

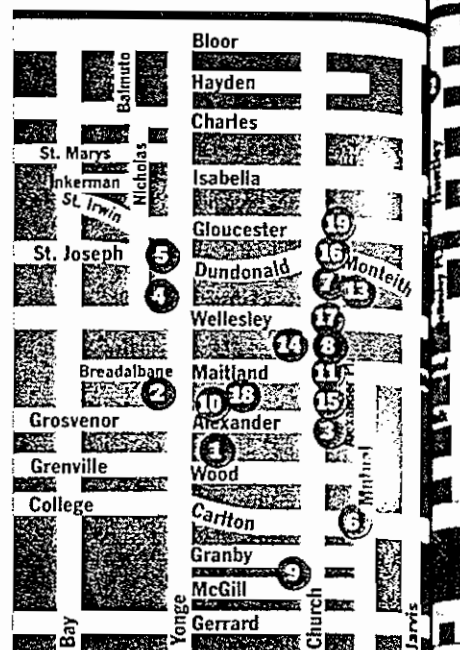
Church and Wellesley

Few other intersections—Bay and King, Jane and Finch—are fraught with such instant connotations. In case you're still puzzling over the area's preponderance of rainbow flags, the thirty blocks centred on Church and Wellesley form the heart of North America's third-largest gay ghetto, behind only San Francisco's The Castro and New York's Greenwich Village.

In Toronto, the Church Street area has been lauded as a prime example of the Jane Jacobs, healthy-city ethos: a pedestrian-friendly, architecturally well-preserved mix of business and residential. It's also a booming tourist attraction—Pride Week alone generates more than forty million dollars in spending—and the neighbourhood's relentless nightlife provides breweries with some of their highest sales in the city.

It wasn't always this way. Post-Depression, Church Street and its stately Victorian homes fell into seedy, rooming-house squalor, as well-to-do families fled north of Bloor. But the arrival of the Yonge subway in 1954, and the consequent spate of high-rise apartment towers—centrally located, with an abundance of cheap bachelor apartments—helped set the stage for a queer invasion. By 1971, the area was disproportionately populated with "confirmed bachelors"—i.e., single, childless males—but it was still a neighbourhood that dared not speak its name. That all changed in the eighties, when police raids on gay bathhouses and the AIDS epidemic heightened the community's sense of solidarity and political consciousness. Church and Wellesley's time had come.

Now people flock to the intersection, be they wide-eyed, just-out boys from Saskatoon and Sudbury, straight women looking for a hassle-free night out or married men taking a walk on the wild side. When the city celebrates its eighteenth annual Pride Week (June 22–28)—with the attendant 800,000-odd gawkers, tourists and revellers—all eyes will again be on the ghetto. Here's a closer look at how it came to be. —Hugh Graham



1. Alexander and Wood streets Established: circa 1850

Named for Alexander Wood, a Scottish magistrate who fled the town of York in 1810 following an alleged gay scandal. (Wood admitted he had inspected the genitals of several young men, but claimed it was to check for scratches in connection with a rape case he was investigating.) After winning a libel suit against his detractors, Wood returned and bought the tract of land where the ghetto now stands.

made the beer hall an especially visible target for Trans-Am-driving yahoos venturing out on Saturday night—one factor in the shift of gay nightlife to the more secluded Church Street. As well, the St. Charles and its nearby rivals—the Quest and the Parkside Tavern—were all straight-owned, and not always supportive of their clientele: at the Parkside, the management co-operated with washroom entrapment stings, complete with police spy holes.

2. The St. Charles Tavern Established: 1950 Closed: 1987

In the seventies, even school kids knew about this notorious haunt—a limp-wristed "Meet me at the St. Charles" was a standard playground taunt. Thousands of Torontonians used to congregate on Halloween to watch the drag queens and hurl insults, eggs and, once, bricks. Its location under Yonge Street's prominent clock tower also



3. The Melody Room Established: 1963 Closed: 1966

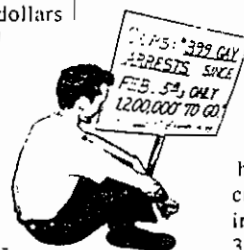
The neighbourhood's first gay club. Here, men shimmed to the camp

anthems of the day while a lookout used flashing lights to warn about approaching officers of the law. The system wasn't foolproof: in 1965, two men were charged with gross indecency for dancing together. The site at 457 Church is now the home of the somewhat more sinister Black Eagle, a dark hotbed of gay machismo where you're advised to come clad in black leather. (Your Roots jacket doesn't qualify.)



4. The Glad Day Bookshop Established: 1970

Canada's first gay and lesbian bookstore was founded by American Jearld Moldenhauer, who moved to Toronto because of Canada's image as a free-thinking culture—ironic, considering his subsequent battles with Canada Customs. Officials have routinely seized and destroyed thousands of dollars of stock en route to Glad Day, including *The Joy of Gay Sex* (a book sold down the street at Coles) and works by Oscar Wilde, William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg. Initially run out of Moldenhauer's knapsack, Glad Day moved to its current location in 1984 and is today crammed with titles on subjects that range from S/M (*Bondage on a Budget*—*The Ultimate Guide to Low Cost Lust*) to religion (*Lesbian Nuns: Breaking the Silence*).



5. Club Manatee Established: 1970 Closed: 1984

Located at 11A St. Joseph Street, Club Manatee was notable as the spawning ground of Craig Russell, Toronto's pre-eminent drag queen—the RuPaul of his day.

6. Club Toronto Established: 1973

Formerly known as the Club Baths, this was one of four establishments targeted by police in the infamous February 1981 bathhouse raids, named



"Operation Soap." Sledgehammer-and-crowbar-wielding cops arrested 320 men, the largest peacetime

arrest in Canadian history. The raids prompted a hastily organized, 3,000-strong protest march down Yonge, and are widely regarded as Toronto's Stonewall—a defining moment that galvanized the hitherto-closeted community. The trials and the raids were expensive (up to ten million dollars), ridiculous (a vending machine maintenance man was arrested) and comical (a police officer on the witness stand mistakenly identified a fellow officer in the courtroom as a found-in). Today, relations with the police are considerably better—free policing is provided for Pride Day, and the cops started a community foot patrol in the ghetto in 1991.



7. The 519 Church Community Centre
Established: 1975

The home of Toronto's snooty Granite Club until 1913, the 519 is now a haven of urban lefty politics, queer seminars ("Dykes Planning Tykes"), vegan women's clubs and—in 1988—an anarchists' convention. Also the original home of Mark Breslin's Yuk Yuk's, which started as a weekly comedy night in the basement.

8. Pink Triangle Press
Established: 1975

Publishers of *XTRA!*, the free biweekly newspaper, Pink Triangle moved to the area in 1988. *XTRA!* began life four years earlier as a pocket-sized promo for *The Body Politic*, Toronto's militant gay newspaper. Ironically, the ad-driven *XTRA!* ended up outlasting its raison d'être; another long-lived legacy of *The Body Politic* was the establishment of the Canadian Gay and Lesbian Archives, celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary this year.

9. The Barn/The Stables
Established: 1976

Church Street's longest-running gay bar, the Barn is an apt name for this creaky, run-down, three-storey institution. This is where one might graduate to after the guppie (gay+yuppie) environs of Woody's (see below). Here, the building is shabbier, the carousing heavier and the dance music harder (the same can be said for the numbing XXX videos, which at times resemble proctology examinations). Still, this sweat-box oozes a certain raucous character, like a wild gay frat party. Formerly a religious bookstore.



10. Buddies in Bad Times
Established: 1979



Sky Gilbert—playwright, commentator and wit-about-town—co-founded this nonprofit theatre company, engineered its

move in 1993 into a larger, permanent building on Alexander Street and served as its artistic director until 1996. He also kept the stage well-stocked with such memorably titled offerings as *Lana Turner Has Collapsed* (1980) and *I Never Met Katharine Hepburn* (1985).

11. This Ain't the Rosedale Library
Established: 1980

It may not be the Rosedale library, but it's a tad more genteel than Glad Day in location (the heart of Church—where it moved in 1986—as opposed to above a dingy shop on Yonge), ambience (no trench coat-clad men lurking by the magazine racks; Martha Stewart cookbooks on sale here) and periodical selection (*Harper's*, yes; *Torso*, no).

12. Boots
Established: 1981

Housed in the bowels of a rambling Victorian mansion (built in 1883 by liquor magnate George Gooderham; later home to the Branksome Hall Girls' School; now the Hotel Selby), the city's benchmark gay dance club is a long way from the land of steep covers and million-dollar Yabu Pushelberg renos. Still, it's amazing what a

few strobes, a pack of giddy twenty-boppers and a marathon of upbeat gay anthems can do for what essentially feels like a giant, lopsided church basement. The high-school dance gays never had.

13. Cawthra Square Park
Established: 1982

This former vacant lot is now premium cruising grounds and the focus of Pride Week festivities. The remains of one wall of the former Granite Club skating rink still stand, as does a vandal-proof permanent AIDS memorial, unveiled in 1993.



14. The Steps
Established: 1984

A twenty-four-hour people-watching hot spot, the steps in front of the Second Cup have become an indelible part of the landscape. Building managers once put up railings to discourage loitering, but to no avail. The new Starbucks across the street may be trendier, but it will never have the steps.



15. Woody's
Established: 1989

All paths lead to Woody's, the spiritual hub of the bar scene and, in many ways, the gay community. Here, well-groomed clones in Gap sweaters knock back brewskis and enjoy a sports bar-type ambience. But instead of hockey games on the overhead TV screens, Adonises play nude volleyball. Where else could you drop by for a pint, watch nude-wrestling videos and listen to the theme song from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*? Church Street's other community centre.



16. Out on the Street
Established: 1992

A shop where you'll find everything from commercialized gay pride—Pride screen savers and T-shirts (HATE IS NOT A FAMILY VALUE; I CAN'T EVEN THINK STRAIGHT)—to camp trinkets (Judy Garland fridge magnets).

17. Byzantium
Established: 1992

You've seen those antihomophobia posters—"We're your doctors, lawyers, bankers"—but have you ever wondered where gay bond traders hang out? It's here. Easily the ghetto's most schmoozy rendezvous. For hetero equivalent, see Canoe, Jump or the Courthouse.

18. Tallulah's
Established: 1994

If you stumbled in here by accident on a Saturday, you might not even realize you

were at a gay club (okay, you might wonder why grown men were dancing together to "Do You Know the Way to San Jose?"). But

unlike at other gay bars, relentless cruising and the choking scent of Obsession are kept to a minimum. While there was once a marked rift between gay and lesbian communities, you wouldn't know it here, where, in a blow against tribalism, punks of both sexes, Banana Republic clotheshorses and Laura Ashley-wearing girls exchange glances side by side on both dyke-friendly Fridays and Sissy Saturdays.

19. Babylon Cafe
Established: 1997

While lounge may not be cutting edge anymore, it was always a part of gay culture, where Burt Bacharach and cocktails never went out of style. Babylon's martini menu features more than 100 different varieties, ranging from the Primal Cream to the Barbara Hall and the Zsa Zsa-tini. Along with nearby Spiral and Slack Alice, Babylon signifies the growing demand for upscale dining in the ghetto—we're out, we're proud and we want to eat at places with more panache than Toby's.

