub and bar is in the southern Denver region and known to better serve the Latinx queer community. Since this is the clientele that it is primarily catered towards, it questions how accessible this space is to the queer Latinx community.

The space's entrances are run down, falling apart, with a color palette of burnt red, watered-down green, and tan on the exterior of the walls. The gates have an overhang with brown shingles on top of the canopy as well. I believe that the entry welcomes all but explicitly makes it is known that this is a space hoping to serve the Latinx community. Incorporating the rainbow-colored escandalo signage right up above the actual entrance gives away its message of being a queer space that purposely focuses on helping the queer Latinx community. With the rainbow color palette incorporated into the signage, it is a signal that it is accepting all queer identities.

Although this space did not provide any indicators of sexual racism it served as an example of what a queer bar can be like if it embraces cultural backgrounds. This queer bar being an example of both queerness and Latinx culture to better serve the needs of the Latinx queer community.



Figure 18 El Potrero Main Entrance. With many entrances to this location, this entrance was the only one that marked it as the main entrance with the Potrero branding above its door.

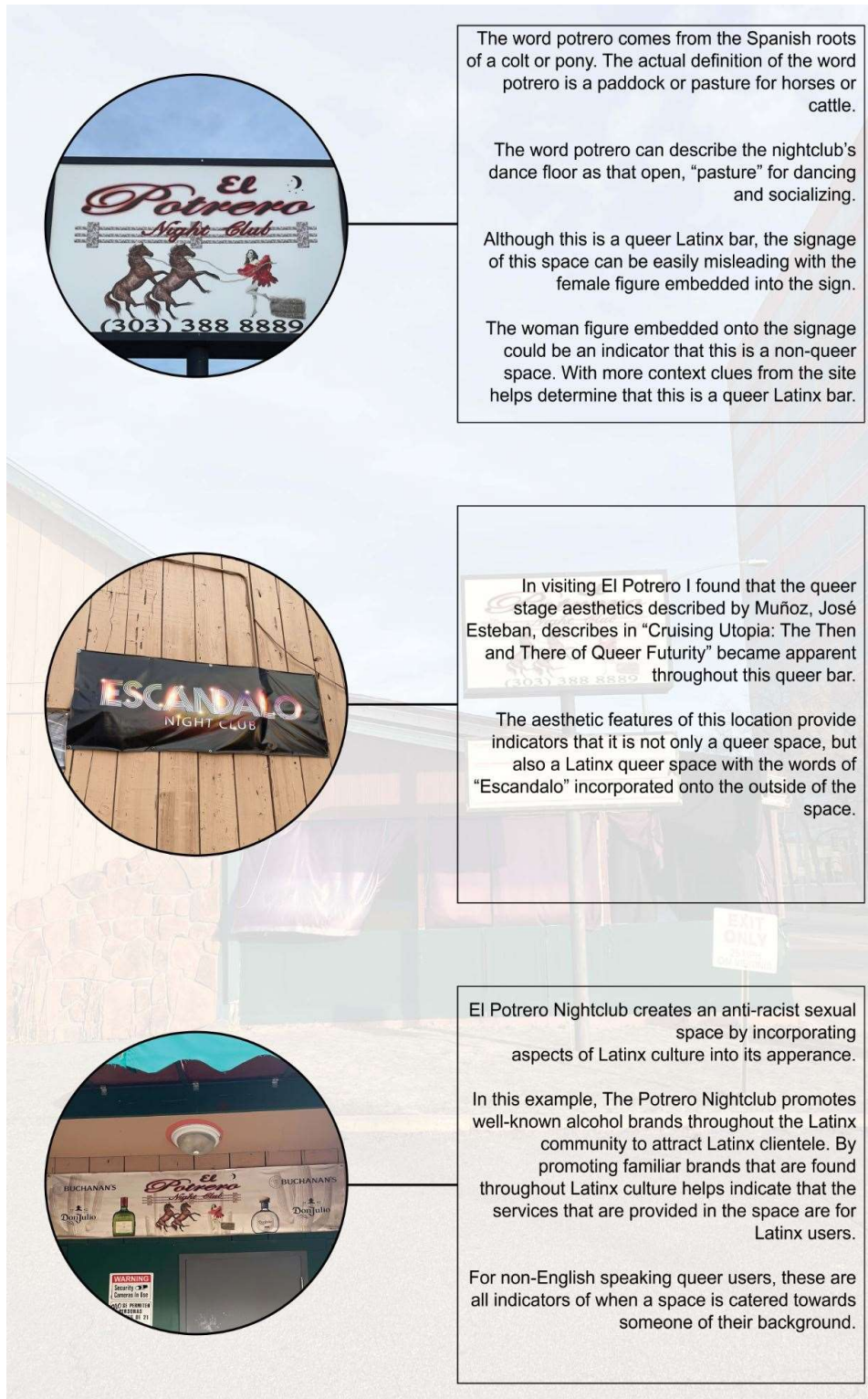


Figure 19 El Potrero Diagrammatic Analysis.

Conclusions

The relationship between architecture and queer identity has been developed in Aaron Betsky's "Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire" and by Gorman-Murray, Andrew, and Matt Cook in "Queering the Interior." These authors all together deconstruct what is known of architecture and instead tailor it through the lens of the queer user. Although these works already analyze the relationship between architecture and queer identity, I build off these pieces and examine the sexual racism that presents itself throughout queer bars.

The methodology of this research demonstrates how a qualitative approach can provide an in-depth engagement with six selected queer bars. The framework from this research also demonstrates how qualitative research can be implemented into the discipline of architecture with thorough observations. The benefit of this qualitative approach is that it provides context-rich detail which strengthens the overall data analysis and interpretation of the sexual racism throughout each space.

Architecture is an instrument of domination, and historically it has been a hegemonic culture of whiteness cis straight maleness enforced into the practice and the built form. Although architecture has this influence, it does not mean it can create a blueprint that combats this stigma to organize into a space with better intention.

After visiting the queer bars of Denver, Colorado, I discovered that although there is no immediate resolution for sexual racism, there are other efforts that can be integrated into the built form to combat sexual discrimination. From the anti-racist promise that is found at the entrance of Pride and Swagger to the vibrant Latinx roots that are expressed on the exterior of Potrero Nightclub, these spaces provide a small but effective attempt at making a space less sexually racist.

This thesis recognizes how race and sexuality can be implemented into the built form and how essential it is to step away and challenge the cultural imprint of heterosexuality throughout architecture. Space does not necessarily invent sexual racism but instead provides spatial and territorial conditions for sexual discrimination to exist. Without architecture, sexual racism would not sustain itself, which also means that architecture has the same opportunity to create a space that is not sexually racist. This research also demonstrates how privileged white spaces of society are still present today, and that the queer community is not exempt from hosting these spaces. This thesis bridges the gap between race and sexuality while also creating a qualitative framework for environmental design to address other social issues focused on race and sexuality.



Figure 20 Main Entrances to Queer Bars throughout Denver, Colorado.

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