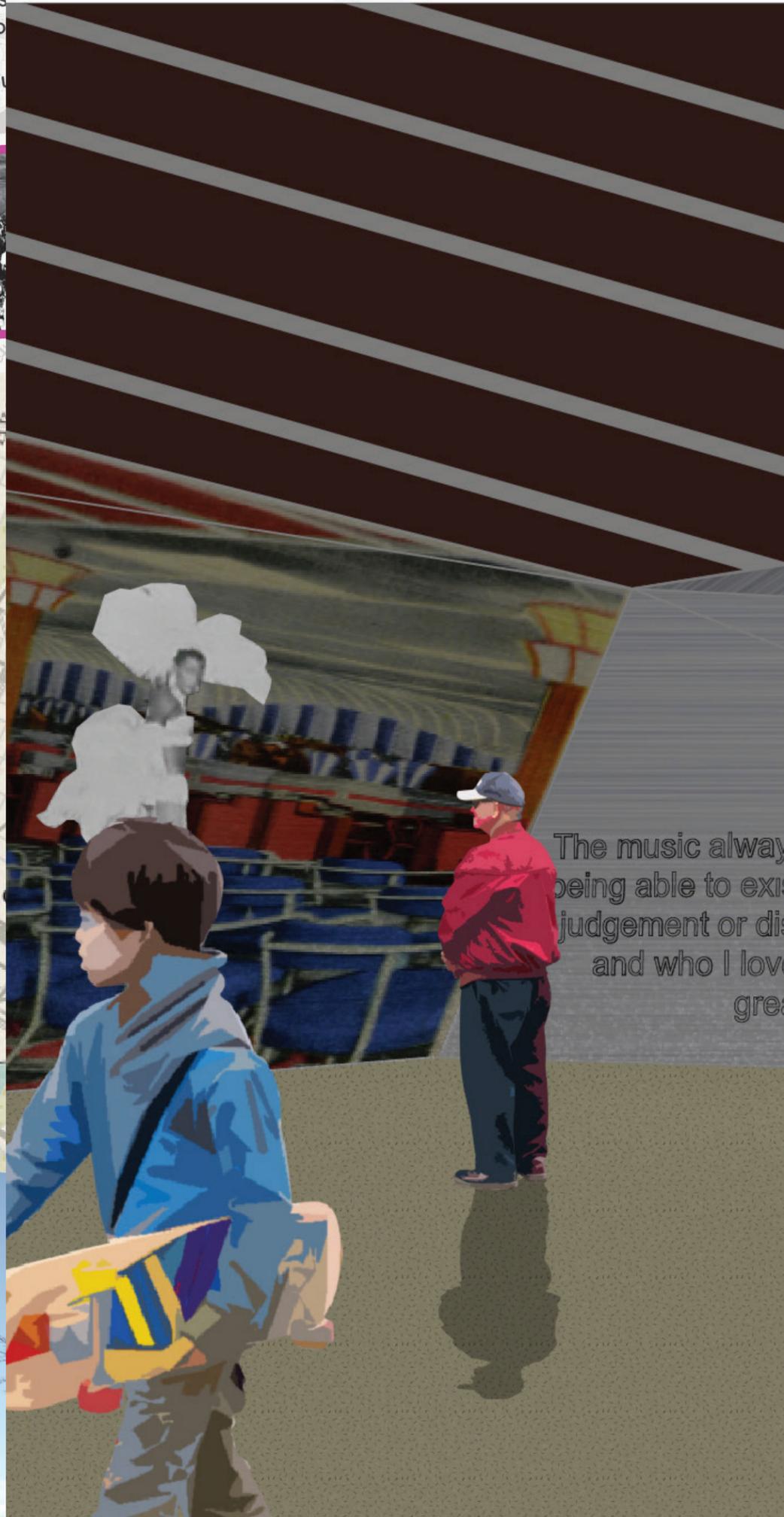
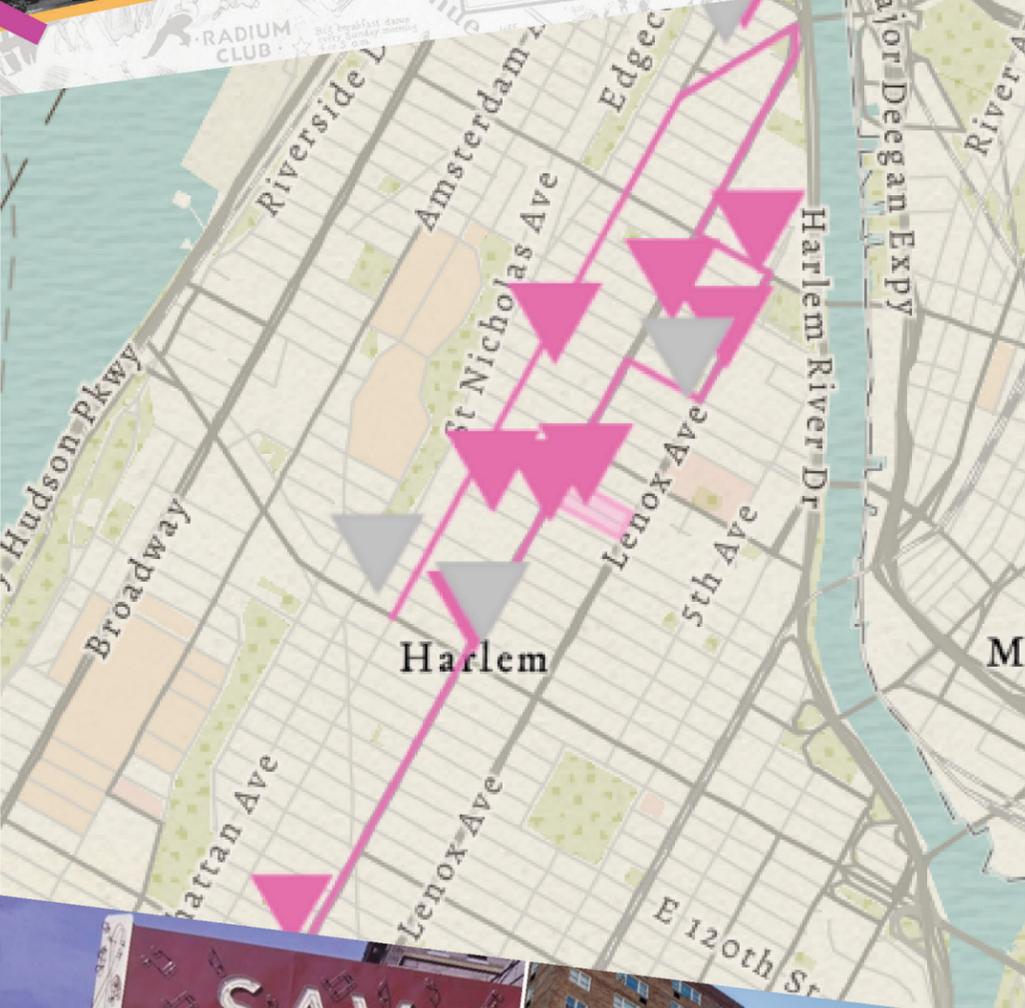
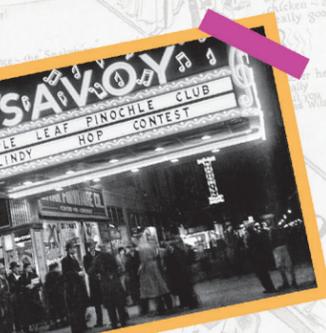


# DISAPPEARING QUEER SPACES IN HARLEM

ABRIANNAH AIKEN



THE SAVOY BALLROOM WAS AN IMPORTANT HARLEM RENAISSANCE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE, AS WELL AS QUEER CULTURE. IT WAS A LOCUS FOR INTEGRATED CELEBRATION OF JAZZ AND BALLROOM DANCE, BUT ALSO HOSTED DRAG BALLS AND WAS A QUEER SPACE THROUGHOUT ITS EXISTENCE FROM THE 1920S TO THE 1950S. THE SITE WAS EVENTUALLY DEMOLISHED TO MAKE WAY FOR HOUSING, AND THE LAND IS CURRENTLY HOSTING A NYCHA COMPLEX.



The music always being able to exist without judgement or discrimination and who I love to dance to.

# DISAPPEARING QUEER SPACES

## Analyzing Spaces and People from the Queer Harlem Renaissance

Abriannah Aiken



## INTRODUCTION

As noted in my Counter Story, there are a plethora of queer spaces from the Harlem Renaissance that have recently been demolished, with their memories slowly disappearing from common knowledge. The following research and project is a way of maintaining this common memory through the use of digital mechanisms and physical space creation.

In order to remember these spaces, there must be a system in place of collecting stories and then sharing them with the larger community in a public manner. The following proposal begins with a digital archive of information that can be shared with the community. There will be opportunities for interaction and submission of stories by the viewer. This will eventually make its way into the physical project: a renovation of a demolished queer space with a site of remembrance.

## QUEER HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The Harlem Renaissance was an important moment for the Harlem community within the 1920s and 1930s. Within this community of artists, writers, and performers, there was a large queer community who found inclusion and acceptance.

Unfortunately, these stories are being lost to time and the spaces that this community found acceptance within are also being forgotten and demolished. For this reason, there is an urgency to archive, distribute, and distribute knowledge about this history and these spaces.

For example, Drag Balls were an integral part of queer culture during the Harlem Renaissance. The theatres and palaces that these took place in, as well as the Drag Balls existence, are being forgotten and lost to time with an urgency to remember them.

## DIGITAL ARCHIVE

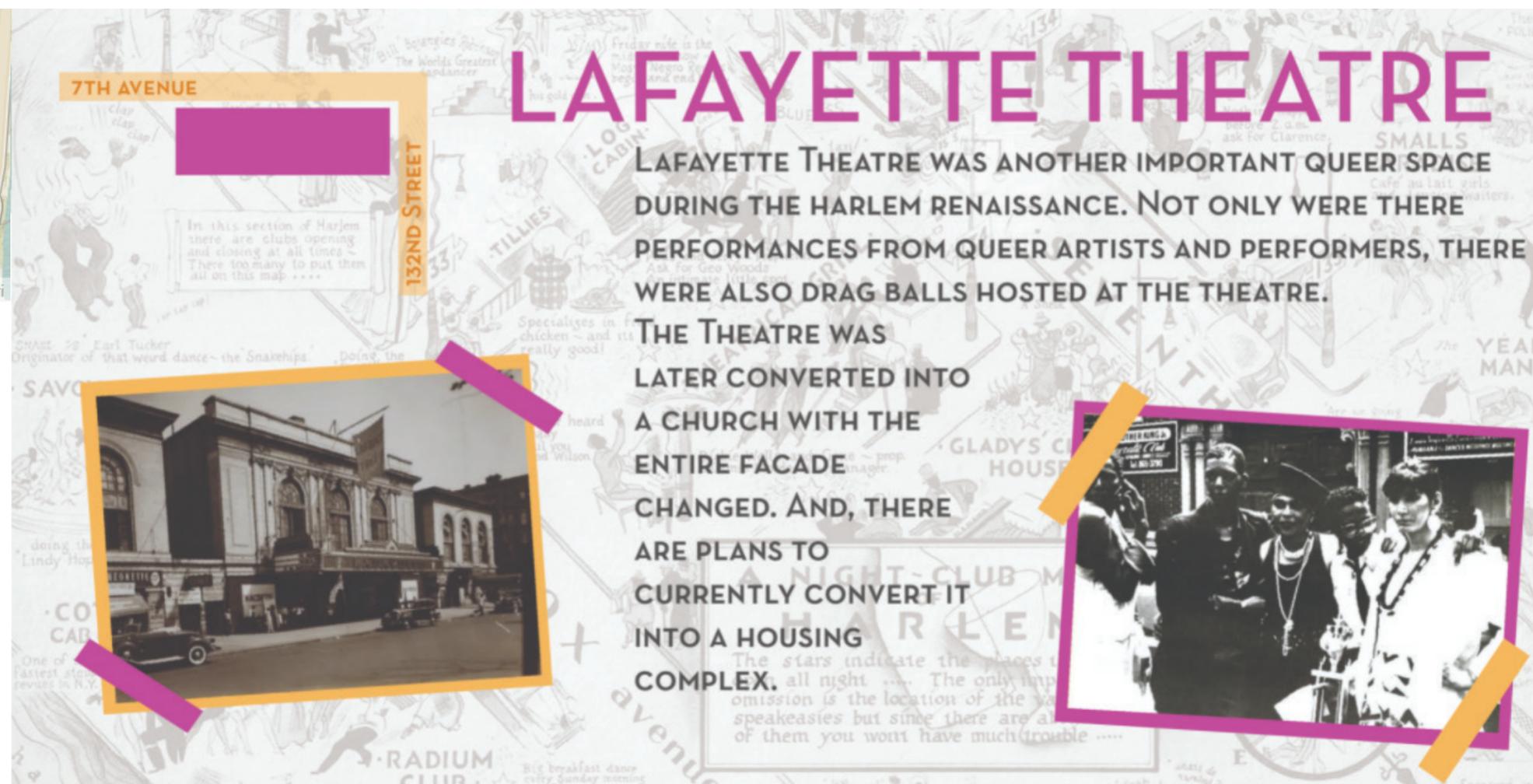
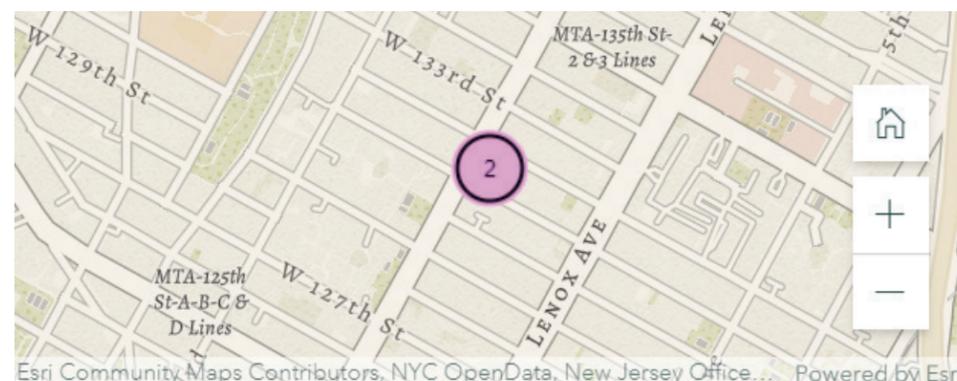
In order to remember these disappearing queer spaces, it is important to create an easily accessible archive. A digital website seems to be the best way of accomplishing this feat. ARCGIS Story Maps allows the history of these spaces to be digitally mapped, as well as archived through various story telling methods.

The most important interface of the website is shown below. On the top left, there is a map that identifies all of the various spaces. The map can be zoomed in and out and you can move from point to point, as well as seen a walking trail path that connects all of these spaces (more on that later). Below that is a small explanation of what the space is. And, below that is a button that will link to a google form. If an individual reads about this space and remembers their experiences within it, they can click the "Add your story" button to be brought to a google form to

fill out to let the administrators know more information. On the right side it is a document with images, as well as facts about the space. As individuals share more stories about the spaces, this portion will continue to be updated over time.

Shown below is #2. If the user scrolls upwards or downwards on their screen or device, the map will change to the correct building, the story google form will change to the corresponding project submission form, and the information on the left side will also change.

In this way, the stories, histories and memories of these disappearing queer spaces can be remembered and distributed through a digital archive. A website is the most easily accessible and distributable mode of archival research and this interactivity gives the project further depth.



## 2 LAFAYETTE THEATRE

Lafayette Theatre hosted Drag Balls throughout the Harlem Renaissance and was a significant queer space.

Add your story!

## WEBSITE INTERACTIVITY

The ARCGIS Story Map Website makes user interactivity very easily accessible and creates an engaging learning environment for all individuals. The most important aspect of the digital archival website is the mapping (as seen on the left). All queer spaces (of the past and present) can be mapped in the same space. The map becomes interactive as users can zoom in and out, as well as click on the various icons to learn more about the spaces.

Another interactive feature is the slider. The sliding elements (as seen on the right), help us to understand the changing of urban landscape over time and how this has specifically impacted disappearing queer spaces. The first slider allows individuals to see how the urban fabric has changed over 100 years. The largest changes can be the introduction of NYCHA and other larger housing projects. This is important as many of the demolished queer spaces were replaced with housing. The second slider looks specifically at Savoy Ballroom. The slider helps you to understand how the same space can look completely different and hold different functions over time. The sliding function allows you to illuminate and erase the future or past in a metaphorically revelatory action.

Overall, the website's interactivity helps to understand and engage with the history of these disappearing queer spaces.

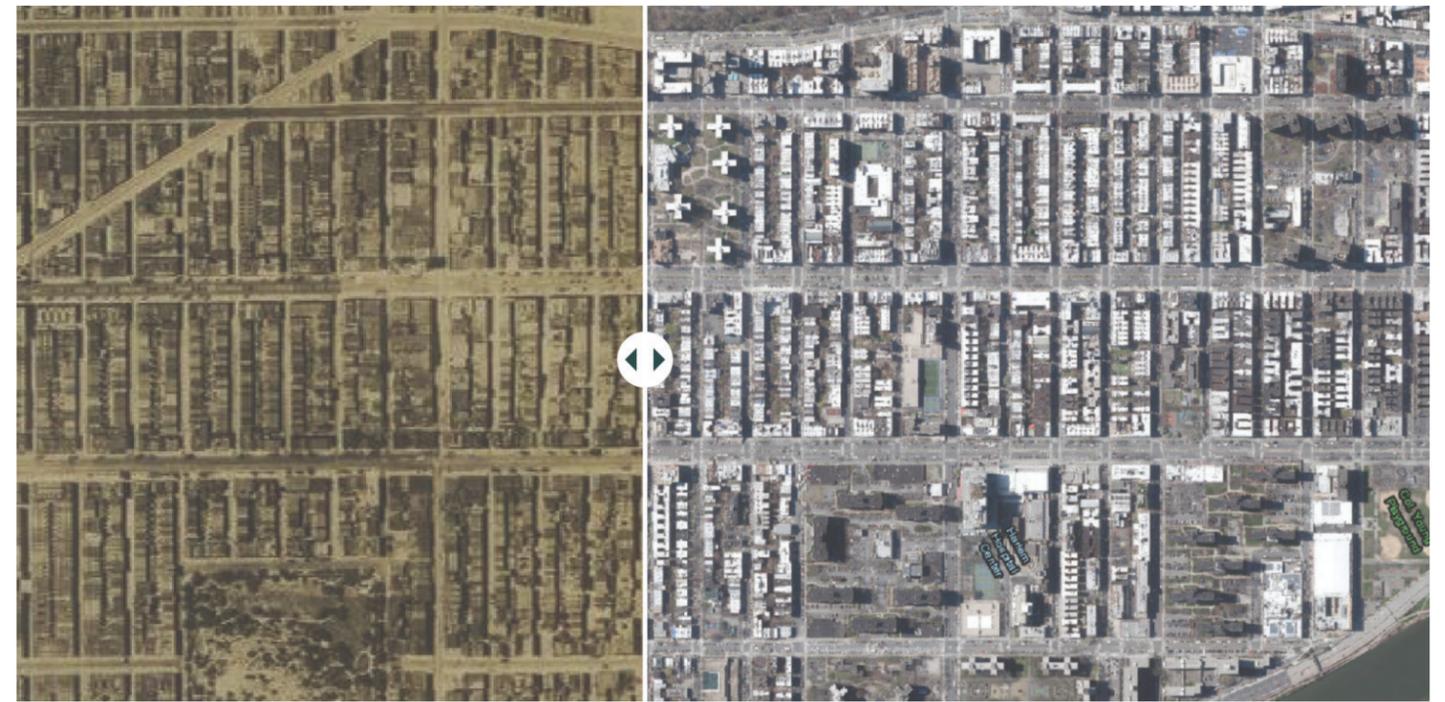
## QUEER HARLEM WALKING TRAIL

The website digital archive can be used on a desktop, but it can also be used on other devices like phones and tablets. One additional goal of the digital archive is to create an experience of the history of these queer spaces. Within the map (to the left), the pink line can serve as a walking trail for users to take. The goal would be for users to walk along the pink line trail, clicking on the various spaces when they encounter them. They can see historical photos and read about the buildings history and, in this way, they can see with their own eyes how the buildings have been lost to time through demolition.

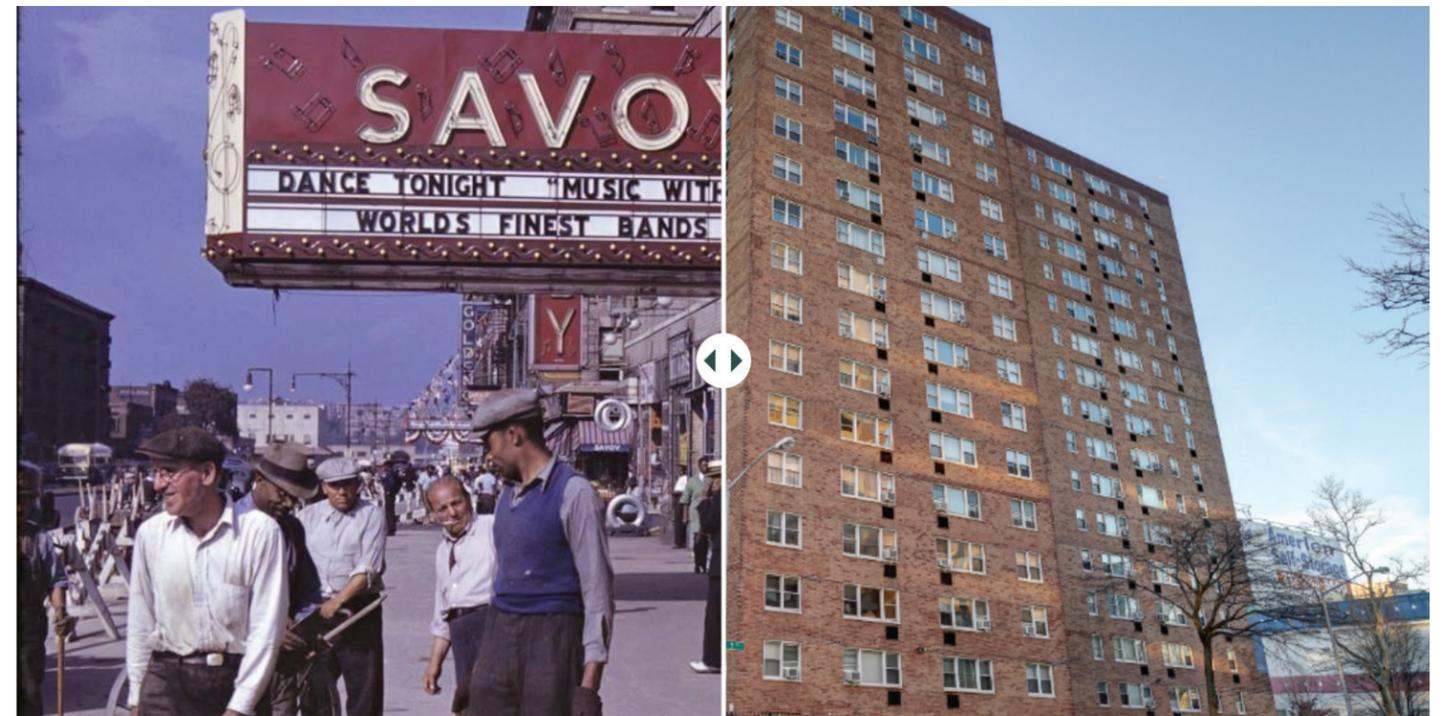
The walking trail will be engaging, as well, with the grey triangles. These will be queer spaces that have emerged or still exist within Harlem. So, not only will the walking trail engage with history, but also the present and future of queer Harlem culture.



ARCGIS Story Map Walking Trail Map: The Pink Line is the Walking Trail one could walk along, while the Pink Triangles are demolished queer spaces. The Grey Triangles are current queer spaces.



ARCGIS Story Map Slider between Aerial 1920 and Aerial 2021: The slider helps the user see how the urban landscape has changed over time, especially in terms of blocks that have been converted into public housing / NYCHA.



ARCGIS Story Map Slider between Savoy Ballroom circa 1920 and NYCHA circa 2021: The slider helps the user understand how the same space has transformed over the course of 100 years. Savoy Ballroom specifically was a true central hub for jazz and ballroom dance culture, as well as a space that hosted Drag Balls. The slider helps one understand the erasure of this history, culture, and communal space.



An example of the Walking Trail. An individual can use their phone to walk along the path and encounter these spaces in their current forms while reading about their rich, queer histories. This individual is standing in front of where Hotel Olga used to stand.

### SHARING YOUR STORY

Within the interactive website, there is the ability to submit your interactions with the space under the button: "Add your story." In this way, the website becomes a space to collect and share new archival information regarding these spaces. If someone knows or has encountered these spaces, they can click the button and be redirected to a google form for them to share this information.

The questions are open ended and welcome individuals to provide as much information as they can remember or would like to share. Not only does it ask about the architectural space itself, but also how it was used, what happened inside, and who was there. Lastly, it asks "what does the space mean to you." This information may be subjective, but really helps future readers piece together and understand these spaces in a new way. And, the last question acknowledges the importance of remembering these spaces for their importance of queer Harlem culture.

The information collected will be used to update the digital archive website, as well as for future installations and permanent projects. Through this addition of story collection, this project and archive becomes living and breathing: forever able to be updated and forever changing as new memories, stories, and histories are accumulated.

**Disappearing Queer Spaces - Share Your Story**

Have you experienced any of these spaces? Please tell us more about your experience! We would love to add it to the Queer Harlem Memorial Project!

aea2191@columbia.edu (not shared) [Switch account](#)

When did you visit the site? Or, was this a regular spot that you visited?

Your answer

Why did you visit the site? Was something significant happening when you visited?

Your answer

Who did you visit the site with? Or, who did you encounter at the space?

Your answer

Can you tell us more about the experience? How did the space play a role in that experience?

Your answer

What does this space mean to you?

Your answer

**Submit** [Clear form](#)



Civil Rights Foundation NYC and SHOP Architects Proposal for the Museum of Civil Rights on 145th and Malcolm X Blvd. The corner skyscraper is where Hotel Olga used to be.

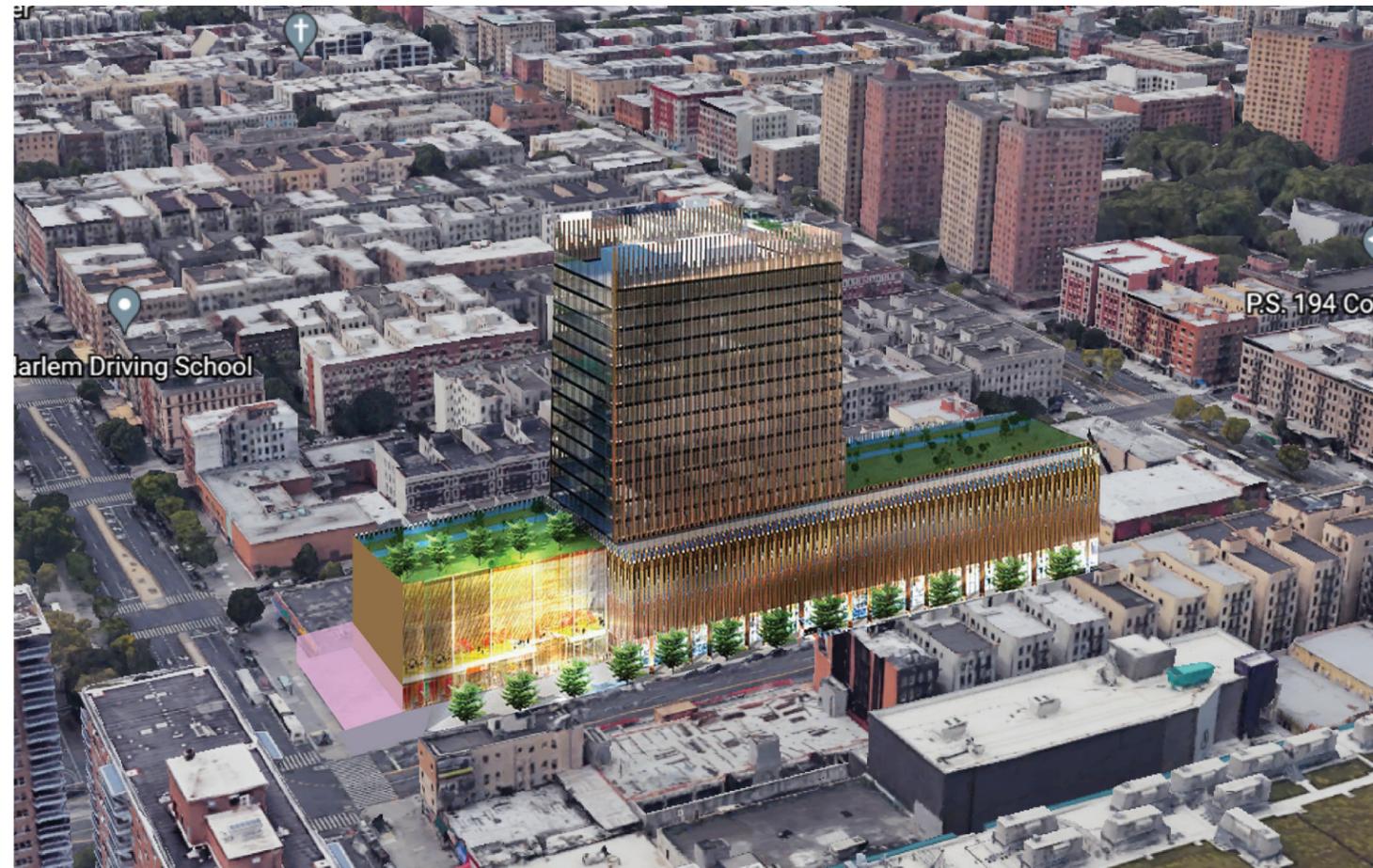
### HOTEL OLGA VERSUS MUSEUM OF CIVIL RIGHTS PROJECT

In 2019, SHOP Architects announced the design for a Museum of Civil Rights that will be built in Central Harlem (<https://civilrightsfoundationnyc.org/>). The actual museum will be accompanied by a plethora of housing in two skyscrapers on either side on the corner of Malcolm X Blvd and 145th. The area where the larger of the two housing skyscrapers will be placed is where Hotel Olga used to be (and is currently an empty lot).

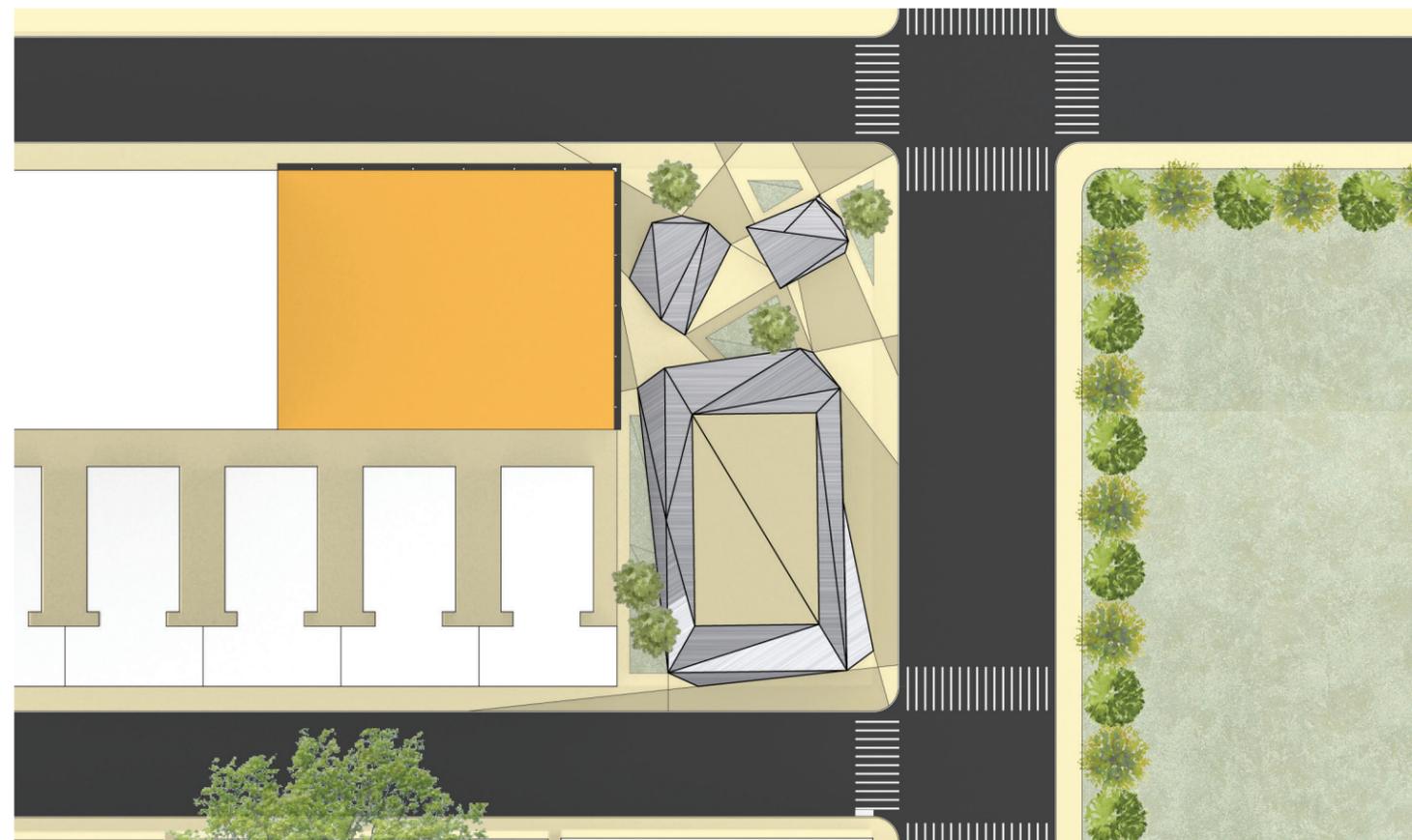
Seeing as the Museum of Civil Rights places “The Campaign for LGBTQIA” as one of their main goals, I believe there is an opportunity for the space of that skyscraper to be utilized more respectfully in remembrance of the queer history that existed on that land before.

The site plan to the right is a proposal for a more activated use of the land for a Space of Queer Rememberance. It will host three triangulated abstractions of the past historical spaces for individuals to interact with and within. There will also be seating and shading to create a safe and comfortable space of learning, sharing, and remembering.

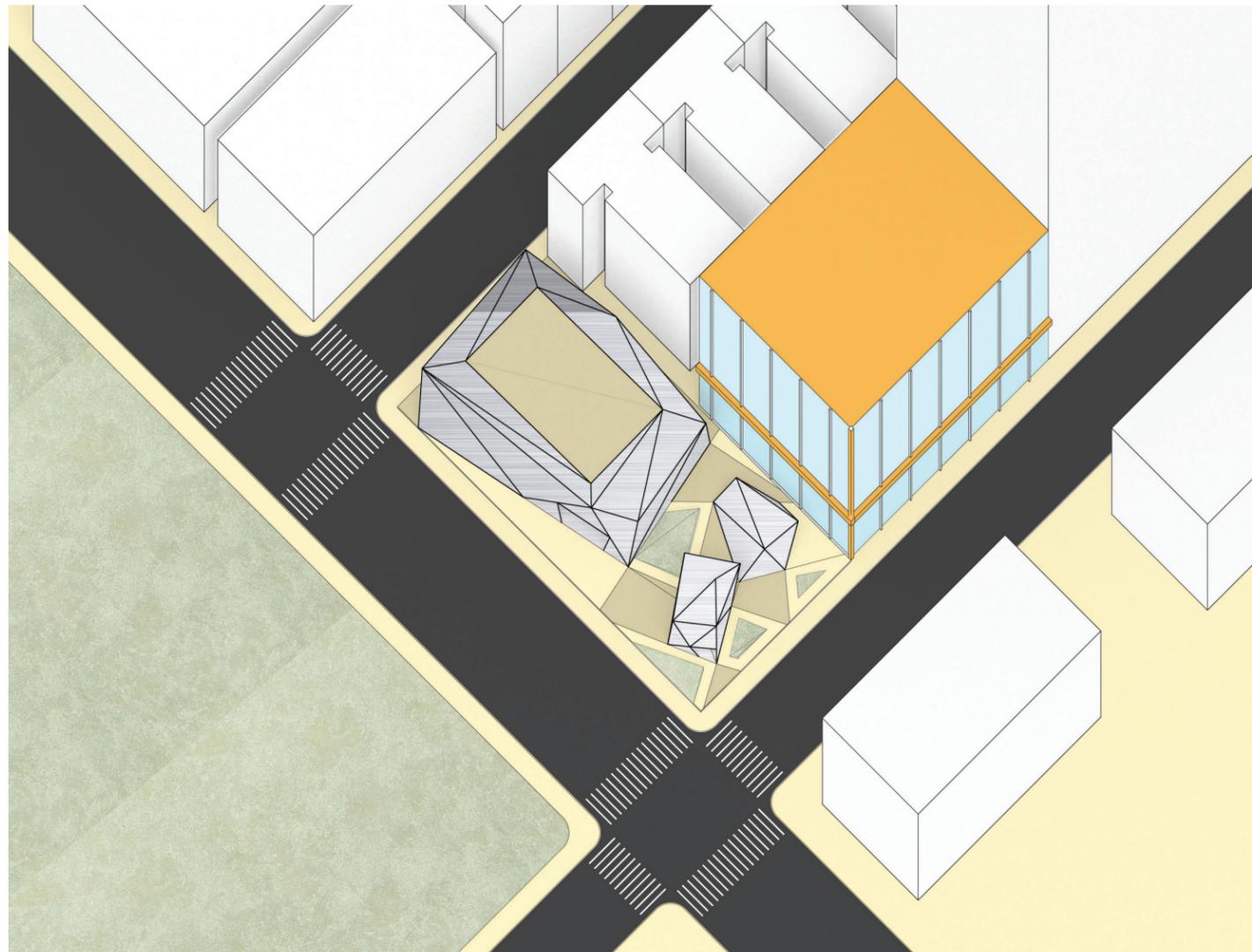
The project will be in direct conversation with the Museum of Civil Rights. The glass facade facing 145th will turn the corner and also become an entrance through the Space of Queer Rememberance. In this way, the museums’ goals of sharing and advocating for LGBTQIA+ rights will be spatialized.



New proposal for the Museum of Civil Rights and adjacent Space of Queer Rememberance.



New site plan for the Museum of Civil Rights and adjacent Space of Queer Rememberance.



New axonometric for the Museum of Civil Rights and adjacent Space of Queer Rememberance.

## DESIGNING THE SPACE OF QUEER REMEMBRANCE

The site will be made up of three triangulated abstractions of disappearing queer spaces: Savoy Ballroom, Hotel Olga Lobby, and N-word-atti Apartment. The spaces will be sized to the approximation of what they truly were for later projections. And, they are triangulated as to not mimic/recreate the past, but understand the history in the context of the present.

The spaces will have openings into their interior. Based on the stories, histories, and memories submitted on the Story Collection Form, these architectures will be living and constantly updated alongside the Digital Archive. As new memories emerge, new information will be etched into the objects interiors and exteriors.

And, the Ballroom structure can be utilized both on the interior and rooftop for future Drag Balls to fully commemorate the past of the Queer Harlem Renaissance. The landscaping will follow the triangulation of the new infrastructure with new moments of greenery introduced within those triangulations. And, as mentioned before, the Museum of Civil Rights will be in direct conversation with the Space of Queer Remberance.

**LAFAYETTE THEATRE**  
LAFAYETTE THEATRE WAS ANOTHER IMPORTANT QUEER SPACE DURING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE. NOT ONLY WERE THERE PERFORMANCES FROM QUEER ARTISTS AND PERFORMERS, THERE WERE ALSO DRAG BALLS HOSTED AT THE THEATRE. THE THEATRE WAS LATER CONVERTED INTO A CHURCH WITH THE ENTIRE FACADE CHANGED. AND, THERE ARE PLANS TO CURRENTLY CONVERT IT INTO A HOUSING COMPLEX.

**Add your story!**

### Disappearing Queer Spaces - Share Your Story

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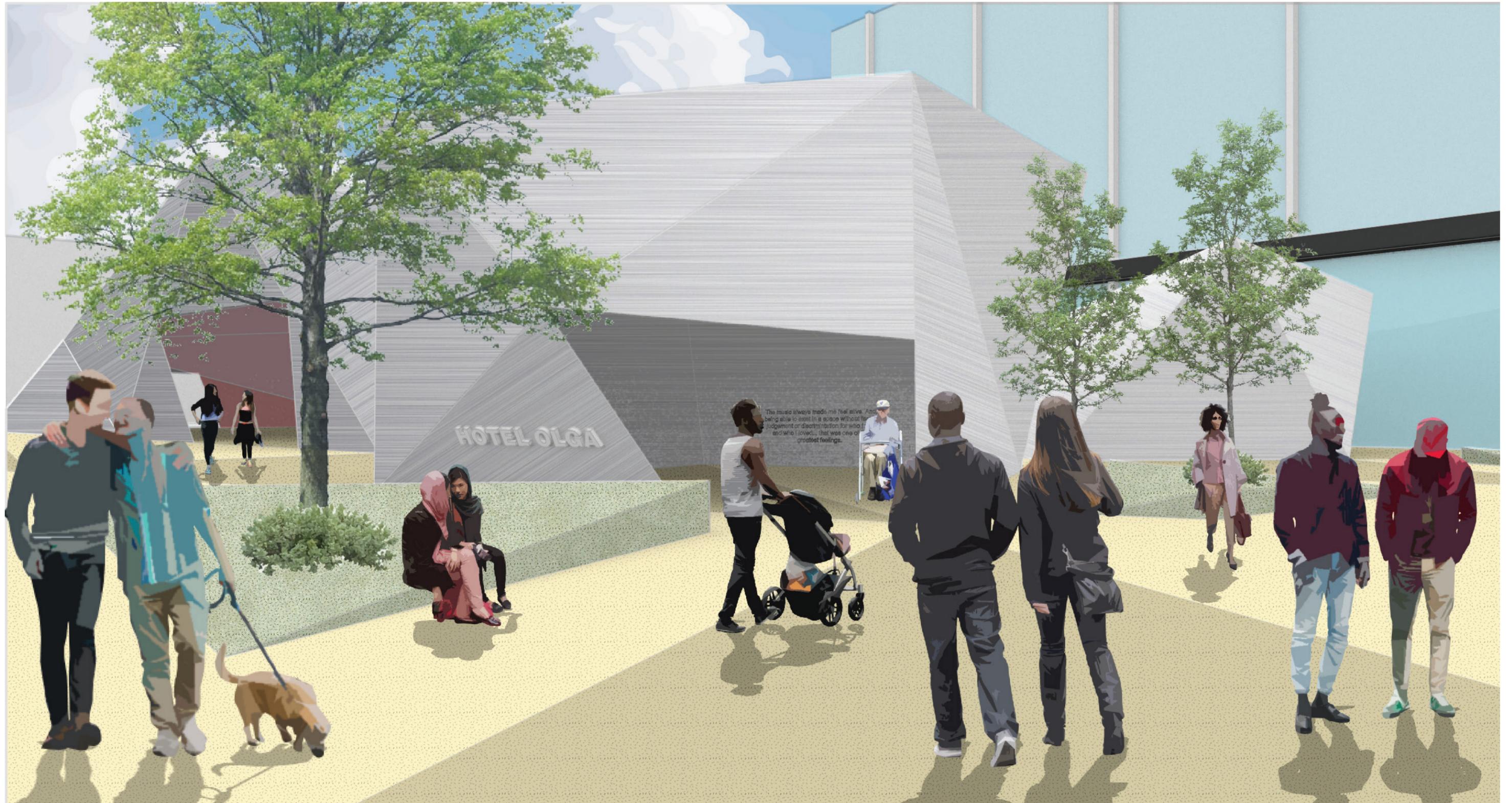
Why did you visit the site? Was something significant happening when you visited?

Your answer

**HOTEL OLGA**

This would always be the place. And, being able to visit in a space without fear or judgement or discrimination for who I was and who I loved... that was one of the greatest feelings.

Relationship between Digital Archive, Story Collection Form, and Story Telling Etchment into the Space of Queer Rememberance



The Space of Queer Remembrance will become a community space for the Harlem Community, as well as the Queer Community. Not only is it a space of learning, reflection and remembrance, it is also an open space for the community to connect, interact, and grow together. The trees and green landscaping allow for the community to enjoy the space year round. And, there is plenty of open space for performances and larger community interactions like parties.

The openings into the structures will be facing the street so as to welcome the community to interact with the structures and learn more about the histories. The structures and overall park space will be easily accessible and inclusive so as to attract the largest group of individuals. Rather than a somber space of remembrance, the Space of Queer Remembrance will be a space of reflection, as well as celebration of the queer histories of the past, present and future. Queer organizations will also host events and programming within the site as well to keep this almost-forgotten memories alive!



The interior of the structures will allow for an interactive experience. The stories from the individuals who experienced the spaces will be etched into the walls, allowing for an engaging, ever-growing way to learn about the histories of these queer spaces. But, there will also be moments that allow for further sensory stimulation. Projections will be used on the walls to recreate the spaces (here, the Savoy Ballroom). Music and other noises like individuals talking the bar will be utilized to allow users to be fully immersed.

And, there will also be projected individuals helping to fully encapsulate the memories of these spaces. As seen in the Savoy Ballroom projection, there will be individuals dancing, as well as recreations of the infamous Drag Balls. In this way, users will be fully immersed in the stories, sights, and sounds of the past. This will hopefully engage individuals of all ages to learn, reflect and remember the almost forgotten histories of these disappearing queer spaces. A hopeful future of this space will also include the introduction of new Drag Balls so as to celebrate the past and look to the future of queer culture in Harlem.

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