

It's a time warp

Commercial Drive has transformed from women's places to lesbian feminist spaces to a queer neighbourhood

by Gordon Brent Ingram

The emergent "gay" streetscapes of the West End were never very friendly to women. By the early 1980s, women were moving to the East End in droves and to Commercial Drive in particular. Originally, feminist and homosexual outlaws did not come for the working-class Italian and Portuguese cafes—which served pre-Starbucks espressos when everybody else was still drinking stale Nabob's drip.

Housing geographer and feminist organizer Anne-Marie Bouthillette has studied the emergence of lesbian and gay communities around Commercial Drive. Her study, funded by the federal government's Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, identified cheap housing with space for children as the most common reason people moved

to the area in the 1980s and early 1990s. Also making the list was the tolerance of alternative, and specifically lesbian-centred, families. The "publicness" of The Drive, it seems, is less about the businesses and the above-ground institutions than about the networks of households and personal connections made on the street.

"The Drive" became one of the first neighbourhoods in the world where lesbian, gay, and queer families became a major thread in the weave of public space. Even compared to cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and London, the extent of lesbian presence on the public space of a neighbourhood was exceptional—and ahead of its time. But even for our young city, the queer spaces on Commercial Drive are relatively new. There are far older and more numerous historic homoerotic sites in Chinatown, Gastown and downtown. There were more self-identified lesbian spaces in the West End and Gastown in the 1970s than there were on Commercial Drive in the 1980s.

But it was on The Drive that a whole neighbourhood was feminized, lesbianized and queered. For example, the Stay in Touch organization of lesbian sex parties, that existed for a decade, went from house to house and never really had a permanent home.

The early gay and lesbian directories of Vancouver list few businesses on Commercial Drive. Some women en-

trepreneurs chose to identify as feminist rather than lesbian and others elected to stay in the closet. And in the 1980s, many a fine lesbian-owned business went under because they had not broadened their customer base.

In walking The Drive, we can begin along Main Street north of the train station and south of Chinatown. Going east at the Georgia Street viaduct we pass the site of some of the first lesbian public presence and, adjacent to it, the location of the old, African-Canadian neighbourhood known as **Hogan's Alley**.

Go east along Prior and then Venables, to the partially worker-owned **Uprising Breads** at 1697 Venables. Going back to 1976, the bakery collective created an early lesbian and gay friendly workplace.

Following Venables another block east, come to **Womyns'Ware** at 896 Commercial, a recent addition to The Drive's diversifying offerings of goods, services and social space.

A few doors down is 876 Commercial—the location, roughly a decade ago, of the **Vancouver Lesbian Centre**.

Moving south and up the hill, we come to the former location of one of the earliest lesbian and gay friendly businesses on The Drive. For more than a decade, beginning in the early

1980s, **Octopus Books** occupied 1146 Commercial. The bulletin board at Octopus was a key site for locating queer households and roommates.

Joe's Cafe at 1150 Commercial Drive became the focus in a fight for queer space after the owner kicked out two lesbians for kissing in mid-September 1990—a month after the Gay Games changed Vancouver forever.

Moving south on The Drive, the blocks between Venables and Charles are, and have for two decades been, the queerest. Opening in September of 1996, **Havana Restaurant and Gallery** at 1212 Commercial quickly became a location for contemporary culture including its use as a venue in the 1997 Vancouver Queer Film and Video Festival. Havana is a cogendered queer-friendly anchor providing a cultural space more extensive than ever before seen in the neighbourhood.

Strolling further south along The Drive, pass another half-block of recent cafes purveying caffeine from the Third World. Cross Charles and go east a few doors to **Harry's Off Commercial** at 1716 Charles. Harry's is the former site of **Josephine's**, a lesbian cafe established in the early 1990s in large part from the boycott of Joe's Cafe. Weeks after Josephine's vacated the site in 1994, after years of financial difficulties complicated by conflicts over such issues as SM, Harry Grunsky and Geoff Chiasson started Harry's. Today this space provides more affordable food, libation, and social space for sexual minorities than



THEN AND NOW: The Drive has a vital multicultural history, as the above 1922 shot of the corner of Commercial and Napier (courtesy the Vancouver Archives) makes clear. Today, it's a comfortable place for lesbians and queer men.

anywhere else on The Drive. In the summer its battered chairs and tables spread out onto the sidewalk.

Going west again, and crossing Commercial Drive at Charles, the well-loved park at the centre of The Drive has been the location of countless queer political and cultural events most—notably the **Stonewall Festivals** every late June for over a decade (and now in limbo while organizers pay off past debts).

Walking east across the middle of

the park, we come to an alley between Charles and William Streets. In recent years, this has been the corridor in the Public Dream Society's Halloween **"Parade of the Lost Souls."** The heavily gentrified backyards are lovely with the backs of recently restored working-class shacks behind them. The self-consciously pagan night festivity provides a key space for alternative families.

Down the lane two blocks is **Mosaic Creek Park**, one of the first

public spaces in Vancouver designed by a self-defined lesbian. Landscape architect Sarah White worked with community groups as part of a broader effort to create a network of smaller, neighbourhood-oriented parks. Facing southwest, the park sometimes shimmers with mosaics of ceramics.

Thanks to Ron Dutton of the BC Gay and Lesbian Archives. Next year, "vancouver(as queer)scape: The construction of public space by sexual minorities in Pacific Canada," by Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Cornelia Wyngaarden will be published by University of Toronto press.