

Trans-ecological Imaginations in San Francisco's Tenderloin

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Much of the violence, social, and racial marginalization associated with downtown urban neighborhoods in the last forty years, exacerbated post-Covid, can be traced back to histories of targeted dispossession masked as urban redevelopment during those decades. This paper examines the dynamics of dispossession, disinvestment, and displacement in the context of the Tenderloin, an under-resourced downtown area in San Francisco.

It focuses on the intersection of Turk and Taylor Streets in the Tenderloin as the site of a speculative design proposal aiming to reverse the erasure of Tenderloin's activist past and the cultures of the queer and trans people who consider it home. The intersection was the site of a queer grassroots uprising against police brutality, the Compton's Cafeteria Riot of 1966. The riot at Compton's was spearheaded by street youth and gender-nonconforming people and occurred three years before the Stonewall Riot in New York which typically marks the beginning of the modern LGBTQ rights movement. As such, its symbolism extends far beyond the Tenderloin. Today, the three-story building that housed Compton's Cafeteria at street level and a residential hotel above is operated as a halfway house by GEO Group, a for-profit prison company that also operated broadly criticized children detention spaces on the US-Mexico border.

At a time when advances in LGBTQ rights during the last three decades are increasingly facing political and policy obstacles nationwide, Compton's legacy and the building's current use demonstrate American society's enduring perception of specific bodies, especially those of queer, trans-gender, and non-binary people of color, as urban interlopers. Moreover, these bodies don't fit mainstream representations of queerness as a predominantly white, middle-class, consumerist culture.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses an ongoing collaborative project in San Francisco, California, the unceded and ancestral homeland of the Ramaytush Ohlone. We have two initial goals. First, we seek ways to advocate for community control of a building in the Tenderloin, which is an under-resourced downtown area in San Francisco (Fig. 1). The main catalysts for our advocacy are on the one hand the building's symbolism for transgender politics locally and nationally and on the other its current ownership by GEO Group, which runs for-profit prisons. GEO Group operates the building as a halfway house.¹ The collective initiative, of which we are part, seeks to construct a vision for the building in equal parts architectural, social, political, and ecological.

Our second goal is to employ a trans-ecological framework in envisioning what the building could be. We propose this as an open-ended design methodology that can take many forms, some of which we outline in this paper. Trans-ecologies is a critical framework that originated in transgender studies in the 1990s.² This framework de-romanticizes the idea of nature as an Edenic ideal and incorporates a critical relation with technology to our understanding of what is natural. It dismantles categorical binaries and engages with a posthuman landscape.³ A trans-ecological ethical disposition is based on embodied relationships to place, that are collectively attuned to histories of difference.⁴ This ethics reimagines a more just post-Anthropoc life undoing historically sedimented relationships of oppression. Our goal is not to operationalize the term trans-ecologies. For example, we do not seek to define a set of prescribed actions for designing trans-ecologically. Instead, we use trans-ecological logics as an invitation to reconceptualize some of the tools that designers already possess. These include mapping, augmented reality, and community design. These can be reconceptualized as tools for understanding hidden forces of oppression. They can help us articulate designers' ethical responsibilities in taking into account how buildings affect and are affected by the larger ecosystems of which they are part.



Figure 1. Site location in San Francisco. Chandra Laborde.

A BRIEF, DEEP HISTORY OF THE TENDERLOIN

Before discussing the historical forces that shape the context of what we work on and the trans-ecological imaginations that sustain this work, we must situate the Tenderloin neighborhood and the building that sits at the center of our inquiry in place and time. San Francisco grew out of military and religious outposts that Spanish settlers built on the unceded ancestral territory of the Ramaytush Ohlone people. Specifically, in what is the County of San Francisco, the area was home to a group of the Ramaytush Ohlone referred to today as the Yelamu, who inhabited the San Francisco Peninsula for at least 13,500 years.⁵ Several Yelamu villages are known to have existed along the Mission Creek area, where the Tenderloin is now located. Over 65 years, the Yelamu and other Ramaytush Ohlone were forced to assimilate and work into Mission Dolores. By 1842, only 15 native people were still living at Mission Dolores.⁶ After the Mexican American War that ended in 1848 and transferred California to the administrative jurisdiction of the United States and especially during and after the Gold Rush of 1849, San Francisco emerged as an instant city.⁷ Its growth was driven by immigrants seeking their fortunes in the Bay, by industry and trade that used the large port on its eastern shore, and by bankers who followed the money pouring into the area.

Throughout San Francisco's modern history, the area that comprised parts of the Tenderloin was known for its nightlife. It was adjacent to Chinatown and Barbary Coast, known for adult entertainment venues. These neighborhoods were highly policed but also, to a degree, allowed people who transgressed sexual and gender norms.⁸ During the first half of the 20th century, cheap rooming houses catered to working-class people, who began to develop social and mutual aid networks and a sense of community there.⁹ The neighborhood consists of thirty blocks in an area of less than half a square mile with little open space other than streets and sidewalks (Fig. 2). The elements that made up most of the urban fabric were residential hotels, a few apartment buildings, and tightly packed storefronts. Besides

cheap housing, the Tenderloin has historically had offices and some light manufacturing, mainly mechanics' repair shops. Notably, also some Bay Area labor unions have had their offices in the Tenderloin for most of the twentieth century. The headquarters of the earliest gay and lesbian organizations after the Second World War, SIR, and Daughters of Bilitis were also there.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Tenderloin became the first stop for young gender and sexually nonconforming people who arrived in the city. These people were often escaping oppressive social environments and harassment elsewhere. Many of them engaged in sex work as a means of survival and found shelter in rooming houses. These marginalized residents' engagement with the Tenderloin's physical environment contributed to beginning a new phase in gay, lesbian, and transgender politics and organizing in the Bay Area and nationally.



Figure 2. Key queer/trans spaces in late 1960s Tenderloin. Stathis Yeros.

The SROs that housed many of the newcomers did not have kitchen-ens or proper meeting spaces such as lobbies. Consequently, residents relied on other parts of the Tenderloin's urban economy for food and socializing. This contributed to the "domestication" of the sidewalks as spaces for socializing and coming out in the sense of openly performing queer subject positions and creating networks of peer support. Vanguard was a grassroots organization that advocated for the rights of Tenderloin queer youth, by picketing businesses, organizing demonstrations, and offering free meals, among other activities.¹⁰ Establishing its base in the neighborhood's countercultural youth street culture, Vanguard sought to form class-based coalitions that opposed the capitalist consumer and entertainment cultures that maintained those relationships.

The building at the intersection of Turk and Taylor streets at 101-121 Taylor (Fig. 3) was at the center of this proto-queer



Figure 3. The building at the intersection of Turk and Taylor Streets in 2022. Chandra Laborde.

coun-tercultural landscape. It opened in 1908 as Hotel Young, an SRO providing low-cost lodging for the city's booming population. It was built as part of the city's reconstruction after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Abram Edelman, an architect who was active mainly in Southern California, where he designed many architecturally significant buildings, designed Hotel Young.¹¹ Typical for this building typology, it had 115 rooms and only 50 bathrooms, with no lobby or dining room. Throughout its century-long history, it operated as a residential hotel under different names and managers. The commercial space on the ground floor housed, among others, Compton's Cafeteria, a twenty-four-hour eatery that was part of a local chain.

The dining hall of Compton's Cafeteria was among the spaces that were integral parts of everyday life for gender and sexually nonconforming Tenderloin residents and visitors, which included some bathhouses, bars, and convenience stores. Compton's functioned as a living room of sorts for a group of young queer people, who were not old enough to be allowed into bars. However, the relationship between the cafeteria's management and its queer denizens was often tense. Vanguard members, for example, had been picketing Compton's for discriminatory practices in 1965 and 1966. That is in part why, when police sought to expel a cross-dressing person (now we would use the term queer, transgender, or gender nonconforming) from Compton's on an August 1966 evening, a riot broke out. Susan Stryker recovered this riot from archival oblivion and pre-sented its story in the documentary *Screaming*

Queens (2005). This work helped create the intersection's legacy as a symbolic site for transgender rights.

Queer, trans, and gender nonconforming activists have carried this symbolism to the present. In the summer of 2022, transgender activists successfully sought to list the intersection of Turk and Taylor as a national historic landmark. The rationale for this proposal was that the history of transgender activism in the Tenderloin could not only inspire movements for trans rights na-tionally and internationally, but also catalyze a discussion about trans cultures and social justice in the present. Throughout the first phase of the technological boom in San Francisco, between 1980 and 2000, the Tenderloin largely resisted neoliberal urban reforms that altered downtown San Francisco zoning and spurred the demolition of low-income housing. Nevertheless, during the last two decades, the rapid increase in economic inequality between the managerial class, including technology workers, and white and blue-collar workers led to a dramatic rise in the number of unhoused people.¹² Because of the historical concentration of anti-poverty initiatives and anti-homelessness advocacy groups in the Tenderloin, and the periodic availability of SRO rooms, street homelessness is more visible today in the Tenderloin than in other San Francisco neighborhoods. That has also raised concerns about the forceful eviction of homeless people from the Tenderloin by police, with the Mayor's backing. Recent proposals to address homelessness in the Tenderloin do not address any of the systemic, underlying problems that contribute to San Francisco's unequal urban landscape.¹³

Meanwhile, the Turk & Taylor building's residential floors house a halfway house operated by GEO Group, a for-profit prison company. Notably, GEO operated children's detention spaces on the US-Mexico border that were widely criticized.¹⁴ However, a window of opportunity to shape the building's future may open soon: first, the City of San Francisco has to review the halfway house's contract every five years, and second, a new California law aims to ban private prison contracts and phase out those facilities by 2028. This law may affect GEO Group's operations in the whole state. In that light, community organizations are currently mobilizing to reimagine the Turk & Taylor building as a hub for transgender cultural presence in the Tenderloin.

The initiative that we undertook with the support of the Townsend Center for the Humanities and UC Berkeley's Center for Race and Gender among others, brings together trans activists, interdisciplinary scholars of trans and queer studies, architects, and students to speculate precisely on this question: how can we liberate the building and vacant storefront and resurface its legacy of resistance? What should be considered priorities in this process? We propose that imagining an alternative vision (or multiple visions) for the building must not be limited by traditional design and planning tools. For example, registering it as a local landmark or renovating it following expert-defined community development principles, however useful they may be at different stages, may not be enough. Seeking to decarcerate the building, to use an apt metaphor, must address not only how it will be used but also who has rights to that space. And, importantly, we must ask: What are the responsibilities of designers, policy-makers, and its inhabitants toward the broader ecosystem where it is located? This last point is especially pertinent in the context of ecological collapse that we are all experiencing, and marginalized communities bear the brunt of it.

TRANSECOLOGIES: PARTIAL EXAMPLES, SPECULATION TOWARD THE FUTURE

The operation of the site of a transfeminine riot as a private prison reveals ongoing forces of oppression that have shaped its history. From a perspective of trans-ecologies, we can identify the Anthropos (the figure of the "Man") as the chief originator of inequality in the world we live in. A transecological framework rejects and dismantles Anthropocentric exceptionalism that comes from centering the figure of "Man" as he who orders life in hierarchical categories according to colonial, racial, and gendered forms of domination and violence. These forms of domination, sometimes overt and other times latent, perpetuate precarious life. Transecologies, then, unsettles the Anthropocene's fixation on humans. The Anthropocene, a term that has entered the contemporary vocabulary of designers among others, is defined as the geologic era named after the species that have altered the planet's innermost geologies and is wrecking biotic life to the point of extinction (Fig. 4). So what would a post-anthropoc world look like? Can a

trans-ecological method open possibilities for the habitability of an inhabitable future?

Amidst Anthropoc climate change and other catastrophes, trans-ecologies open the possibility to inhabit the uninhabitable. At the intersection of trans studies and the environment, trans-ecologies questions the "Nature" that is home to "Man" and that categorizes transexual embodiment as "unnatural." Trans-ecologies decenter anthropocentric privilege allowing posthuman ecological intimacies. Their focus on embodied relationships to place is attuned with histories of difference in all their forms, especially those that challenge binaries such as nature/culture, female/male, and rural/urban. This challenge to western binaries is similar to that of queer ecology but, from a transfeminist perspective, transecology takes one step further in the way transness is not "either, or" but "both, and." What does it mean to understand a place as both/and urban, rural, and non-anthropocentric? How can we use technocultural approaches to unsettle the histories of domination in order to reimagine alternative structures of sociality that are non-hierarchical and reciprocal?

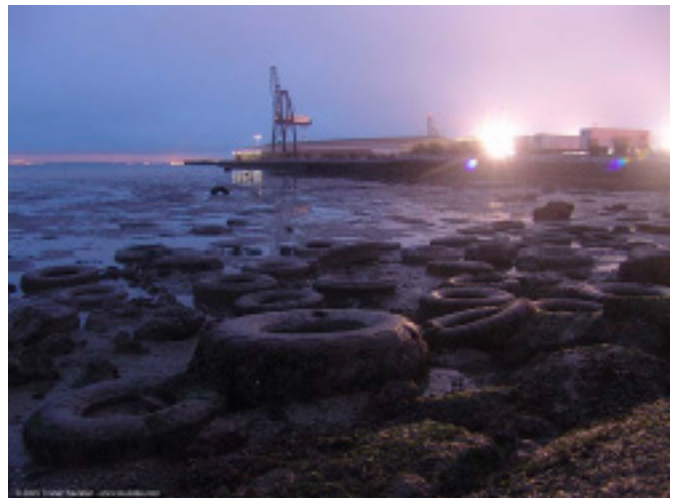


Figure 4. The Warm Water Cove in San Francisco, also known as Tire Beach in 2005. Tristan Savater.

We do not look for exemplary trans-ecological spaces. Rather, our process includes searching for precedent processes and ways of thinking about the physical environment creatively. We want to briefly introduce two such examples that we consider generative from a trans-ecological perspective and hope that they become openings to think about the possibilities and perhaps also the limitations that they bring forward.

The first project is an interactive map that uncovers the natural history of San Francisco's past landscapes. Through synthesizing historical data from archives and visualization techniques,

the digital historical ecology of San Francisco prior to Spanish colonization overlaps the current satellite photograph. The visualization of a more biodiverse city is helpful in imagining alternative futures rooted in the synthesis of historical uses of the land, hidden morphological characteristics, and currently existing physical infrastructure. Digital reconstruction also provides a foundation for building ecological resilience and supporting urban greening efforts at multiple scales. The visual, textual, and audio descriptions of the remarkably unique landscape explain how it has been modified since Ohlone tribal groups managed the land, demonstrating how the diverse ecosystem has been disrupted. We can imagine how the original location of the Turk and Taylor building was close to a pond, over shifting dunes, marches, and oak woodland (fig. 4).

Another project along similar lines that our group is investigating as precedent is a self-guided tour along the pre-Gold Rush shoreline of San Francisco. The tour is part of a series of exhibits by the Exploratorium, a Museum of science, technology, and art. The tour's purpose is to deepen our understanding of the city's ongoing changes since the 1800s. There are twelve stops over the waterfront, three of which have an Augmented Reality (AR) aspect. Using a smartphone or tablet, it is possible to view floating three-dimensional images of landscapes and artifacts, including a Yelamu shellmound, a sacred burial place. Although the AR element of the project is not new, the use of technology to reveal buried aspects of the past is significant from a perspective of transecological methods for design research and practice. In the case of the Tenderloin, a similar approach could reveal those buildings that were connected to the mutual aid and kinship network that built up toward the riot of 1966, for example. These types of practices can also be used to hack reality and reveal, for instance, what are the oppressive practices that are being used behind walls in a private prison disguised as housing in a downtown neighborhood. It could also be used to recreate the riot scene that is so meaningful to the queer and trans community.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, our goal for this brief paper was to contextualize our project in a historical frame that brings together histories of oppression, settler colonization, anti-trans violence, and resistance and explore how they can inform the future of a physical site. We propose trans-ecologies as an alternative theorization of nature-techno-cultural constellations to the Anthropocene, which maintains the figure of the "man" in its center. And finally, we are exploring how these ideas can lead to a physical or technological intervention at the site. As this in an ongoing project, its contours, directions, and outcomes are constantly evolving, and we welcome communication that can create synergies along the journey. The author has worked with the Kansas State School for the Blind (KSSB) for several years. KSSB is a fully accredited public pre-K-12 school located in Kansas City, KS. It serves students with visual impairments and blindness in grades pre-K through 12th grade. It first

opened in 1868, one of the first institutions of its type in the country. Their primary mission is to ensure learners with visual impairments are able to assume responsible roles in society and lead fulfilling lives.

ENDNOTES

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