

ARCHITECTURE IS BURNING: AN URBANISM OF QUEER KINSHIP IN BALLROOM CULTURE

Malcolm Rio
(Rio UltraOmni)

A ball is a gathering of people who are not welcomed to gather anywhere else. A celebration of a life that the rest of the world *does not* deem worthy of celebration. There are categories—people dress up for them, walk. There's voting, trophies ... Better than money—you can actually make a name for yourself by winning a trophy or two. And in [the ballroom] community, the glory of your name is everything.¹

Late at night in the streets of New York City, a figure engulfed by a billowy golden ensemble of sequin and lamé is illuminated by flickering neon and fluorescent lights. She walks up the streets of Harlem to the fire-engine red doors of the Imperial Elk's Lodge. As the doors open—in a metaphorical hinge between architecture and urbanism, dividing a queer interior and a normative exterior—indistinct shouting over upbeat techno erupts from a crowd of joyous black and brown bodies that are clapping, cheering, and zig-zagging their fingers through a humid and hazy air. An emcee shouts, "Get off the floor. Get off the floor!" as the cloud of gold lamé shuffles across the threshold and into the main space. The emcee continues, "Learn it, and learn it well." His comments set off the figure in gold who begins whacking, bopping, and bouncing across the floor, shedding elements of her costume that reveal even more gold sequin. The cheering from on-lookers that flank the dancing gold figure exponentially intensifies with many jumping out of their seats, hands raised high over their heads, dramatically clapping to accentuate their approval. One spectator screams at the golden figure, "Girl, give me those motherf**king heels!"²

Ballroom is a queer subculture that emerged out of drag performance in the early 1970s in New York City. It largely comprises queer people of color (QPOCs) who compete or "walk" in ways that emulate the archetypal traits of a gender, sex, or social class that is not theirs—or battle through a dance known as voguing. Many ballroom participants belong to one of a series of social groups known as houses, which serve as queer alternative families led by a Mother and/or Father who provides

¹ In the words of Blanca Evangelista, the fictional Mother of the House of Evangelista in the US television serial *Pose*, which premiered June 2, 2018. Due to ballroom's subcultural nature, defining it through conventional norms such as a dictionary is not appropriate. Thus ballroom's definition must come from oral histories shared by members within the ballroom community in which some serve as advisors and writers for the television show *Pose*. Emphasis added. *Pose*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot," directed by Ryan Murphy, aired June 3, 2018, on FX, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81029280>.

² Description from the beginning of Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning*, Dorian Corey, Pepper LaBeija, Willi Ninja, Freddie Pendavis, Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*, directed by Jennie Livingston (Burbank: Miramax Home Entertainment, 2005).

³ These economic and social hardships include the economic and energy crises of the 1970s, the shrinking of U.S. welfare programs in the 1980s and 1990s, intensified drug enforcement and policing in black and brown communities, and a significant spike in the nation's crime rates in the 1970s and 1980s concentrated in urban areas. These hardships are addressed in further detail later in the essay. Ibid.

⁴ Michel Foucault defines heterotopia as "real places ... which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within [a] culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind

are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality." Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* 5 (1984): 46-49.

⁵ For utopian scholars such as Tom Moylan, Edward K. Chan, Ruth Levitas, Raffaella Baccolini, and associated scholars with the Ralahine Center for Utopian Studies at the University of Limerick, alterity is an essential component to utopian thinking. Alterity is a means of social dreaming or world-building that re-envisions existing social relations through provisional, fluctuating, and re-combinatory practices. For these scholars, the absence of alterity would impede possibilities of social progress and change which depend upon the ability to imagine new, even preposterous, social relations. Anti-utopian thinking, characteristic of the Modern era and that of the later half of the twentieth century, often argues against alterity-thinking as impractical, fictitious, or delusional. See Ruth Levitas, *Utopia As Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, *Utopia Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007); Edward K. Chan, *The Racial Horizon of Utopia: Unthinking the Future of Race in the Late Twentieth-Century American Utopian Novels* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016).

⁶ Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* was one of the first commercially successful films to focus primarily on topics of

wisdom and guidance to the house's other members, known as children. During the late 1980s—a period of ballroom immortalized by Jennie Livingston's 1991 popular documentary *Paris Is Burning*—both the social structures of houses and ballroom performance rapidly evolved to provide ever more inclusive, safe spaces for the many young QPOCs disproportionately affected by a variety of economic and social hardships during the last third of the twentieth century.³ Indeed, *Paris Is Burning* captures the everyday lives of QPOCs and their wrestling with the socio-economic adversity of the late 1980s. By 2016, the Library of Congress recognized the film as deserving of inclusion in its National Film Registry.

Through *Paris*, the audience's gaze is directed at the creative and invented systems of ballroom's queer kinship. The forms of kinship ballroom is co-constitutive with are a site for utopic thinking and practices, comparable to what Michel Foucault termed "heterotopia," and provide both individual and collective affirmation, validation, and appreciation despite this community's systemic oppression.⁴ By organizing and participating in balls and affiliating with a house, members of ballroom make real a fabulous and ingenious form of queer, racial, and spatial alterity—an essential component to utopic/heterotopic thinking, as evidenced by the manner in which *Paris* frames its subjects.⁵ When watching *Paris*, viewers witness QPOCs actively engage in subcultural productions of space that creatively reject the values and positions within which the normative social order hopes to regulate them. However, popular and academic references to Livingston's documentary or a larger acknowledgment of the film's subject matter—the subculture of ballroom—are acutely absent within the disciplinary discourses of architecture and urbanism.⁶ This is especially shocking given the film's unprecedented commercial success, its cult-like adoration, and its explicit attention to the social politics of urban spaces that contributed to the film's 2016 induction into the National Film Registry to be preserved as an emblem of American film history and heritage.⁷

This omission lays bare the failure of architectural historians and theorists to develop frameworks for addressing stories and experiences such as those documented in *Paris* as well as the very exclusions of QPOCs from being a part of their discussions. This absence is especially striking given the numerous architectural texts, projects, exhibitions, and critical-practice studios centered on topics such as subversive cultural practices, the politics of resistance, occupation, right to the city, and speculative futures.⁸ Yet, this absence is nonetheless consistent with the broader ideological, pedagogical, and methodological circumscription of bodies and practices that do not

homosexuality and transsexuality (especially within black and Latinx communities). Film critic Lucas Hilderbrand similarly notes throughout his book, *Paris Is Burning: A Queer Film Classic*, the rarity of the film's commercial and mainstream success for both its genre, a documentary, and subject matter, homosexual and transsexual people of color. Lucas Hilderbrand, *Paris Is Burning: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014); Ashley Clark, "Burning down the House: Why the Debate over Paris Is Burning Rages On," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jun/24/burning-down-the-house-debate-paris-is-burning>.

⁷ The social and political urban spaces *Paris Is Burning* focuses on include low-income apartments, community centers, churches, parks, piers, sidewalks, and streets that host illegal activity and forms of labor, as well as spaces of exclusion predicated on race, class, gender, and sexuality such as high-end retail stores or city neighborhoods with exclusive real estate markets such as the Upper East Side along Park Avenue.

⁸ Although Aaron Betsky's 1997 *Queer Space* does a tremendous job reconstructing queer nocturnal leisure spaces of the late 1970s and early 1980s, there is no reference to the spaces of ballroom. Similarly, Joel Sanders' *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity* does not mention ballroom culture. Christina B. Hanhardt's *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* does reference ballroom culture but only

in passing and predominantly through its mainstream form, Livingston's *Paris Is Burning*. Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1997); Joel Sanders, *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996); Christina B. Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 192, 197.

conform to existing structures of historical writing.⁹ Even with the tremendous contributions and efforts of architectural scholars and practitioners, there still remains an extraordinary lack of sexual, racial, gendered, classed, and “othered” architectural histories.¹⁰ At the core, this failure has to do with the conditions of architecture, as a collection of abstract knowledge practices and physical, built objects, to delimit and/or give rise to cultural understandings of spatialized and embodied ontologies of blackness and queerness.

An analysis of ballroom’s history and the urban and architectural forces that shape both QPOC subjects and the ballroom community during the 1970s and 1980s may begin to fill the gaping hole left by the profession’s disregard of and for otherness. Ballroom culture and Livingston’s *Paris* can be positioned as architectural and urban texts. This first requires locating the socio-political elements that brought QPOCs to New York City in the late 1970s and 1980s, followed by an analysis of the architectural and urban elements that shaped QPOC life and ballroom culture. Such an analysis relies on the use of sources rarely brought to bear on studies in traditional architectural history: artists’ oral histories, literature reviews, television shows, and artistic photography.

A racialized counter-archive of queer subculture such as this one offers a historical heterotopia of queer kinship for QPOCs in the face of increasing social, state, and media marginalization and violence—the War on Drugs,¹¹ the Reagan-Bush culture wars,¹² HIV/AIDS, homelessness, cable media caricatures¹³—that was commonplace in New York City during the period of development following the city’s financial crisis. Central to ballroom’s production of safe spaces was its use of “realness” to reflect the intimate link between identity, its performativity, and urban space.¹⁴ For the QPOC subject embodied in multiple identities needing to negotiate several spatial and political antagonisms, physical movements across New York’s urban fabric requires constant, performative shifts or else risks violence from a hostile exterior—exposing the imbricated relationship between performances of identity and the designing of space, and vice versa. Spatial character, program, purpose, and etiquette are deeply interwoven with social identity and its (proper) performativity.

9 During a graduate lecture to PhD students at the Yale School of Architecture, Charles L. Davis II spoke about the barriers scholars of architectural history confront when it comes to researching blackness in architecture. To overcome these barriers, Davis II suggested two methods for emerging scholars: the first being that rather than seeking a formal tectonics or physical building, the common subjects of architectural analyses, scholars of black histories, or, what could reductively be called “black architecture,” must often look for the occupation(s) of space as a means in which blackness is expressed architecturally, which is inherently ephemeral and complicated to reconstruct. The second, that absence of formal architecture is a form of architecture. Aaron Betsky expressed a similar struggle in his reconstruction of disco-era spaces in New York City. Charles L Davis II and Summer Sutton, “YSOA PhD Dialogues: Access, Accountability, Architecture,” Lecture, Yale School of Architecture, Yale University, New Haven, November 8, 2018; Aaron Betsky, email message with the author, November 7, 2018.

10 Architectural scholars and practitioners who have addressed themes of blackness or queerness include, Aaron Betsky (*Queer Space*, 1997; *Building Sex: Men, Women, Architecture, and the Construction of Sexuality*, 1995), George Chauncey (*Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, 1995), Beatriz Colomina (*Sexuality & Space*, 1997), Mario Gooden (*Dark Space:*

Architecture, Representation, Black Identity, 2016), Charles L. Davis II (*Building Character: The Racial Politics of Modern Architectural Style*, 2019), Joel Sanders (*Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*, 1996), and Mabel O. Wilson (*Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums*, 2012).

11 “The War on Drugs” is an expression to connote the anti-drug campaign led by the U.S. federal government. Although it is argued that the campaign’s origins extend from the beginning of the twentieth century (i.e., the Smoking Opium Exclusion Act in 1909 or the Marijuana Tax Act of 1937), the phrase was popularized by the media in 1971 after President Richard Nixon’s June address to congress on the importance of his 1970 Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act, in which he declared drugs and drug abuse to be “public enemy number one.” Critics accuse the campaign of disproportionately affecting black and Latinx communities and that underlying these federal policies is racism: “Race has always influenced the administration of justice in the United States ... Biased police practices are ... nothing new, a recurring theme of African American experience since blacks were targeted by the police as suspected runaway slaves. And every drug war that has ever been waged in the United States—including alcohol prohibition—has been tainted or driven by racial bias.” Chris Barber, “Public Enemy Number One: A Pragmatic Approach to America’s Drug Problem,” *Richard Nixon Foundation*, accessed October 4, 2019,

LOCATING THE QUEER
PERSON OF COLOR
IN 1980S NEW YORK CITY

Juan Manuel Rivera’s story of coming to and surviving in New York City in the late 1970s is told through interviews with Professor of Spanish and Latin American/Latinx literatures and culture at Fordham University Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé in *Queer Latino Testimonio*, *Keith Haring*, and *Juanito Xtravaganza: Hard Tails*. It is one of the few (material) allegories to offer an insight to the everyday life of queer people of color during the cultural shift of the late ’70s and ’80s in New York City. Beginning with Juan’s teenage years in New Haven, Connecticut, Cruz-Malavé sensitively and respectfully lays out the troubling yet common conditions that sent Juan to New York City: homophobia, familial rejection, and the desire to be free:

...my brother was staring at me, and there was more hate in his face than I’d ever seen. And without saying a word, he just got up and knocked all of my art work on the floor. And I could tell he’d just found out, that L ... had finally told him I was a faggot. And for the first time in my life I got real mad and hit him. And he punched me back, and I fell to the floor. And as I was getting up, he lunged for my back with a kitchen knife. And lucky for me a friend of his jumped in and grabbed the knife as it was coming down. And as my brother’s friend was desperately trying to restrain him, my sister was screaming hysterically. And when my parents came in they started yelling at me: “*Tú eres el mayor!* You should know better ... You should ... !” And as my father raised his hand to strike me I grabbed it in midair, and my mother started shaking and crying, and I ran out ... Yeah, it was then I decided to run away to New York.¹⁵

Following this violent incident, Juan fled to New York City in order to escape his conservative, homophobic hometown. To Juan, New York embodied “the values of liberation and personal freedom emblemized by the 1960s, chief among them sexual self-expression.”¹⁶ When he arrived in the city, Juan was “overwhelmed,” poor, and clueless as to how he would survive in his new city but thought it completely impossible to return to his family. For the first two months, Juan lived, as he describes, as a “derelict.”¹⁷

... after the second day in the City, your stomach starts talking to you, and it’s like it never dawned on you that you had to eat. And so, after a while you end up living like a derelict, going through garbage cans to eat. And if I had only known how to steal, it would’ve been different, but I didn’t ... So pretty soon I felt like a derelict, I was a derelict. And for about two months I slept in [sic] church benches, in alleyways, in city parks.¹⁸

<https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2016/06/26404>; Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 187.

12 American sociologist James Davison Hunter coined the term “culture wars” in his 1991 *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. Hunter argues that American politics was radically reshaped under the conservative presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, which focused the attention of their offices on polarizing cultural issues such as abortion, gun rights, LGBT rights, religious freedom, (racialized) crime, and feminism. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

13 The 1980s brought the advent of 24-hour cable news channels like CNN. During this decade, pervasive media narratives of urban crime and decline on both cable and non-cable stations, such as in CBS News’ “48-hours on Crack Street,” were prevalent. Crime, drug abuse, homelessness, poverty, disease, issues that were often represented with a black face, were framed as antithetical to the nation’s founding liberal principles (liberty, justice, meritocracy) and reinforced by the U.S. federal government’s anti-drug efforts against the continued “public enemy number one.”

14 Judith Butler introduces her theory of performativity in her 1990 *Gender Trouble*. She later clarifies and revises her theory in her 1993 *Bodies That Matter*, arguing that performativity is a reiteration of normative social acts that acquire an “act-like status”

which simultaneously conceal or dissimulate the very act performativity seeks to mimic. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

15 Emphasis in original. Cruz-Malavé, *Queer Latino Testimonio*, 19.

16 Ibid., 4.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

Although not a full-fledged child of the ballroom scene until the 1990s, Juan was very close with the children of the House of Xtravaganza: “I’d always thought of myself as a child of the *House of Xtravaganza*, ’cause I’d been there with the legendary children of *Xtravaganza* when the houses were being formed.”¹⁹ Juan’s connection to the House of Xtravaganza is framed as a life-support during the darker periods of his life, especially once Cruz-Malavé’s biography later tells the story of Juan’s relatively unknown romantic relationship with the Pop artist Keith Haring from 1986 to 1990, a period that proved to be “the most frenetically productive years of [Haring’s] career.”²⁰

Echoing the early hardships Juan faced when fleeing to New York City is one of *Paris Is Burning*’s star performers, Venus Xtravaganza, who discloses, though only partially, her participation in the sex trade. This is the most direct correlation made in *Paris* between ballroom and the city’s sex trade, revealing the kind of labor many transwomen must often undertake as a means of subsistence.²¹ Venus shares her own near-death experiences with a transphobic john as well as her fear of contracting HIV/AIDS, which eventually led to her (partial) withdrawal from sex work.²² Juan’s biography, too, unveils similarly cruel experiences within the sex trade, beginning with his first-time hustling:

[A john] ended up taking me home and doing all kindsa [sic] stuff to me. And at one point I was so destroyed, ‘cause I didn’t want to do what he wanted me to do—I didn’t wanna get fucked! And he was trying his damned hardest to fuck me, and I was going, “Stop, Charlie! Charlie, stop! Go to sleep, Charlie! Go to sleep!” but he kept trying all night long. And by the time he was fucking me the second time that night, I was crying, you know, and asking God to give me the strength not to turn around and kill this man, ‘cause I was ready to kill him. So I was crying and praying at the same time that this be over with ... Yeah, that was the first time ... And after that, I kinda went back, and did it for twenty, thirty dollars, and made enough money to get an apartment and clothes.²³

These painful testimonies of violence, desperation, and sex work reveal an underbelly of the ’80s, in which the prosperous images projected by primetime television fare such as *Dynasty* and *Dallas* were far removed from the lives of many QPOCs.²⁴ Carlos Aparicio and Susana Aikin’s 1990 documentary *The Salt Mines* adds further evidence of the centrality of sex work, public violence, and economic desperation for QPOCs living in New York during the time. Similarly, for heterosexual people of color (POC), New York City’s triumph over its possible bankruptcy in 1975 was starkly absent from many of its inner-city neighborhoods. These communities “remained a devastated war zone of abandoned and burned-out buildings and

19 Ibid., 55.

20 Ibid., 3.

21 In *Paris*, Venus explains that “most of all the drag queens that are involved in the ball, say ninety percent of them, are hustlers. I guess that’s how they make their money to go to the balls and get whatever they need and stuff.” It is important to note here, however, that the film has been criticized for oversimplifying the overlap between illicit practices and ballroom culture; it is unlikely that ninety percent of drag queens were involved in the sex trade. Nevertheless, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed strict anti-cross-dressing discrimination that made it hard for trans-people to obtain or maintain employment. Other documentaries contemporary to *Paris* like Susana Aikin’s *The Salt Mines* (1990) similarly capture the economic struggles of transwomen and their relationship with the city’s sex trade. Lucas Hilderbrand, *Paris Is Burning*, 69.

22 Although Venus Xtravaganza claims in the film that she no longer participates in sex work, at another point she does allude to continuing to work as an escort. Her murder during the filming of *Paris Is Burning* is suspected to have been a result of a transphobic john who strangled her to death upon learning that she was a transwoman.

23 Cruz-Malavé, *Queer Latino Testimonio*, 21.

24 Juan explains in his interviews with Cruz-Malavé that his inability to obtain “legitimate” employment stemmed from his inability to read and write due to an inadequate public education in the New Haven education system.

However, Jennie Livingston does not explicitly state the reasons why Venus Xtravaganza must participate in sex work. It can be assumed though that the lack of workplace anti-discrimination laws for LGBT people and the Reagan-Bush culture wars allowed transphobia to become commonplace in work environments in the 1970s and 1980s.

25 Ibid., 5.

26 The welfare state was significantly waning in the 1970s but became severely undermined in the 1980s when the Reagan administration eliminated or significantly reduced various welfare programs across multiple levels of government. John A. Ferejohn, “Changes in Welfare Policy in the 1980s,” in *Politics and Economics in the Eighties*, eds. Alberto Alesina and Geoffrey Carliner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 123–142.

27 Nico Sifra Quintana, Josh Rosenthal, and Jeff Krehely, *On the Streets: The Federal Response to Gay and Transgender Homeless Youth* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2010), 7–9.

28 Ibid., 8.

29 According to the report, the average age range in which individuals first became aware of their same-sex attraction during the 1970s was 13 for men and 14 to 16 for women. In the 1980s, these ages dropped to 9 for men and 10 for women. Similarly, the report captures the same trend in the average age range individuals began to self-identify as gay or lesbian: 19 to 21 for males and 21 to 23 for females in the 1970s, and 14 to 16 for males and 15 to 16

vacant lots, overrun by the drug trade and patrolled by an unsympathetic police [state]” that conflated racial color, homelessness, and economic poverty “as the [root] cause, rather than the victims,” of the city’s lingering socio-economic problems.²⁵ These socio-economic issues similarly hit the influx of queer youth who arrived in New York City in the late 1970s and through the 1980s, many of whom, like Juanito Xtravaganza’s story, were estranged or disowned from their biological families. Without emotional, economic, and social support either from the state and national welfare programs or their own biological families, queer individuals were left to organize their own means of support, especially amongst the increasing number of homeless queers that colored the city’s growing “new” form of homelessness.²⁶ The number of homeless queer youth continued to rise throughout the ’80s and ’90s, correlating with the decrease in the average age at which many teenagers became aware of their sexual identity during these decades.²⁷ In the 1970s, young “people realized their lesbian or gay identity ... between ages 14 to 16, and they then came out after high school when they were between 19 to 24 years old.”²⁸ However, in the ’80s and ’90s, “the average age for identity realization dropped between ages 9 and 10, with youth coming out predominantly in high school at ages 14 to 16.”²⁹ The need to support “one’s own” led Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, the transvestites and trans-activists pivotal in the Stonewall Inn uprising, to found the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) in 1970 in order to provide shelter, housing, and support to homeless queer youth and sex workers along the Greenwich Village Waterfront.³⁰ Similarly, the Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth (IPLGY) was founded in 1979 by psychiatrist Dr. Emery S. Hetrick and New York University professor Dr. A. Damien Martin to discuss “at-risk LGBT youth in New York City affected by homophobia, physical abuse, homelessness, chronic truancy and school dropout, and involvement in sex work.”³¹ Both STAR and IPLGY offer institutional examples of the many ways queer people worked towards helping “their own,” especially addressing urban homelessness. Further, these queer organizations demonstrate the “increasing ... legibil[ity], that embodied intersecting issues of race, gender, sexuality, disability, cleanliness, and bodily comportment that emerged in tandem with (and as a result of) struggles over housing, neighborhood change, rising economic inequality, deinstitutionalization, and fears of crime during the Reagan Era.”³²

Ballroom similarly became a support mechanism for QPOCs. Although a significant portion of Juan Rivera’s story of the 1980s centers on his relationship

for females in the 1980s. Caitlin Ryan, “LGBT Youth: Health Concerns, Services and Care,” *Clinical Research and Regulatory Affairs* 20 (2003): 137–158.

30 “Greenwich Village Waterfront,” *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*, accessed May 1, 2019, <http://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/greenwich-village-waterfront-and-the-christopher-street-pier>.

31 The Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth (IPLGY) was renamed in 1988 to the Hetrick-Martin Institute (HMI). “Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth,” *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*, accessed May 3, 2019, <http://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/institute-for-the-protection-of-lesbian-and-gay-youth-iplgy>.

32 “Ariel Eisenberg on the 1980s NYC Homeless Crisis,” *Organization of American Historians*, April 23, 2015, <http://www.processhistory.org/ariel-eisenberg-on-the-new-york-city-homeless-crisis-in-the-1980s>.

of mutual support with Keith Haring, it ends with him returning to the ballroom children and becoming an Xtravaganza. After Haring passed away from AIDS-related complications, Juan, himself infected with HIV, fell into a deep despair: “I couldn’t get a job, had AIDS, and needed to take care of myself.”³³ With limited employment opportunities, Juan returned to hustling despite his strong dislike of it.³⁴ It was also a period marked by myriad AIDS-related deaths of other loved ones. Juan’s friends, whom he had come to know and care for during his time with Haring, suddenly turned their backs on him, spreading stories that “[h]e and *these Puerto Rican gay hustlers* had brought down Haring”—an intentional accusation, according to Juan, to discredit his romantic relationship with Haring and therefore distance Juan’s historical impact on Haring’s artwork and his postmortem Foundation.³⁵

LOCATING THE BALLROOM:
ORDINARY SPACES OF
SPECTACULAR PERFORMANCES

A house? A house—Let’s see if we can put it down sharply. They’re families. You can say that. They’re families ... for a lot of children who don’t have families. But this is a new meaning of family. The hippies had families, and no one thought nothing about it. It wasn’t a question of a man and a woman and children, which we grew up knowing as a family. It’s a question of a group of human beings in a mutual bond. You know what a house is. I’ll tell you what a house is. A house is a gay street gang. Now, where street gangs get their rewards from street fights, a gay house street-fights at a ball.³⁶

Similarly to the search for “blackness” within architecture, a peculiar problem arises in locating the architecture and spaces of ballroom—the venues that host balls and the apartment complexes in which houses converge: they often lack any formal history and/or an enduring spatial presence. As architectural historian Charles L. Davis II has championed, the occupation of space is one way in which *blackness* is expressed architecturally. This is, however, often unnoticed by architectural theorists and historians owing to a disciplinary reliance on traditional methods for identifying proper architectural production such as a formal tectonic style or the existence of a physical building. For Davis the absence of “formal architecture” *is* a form of architecture and the form most often associated with blackness rather than a formal tectonics of physical building.³⁷ Architectural critic, curator, and author of *Queer Space* Aaron Betsky encounters the same dilemma writing a historical reconstruction of the environments of disco-era New York: spaces

33 Cruz-Malavé, *Queer Latino Testimonio*, 51.
34 Ibid.
35 Emphasis in original. Ibid., 53.
36 *Paris Is Burning*.
37 Davis and Sutton, “Access, Accountability, Architecture,” Lecture, Yale School of Architecture, Yale University, New Haven, November 8, 2018.
38 Aaron Betsky, email message from the author, November 17, 2018.
39 Betsky, *Queer Space*, 5.
40 Hilderbrand, *Paris Is Burning*, 60.
41 Ibid.
42 The co-habitation of numerous individuals may have violated certain lease conditions.
43 *Paris Is Burning* (1991), 00:23:20–00:24:30.
44 Ibid., 00:28:20–00:28:30.
45 Ibid., 00:29:30–00:30:01.
46 Hilderbrand, *Paris Is Burning*, 61.
47 Such matters can only be reconstructed through oral histories with ballroom individuals of that era. I have had various degrees of success in recalling the specificities of these domestic elements through interviews on and off the record with ballroom members. Rori Xtravaganza, interviews with the author, New York, NY, January 15, 2019; Chantal Regnault, *Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene of New York City 1989-1992* (London: Soul Jazz Books, 2011), 208.
48 Here I am assuming that ballroom members would want to live in or approximate to the city’s central queer community based on informal and formal interviews with ballroom members.

that were “essentially ephemeral, with only oral histories and a few grainy photographs [and] films to document what were complex spaces created by a combination of lighting, architectonic elements, music, and performance ... [without] any descriptions that took full account of the complexities of all of these factors.”³⁸ Indeed, it was the ephemerality of New York’s disco scene, specifically that of Studio 54, that made their spaces so magnetic:

The spaces that appeared and disappeared there every night were so much more clearly focused, so much more direct. Exactly because they did not stick around long enough to accrue meanings, memories, or emotions, they confronted you much more clearly as nothing but pure space, activated only by your body. Instead of walls, floors, and ceilings, here was a space that appeared and disappeared continually. Instead of places of privacy, where design was unwanted, and public spaces where architecture had to appear in a correct guise, here was a place where the most intimate acts, whether real or acted out in dance, occurred in full view through a structure of lights, sounds, and arrangements that made it all seem natural. Instead of references to buildings or paintings, instead of a grammar of ornament and a syntax of facades, here was only rhythm and light.³⁹

The environments of ballroom prove no different and, considering the numerous forms of violence and oppression QPOCs witnessed in the late ’70s and ’80s, ballroom’s lack of a paper trail about its spaces comes as no surprise.

The most difficult to locate are the residential spaces in which houses congregated. In his analysis of *Paris*, Lucas Hilderbrand points out that Livingston’s film alludes to a house as a residence in which members cohabitate.⁴⁰ Although some house Mothers and Fathers did informally take in children who were homeless or kicked out of their earlier familial homes, “many ball walkers continue[d] to live with their biological [families].”⁴¹ Stories about house mothers and/or fathers sheltering other members of their houses are circumstantial, without an official record, either because of their informality or because this practice was not technically legal.⁴² It was more common for house children to hang out in or around their house’s mother or father’s house, whether for a few hours, a day, or a weekend, during which they would socialize with other QPOCs, talk about queer issues they were unable to talk about in other spaces, and prepare for balls:

PEPPER LABELIA: When someone has rejection from ... their family ... they search. They search for someone to fill that void. I know this for [sic] experience, because I’ve had kids come to me and latch hold of me like I’m their mother or like I’m their father, ‘cause they can talk to me and I’m gay and they’re gay.⁴³

ANGIE XTRAVAGANZA: My name is Angie Xtravaganza and I am the mother of the House of Xtravaganza. When there’s a ball, I’m always doing something for everybody in my house ... I always offer advice, you know—as far as what I know and what I’ve been through in gay life, you know. I ran away from my house when I was 14 and I’ve learned all sorts of things—good and bad—and how to survive in gay world [sic], you know. It’s kind of hard.⁴⁴

FREDDIE XTRAVAGANZA: ...I’ll always get a birthday gift from Angie. Won’t get one from my real mother. Like when I got thrown out of my house, Angie let me stay with her until I got myself together and I got working. She always fed me. She can be a pain in the ass sometimes, but I wouldn’t trade her in for any other mother.⁴⁵

Houses “indicated a lack of personal domestic space for some ... but ... also indicated a strong sense of community and kinship,”⁴⁶ a queer construction of family that offered solidarity and support against the myriad urban crises countless QPOCs endured including HIV/AIDS, homelessness, sex work, drugs, and commonplace bigotry. Thus, in the absence of filiation, Pepper, Freddie, and Angie construct affiliative relationships through the house. These bonds, however, should not be mistaken as a congregation driven by tragedy; rather, the foundation of every house is the desire to support and love fellow house members and remove them from close proximity with the urban crises in their everyday life. Both Freddie and Angie make clear that biology does not determine the form of kinship but rather the rituals of support and care.

Despite the lack of conventional archival sources from which to infer the complexes in which houses were located, their plans and layout, the manner in which spaces were divided, how many occupants commonly resided in a house, rental agreements, and their geographical distribution across New York City, what is known is that the majority of houses were in Harlem or Brooklyn.⁴⁷ A number of factors probably occasioned this: namely, that these areas had existing ethnic-minority communities in which many ballroom members grew up and lower rents compared to locations in Greenwich Village.⁴⁸ Although tracing the historic network of house apartments proves difficult, what is known are some of the key spaces wherein balls were produced and hosted: the Imperial Elks Lodge No. 127, the Harlem YMCA, the Roller Rock Skating Rink, the Crystal Ballroom, the Uptown Social Club, and the Golden Terrace Ballroom in Harlem; Club Constellation, the Red Zone nightclub, and Hotel Diplomat/Club Sweatz in the Midtown/Times Square area; Tracks NYC nightclub, the Paradise Garage nightclub, the Marc Ballroom, and the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in Greenwich Village.⁴⁹ These

spaces typically had conventional open floor plans or banquet halls, seemingly ordinary, but easily adaptable and accommodating to large groups and spectacular performances.

Unfortunately, many of these venues shut down prior to the new millennia and were redeveloped into new commercial entities that failed to leave behind accessible plans or documentation of their prior spaces.⁵⁰ Yet, through a handful of photographic and film documentations on ballroom, a coherent spatial organization emerges, a spatial pattern Marlon M. Bailey attempts to diagram in his 2014 essay, “Engendering Space: Ballroom Culture and the Spatial Practice of Possibility in Detroit.”⁵¹ Bailey’s “The Ballroom culture ground plan” categorizes the essential components of a ball and distributes them within a common ball configuration: a central, long, and narrow runway/performance area flanked by areas for participants and spectators to its left, right and back, and capped with a panel of judges at its front.⁵² Vacillating between the panel of judges and the middle of the runaway area is a commentator(s) who performs just as much as a walker, maintaining the event’s high energy and moderating between the judges’ critiques and a walker’s reactions.⁵³

Even though Bailey’s analysis is derived from his experiences with Detroit’s contemporary ballroom scene, Livingston’s documentary work on late-’80s ballroom, and Gerard H. Gaskin and Chantal Regnault’s artistic photographs relay the configurations Bailey’s plan conceives, revealing a consistent spatial logic maintained in ballroom culture likely since its beginnings.⁵⁴ Bailey’s description of contemporary ballroom’s spaces as well as Livingston’s and Regnault’s documentary work expose another organizational consistency: the use of easily foldable furniture and simple decorations such as streamers, cutting ribbons, metallic curtains. The use of these furnishings afforded swift setup and disassembly, allowing any venue to be easily and temporarily co-opted into a site of queer fabulousness and subsequently restored to its original ordinariness, a likely necessity for bypassing the policing of the (hetero)normative social order or the distinct homophobia present within the black community at the time—a spatial argot that built on the need for QPOC space that ballroom provided.⁵⁵ This theory is supported by the fact that earlier eras of ballroom were held late at night: “balls were held late at night because the rent was cheaper and drag queens were safer than on Harlem streets, where black-nationalist militancy had cramped the quasi tolerance of gay culture common in the neighborhood in prior decades.”⁵⁶ Cloaked under the darkness between midnight and twilight, participants were free to commute in their grandiose

49 This list was compiled from Kevin (Ultra Omni) Burrus’s “Harlem Ballroom Historic Timeline” document and credited photo locations of Chantal Regnault’s photography of ballroom culture from 1989 to 1992. Chantal Regnault, *Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene*, 208. Kevin Omni Burrus, “Harlem Ballroom Historic Timeline,” accessed May 16, 2019, <http://harlemballroomhistorictimeline.blogspot.com>.

50 Some exceptions include the Harlem YMCA and the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center. The former was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1976 but is not often recognized (in the mainstream) as a site of LGBT life. The latter was marked a cultural LGBT landmark and was a pivotal site in the founding of queer activist groups, including the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), Senior Action in a Gay Environment (SAGE), and the Gender Identity Project.

51 Marlon M. Bailey, “Engendering Space: Ballroom Culture and the Spatial Practice of Possibility in Detroit,” *Gender Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 21 (2014): 489–507.

52 Ibid., 500.

53 Ibid., 499–500.

54 Gerard H. Gaskin, *Legendary: Inside the House Ballroom Scene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Regnault, *Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene*.

55 This kind of ad hoc, lo-fi architecture is noted as typical of nightlife and club culture by scholars such as Sarah Thornton (*Club Cultures*, 1996)

Jörg Heiser, Mateo Kries, Jochen Eisenbrand, Catharine Rossi (*Night Fever*, 2018), and Cynthia Rose (*Design After Dark*, 1991). It should be emphasized, however, that in the case of ballroom, this ad hoc architecture was also the product of limited funds, a lack of consistent access to spaces for black queer joy, and the need to remain covert and undiscovered due to social and cultural disapproval of homosexuality within black and Latinx communities.

56 Tim Murphy, “Gay Old Times ... 1969,” *New York Magazine*, June 21, 2009, <http://www.nymag.com/guides/summer/2009/57468/index1.html>.

57 Tavia Nyong’o, email message with the author, January 7, 2019.

58 Michael Musto, “How Mayor Giuliani Decimated New York City Nightlife,” *Vice*, March 5, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/bjdzq/how-mayor-giuliani-decimated-new-york-city-nightlife.

59 Although there is not enough space in the article to properly discuss the role of gay shaming, known as “reading” and “throwing shade,” in ballroom culture, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge it as a central part to ballroom. “Reading” and “throwing shade” are social mechanisms for policing other QPOC bodies that operate within varying degrees of playfulness and seriousness, ranging from a lighthearted competition cattiness to serious callouts on the ways in which another person’s embodiment of a different gender/sex, race, or class fails to be believable. In my graduate thesis at the

costumes undetected by the homophobic social order and return home before the rest of the city awoke. These late hours also accommodated participants’ work—both formal and informal—and their life/family schedules. Despite ballroom’s relationship with homelessness, poverty, and the sex trade, not all participants suffered their families’ rejection or were involved in informal living and labor practices. With some members pursuing doctorate degrees or working on Wall Street, these late-hour balls allowed participants to attend after regular work hours as well as keep their “professional” or “mainstream” lifestyle separate from the counter-culture scene of ballroom.

Producing a ball required other measures to abate their detection and possible conflict. American cultural critic and historian Tavia Nyong’o points out that house fathers were often the ones responsible for securing ballroom venues, negotiating leases and contracts, and dealing with other “behind the scene roles,”⁵⁷ imitating traditional gender roles and expectations, such as men/fathers’ engagement in the legal matters of the household. In the late ’80s, Kevin Omni Burrs, father and founder of the House of Ultra Omni, brought the ballroom scene to New York’s Greenwich Village, hosted by nightclubs such as Tacks NYC, the Roxy, and the Paradise Garage. These balls could occur at earlier hours given the Village’s acceptance of queer life and culture, which also allowed for more participation and larger attendance. Although balls were spaces of alterity, black joy, and critical self-reflection, they were also commercial undertakings; the production] costs of balls and cash-prize awards required fundraising and entry fees, which meant attracting broader audiences.

Today, ballroom endures despite the decline of the city’s gay nightlife in the 1990s under Mayor Giuliani’s “quality of life” policies.⁵⁸ While many venues had to close their doors—Danceteria, Tracks NYC, the Paradise Garage, Better Days, the Sound Factory Bar—ballroom’s ability to co-opt any space is what makes it possible for ballroom to continue to this day; a ball is tied not to a specific fixed spatial typology but rather to a practice of spatial organization. Ballroom and its supporting infrastructure of the house, in contrast, provide a socially and spatially malleable form of affiliative association structured around reframed notions of kinship and familial support. Despite ballroom’s engaging in competition, house rivalries, and the queer cultural practice of shaming,⁵⁹ this subculture nonetheless forms a network of positive queer solidarity against a myriad of urban, social, and political violence as witnessed in 1980s ballroom. By offering what are commonly called “safe spaces,” ballroom provides the queer social relationships necessary for enduring tremendous oppressions.⁶⁰ Like the

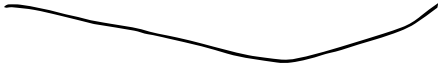
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, “Drag Hinge: Reading the Scales Between Architecture and Urbanism,” from which this article derives, I argue that gay shame works as a mechanism of survival, especially for transwomen, by calling out that their performativity of sex and gender may fall short of believability and lead to homophobic and transphobic violence or death. Malcolm Rio, “Drag Hinge: Reading the Scales Between Architecture and Urbanism,” Master thesis (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2019), 124–6.

60 Safe spaces are environments in which an individual can feel free from prosecution, discrimination, or violence against aspects of their personhood. For Christina Hanhardt, the ideal of this term was crucial in shaping 1960s LGBT social movements. Hanhardt, *Safe Space*, 4.

61 Critical race scholars such as Cornel West, Toni Morrison, and Jacqueline Bussie have written at length about the resistive heuristic of laughter in the face of oppression and violence. “... laughter [that] occurs even in the face of death ... according to Bussie communicated something of the laughter of the oppressed as a ‘transcendence of fear.’ Bussie cites the work of Cornel West, who argues that laughter within the African American community is a means to convey ‘a worldview of tragic hope’ that places ‘an enduring emphasis on the tragic facts of human existence: death, disease, disappointment, dread, and despair.’ Laughter within the African American experience,

however, what West calls ‘the pervasive sense of joy, laughter, and ingenious humor in the black community—flows primarily from the African American preoccupation with tragedy.’ L. Juliana M. Clasens, *Claiming Her Dignity: Female Resistance in the Old Testament* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), 119; see also, Jacqueline A. Bussie, “Flowers in the Dark: African American Consciousness, Laughter, and Resistance in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007).

many QPOCs that make up the subculture who must constantly and productively adapt to adverse conditions, often creatively distorting these conditions into means of social change, rather than buckling under them, ballroom reveals a different approach to architectural production.⁶¹ This form of architectural production is not predicated on fixed relations of programming and space as are zoning and landmarking, but instead opportunistically transforms what is available to suit what is necessary. Further, ballroom subverts the tools of architectural and organizational legitimacy, carving out spaces for the enactment and celebration of black queer life, joy, and fabulosity through destabilizing mimetic practices.⁶²



Malcolm Rio is a graphic and architectural designer and thinker living in New York City. He is currently a PhD student at Columbia University where he researches the historical intersections of race, sexuality, nationhood, architecture, and urbanism. He received his MS in architecture studies (SMArchS) from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with several distinctions including the 2019 SMArchS Thesis Prize and the Arthur Rotch Special Prize for his research on urbanism, black ontology, and ballroom culture. Rio also holds a Master of Architecture (MArch) from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and a BS in philosophy and a BFA in graphic design from Towson University. Rio was an inaugural AICAD teaching fellow positioned at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) where he taught graphic design, architectural design and foundation studio courses. During his appointment at MICA, Rio's research focused on the racial and class dimensions of mobile network technologies in Baltimore City as a case study of the hollowing out of public transit systems in medium-sized, post-industrial cities across the US.

62 This work, which is a part of a larger thesis project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology would not have been possible without the fruitful conversations, unconditional support, love, and help I received from many people. Of the many, I would like to thank those who went above and beyond, offering their guidance, support, warmth, and time. They include Aaron Betsky, Garnette Cadogan, Dr. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, Dr. Jackson Davidow, Jermaine Ellis and the Hetrick-Martin Institute, Dr. Lauren Jacobi, Dr. Erica Caple James, Dr. Kareem Khubchandani, Ken Lustbader and the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, Caitlin McCarthy and the archives of the The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center, Matthew T. McMorrow, Tavia Nyong'O, Joel Sanders, Susanne Schindler, Paul Soulellis and *Queer.Archive.Work*, Yehoshua Talbert and the Kiki Coalition. I was star-struck and deeply humbled when I received a reply-email from Jennie Livingston. Thank you for your willingness and excitement to speak with me about *Paris Is Burning*, New York City, and queer urbanism. I am especially indebted to those within the ballroom community who were willing to speak with me about ballroom and its history. A special thank you to Rori Xtravaganza (Rori Grenert), Koppi Mizrahi (Konomi Shishido), Icon and House of UltraOmni father Kevin Omni Burrus, father Andre Mizrahi, and Leggoh LaBeija. I would like to express my love and appreciation to the person who adopted me into the House of UltraOmni, writer and LGBTQ+ advocate

Sydney (Syd) Baloue. My sincerest gratitude to my thesis supervisor and readers Dr. Arindam Dutta, Dr. Delia Wendel, and Dr. Cornel West. Lastly, a special thanks to Aaron Tobey, the *Thresholds* editors Stratton Coffman, Dalma Földesi, and Sarah Wagner, and the anonymous reviewers that have all worked hard on making this essay much stronger. All shortcomings are my own.