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The Emerging Gay Neighborhoods of America

by Jimmy Im
In the mid-1970s, the Chelsea neighborhood in Manhattan was considered one of the safest places in America for the LGBT community. It was home to a handful of gay bars like The Eagle and The Spike, as well as one of the first known gay dance clubs, Seventeenth Saloon, where an eclectic range of gay men mingled. Rent was considerably cheaper than the popular, next-door neighborhood of the West Village, and gay-owned shops eventually opened along Eighth Avenue. Chelsea became a wonderful bubble for the gay community, and no one could pop it. You could eat, party, cruise and live here; there was no reason to leave this cozy utopia. Through the decades, gay bars continued to open, like Splash, Barracuda, and G Lounge, and modern, gay-owned boutiques like Malin + Goetz started replacing ubiquitous sex shops. No other neighborhood was more gay-approved, though Chelsea’s strength became its weakness: the neighborhood was getting crowded, commercialized, and too expensive for longtime residents.

When nobody thought Chelsea could be out-gayed, gay men and women started heading north where they essentially founded Hell’s Kitchen at the turn of the 21st century. Hell’s Kitchen was rough around the edges, but comparatively cheaper and already settled by a small community of gay artists, dancers, and performers considering its close proximity to the Theater District. Two relatively unknown gay bars were sizzling cocktails and blasting show tunes and, soon enough, the under-the-radar Hell’s Kitchen somewhat rivaled Chelsea, boasting more than a dozen gay bar openings within the past 15 years, and becoming home to a thriving LGBT community. Hell’s Kitchen became the new Chelsea, though it too fell victim to gentrification where rents often doubled, corporations set up shop, and many residents could no longer afford it. But this doesn’t come as a surprise. Gay gentrification is a double-edge sword, but comparatively cheaper and already settled by a small community of gay artists, dancers, and performers considering its close proximity to the Theater District. Two relatively unknown gay bars were sizzling cocktails and blasting show tunes and, soon enough, the under-the-radar Hell’s Kitchen somewhat rivaled Chelsea, boasting more than a dozen gay bar openings within the past 15 years, and becoming home to a thriving LGBT community. Hell’s Kitchen became the new Chelsea, though it too fell victim to gentrification where rents often doubled, corporations set up shop, and many residents could no longer afford it. But this doesn’t come as a surprise. Gay gentrification is a double-edge sword, and it’s all too common when the gays find a new neighborhood to flip.

According to Amin Ghaziani, author of the book *There Goes the Gayborhood?*, LGBT residents boost property prices. “We know that areas that have large concentrations of gays and lesbians increase in housing prices compared to the US national average,” he told the *Guardian*. “In areas where male same-sex households comprise more than 1% of the population (a level three times the US average), we see about a 14% increase of the price. In areas with a comparable level of female same-sex households, we see a 16.5% increase.” In NYC, many people leave Hell’s Kitchen and Chelsea to explore the new frontier of ungentrified New York City. Nobody knows what the next big gay neighborhood will be; that’s how gentrification works. But all it really takes is cheap rent, the opening of one gay-owned business, and a vision to make the neighborhood flourish with rainbow colors.

Like Chelsea and Hell’s Kitchen, many distinctive neighborhoods across America have served as a bastion for gay men and women, providing a safe space and forward-thinking community since the modern gay movement began. The Castro in San Francisco, West Hollywood in Los Angeles, the French Quarter in New Orleans, Midtown Atlanta, and the South End of Boston are nationally known, trendsetting, and predominately gay neighborhoods that celebrate gay culture and lifestyle. They’re chockfull of gay-owned businesses and exciting nightlife. For decades, these neighborhoods have served as exemplary models for residents and travelers alike, and they’ll always be legendary pioneers in the gayborhood movement.

As the world turns, other neighborhoods grow with gay pride, fueled by progressive men and women seeking affordable rent, bigger spaces, a sense of community, and overall convenience, both for living and business. Soon enough, there’s an entire migration with the LGBT dweller in mind. And while residents may experience the inevitable double-edge sword of gay gentrification (a natural process that can take decades), it’s almost a blessing in disguise. They find new neighborhoods to move in to, spreading gay culture outside of particular bubbles, and helping the growth of the gay community across the city. These emerging neighborhoods also give gay travelers plenty more to explore when visiting their favorite cities, and there’s nothing more exciting than immersing in the next great gay neighborhood when it’s coming into its own.

We traveled the country to find the most exciting, emerging neighborhoods that are on the brink of national gay fame thanks to an influx of LGBT residents and businesses, outstanding quality of life, and, most importantly, a welcoming community. From Los Angeles to New Orleans, these dynamic cities are home to flourishing gayborhoods that are rapidly growing, and they are destined to become perennial favorites for decades to come.

**River North**

**Denver, Colorado**

Denver has always been ahead of the gay curve. The Mile High City hosted one of the first pride parades in the USA, gay organizations (like The Colorado Gay Rodeo Association) were thriving in the early 80s, it was one of the first municipalities to adopt an anti-discrimination policy in 1990, and PrideFest ranks as one of the largest gay pride weekends in America with more than 350,000 people celebrating. The gay scene is flourishing, and most gay locals make Capitol Hill the neighborhood to live, work, and play.

Today, the gays are quietly migrating north to the burgeoning River North (RiNo) Art District neighborhoods, the hottest new area in Denver with recently erected condos and lofts, sprawling parks, trendy new businesses, and art galleries mixed with historic warehouses and factories. With diverse communities, art culture, exciting public events, affordable housing, and convenient accessibility to the entire city, River North has truly blossomed into an exceptional neighborhood, and it’s really just now getting started.

Openly gay visual artist **Tracy Weil** moved his live/work gallery-studio to River North in 2000. Noticing the neighborhood’s potential in growth, he became one of the co-founders of the River North Art District to help it thrive. “The area is rapidly changing, but really for the better,” he says. “This neighborhood was once a food desert and Denver’s most polluted zip code. We are a neighborhood that is empowered to drive our own change in some respect. We have worked hard to utilize tools like being a registered neighborhood organization and starting a business improvement district to gather funding that we have control over. To uplift our community we focus dollars where we as a collective would like to see improvements. This includes keeping artists and creatives in the neighbor-

![Denver](image)
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A new boutique hotel is slated to open next year, touting a buzzing lobby bar, Death & Co Denver (a sister location for NYC’s top-rated cocktail bar, which is expanding for the first time ever). Planned developments and projects also include new shopping streets in addition to the new breweries, restaurants, retail, design stores, and galleries that have already opened.

Stay at the ART, a hotel, a 165-room boutique hotel that opened in April 2015 and is next door to the Denver Art Museum. The innovative, 165-room property features a world-class art collection and stunning design features. Each guestroom floor is inspired by an individual artist whose original artwork is translated throughout each room and suite.

The Marmalade Salt Lake City, Utah

When you think of thriving gay populations in the United States, Salt Lake City may not immediately come to mind. In fact, it may be the last city you think of. Utah has notoriously been identified with anti-gay movements. It’s a state where the color red runs deep, particularly due to a strong conservative stance and generations of Mormon communities that have strong influence. The state is also the world headquarters of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which has been very active in demonstrating its anti-gay beliefs on the community.

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Laying the groundwork for a gay-friendly footprint was Tracks, the premier gay nightclub in Denver that been here for almost 20 years. Tracks was in RiNo before RiNo was even on the map, and the club is known for its themed nights including Babes Around Denver, an after-hours social group for gay women. Tracks is also a go-to for heterosexual couples thanks to its fun vibes and welcome attitude. Due to Track’s success and the gentrification of the neighborhood, other gay establishments are moving in. The Wrangler, a popular gay watering hole, moved to River North last fall (2016). Now in a bigger, 13,000-square-foot space (a former church), The Wrangler has become more than a bear bar; it’s now a staple to RiNo.

River North is flourishing with plenty of new businesses and attractions that appeal to the gay traveler. The Source, a recently opened artisanal food market in a landmark 1880’s building, has become a premier dining destination thanks to nearly a dozen, contemporary eclectic eats, including Acorn, the sister restaurant of Denver’s award-winning Oak at Fourteenth. Furthering Denver’s commitment to sustainability and healthy lifestyle, Denver Central Market opened last September provides fresh produce and groceries in a beautifully restored building. Not even a year old, it’s being hailed as one of the best food halls in America.
But major gay milestones were happening when we weren’t paying attention. Same-sex marriage was legalized in October 2014, almost a year before it was recognized by the US Supreme Court in June 2015. In March 2015, Utah passed a comprehensive anti-discrimination law that protects LGBT individuals in employment or housing based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Openly gay Utah State Senator Jim Dabakis, who co-founded the Utah Pride Center and Equality Utah, was appointed to office in December 2012, and Jackie Biskupski was sworn in as Salt Lake City’s first openly gay mayor in January 2016.

With 4.7 percent of Salt Lake City’s population identifying as gay, the state capital is among the top ten gayest cities in America (according to a Gallup poll in 2015), and it’s only growing. While The Marmalade has been the anchor of the gay community (like Chelsea in NYC and West Hollywood in Los Angeles), it is quite young and still blooming. In other words, The Marmalade is only getting gayer.

On The Marmalade’s initial “gay-trification,” locals would point their finger to Club JAM, a gay bar that opened in 2007 and first planted LGBT roots in the neighborhood. “When Club JAM opened in 2007, it was the first domino that got things moving in The Marmalade neighborhood,” says club owner and young entrepreneur Jason Olsen. “It was a big risk opening here; the area was run down and very transient with lots of vacant homes. But the tell-tale sign of old, historic homes getting bought up and rehabbed by gay investors and realtors helped it gentrify. Once this starts, the neighborhood is bound to continue gentrifying.”

Jason, who moved to Salt Lake City in 2004 and bought the club from original owners in 2013, knew the neighborhood would simply flourish. The Marmalade is close to other gay hot spots, rent is cheap, there is easy access to major freeways and roads, and it’s conveniently located near downtown, where visitors can stay at gay-friendly hotels like [Kimpton Hotel Monaco Salt Lake City](https://www.kimptonhotels.com/masondrc), which is close to the hood. There was no doubt the gay community would start moving in, and the neighborhood has since prospered.

“The under-30 population is big here,” Jason says. “Salt Lake City as a whole is a very young city compared to other areas around the country. Last I read, our average was around 31 years old compared with a national average around 37 years old. We have lots of outdoor activities in both summer and winter, which leaves us with plenty to do all year long.”

According to Jason, The Marmalade is developing fast, and it seems like everyone is actively involved one way or another. “Laziz, our hippest new restaurant, was opened in the fall 2016. It’s owned by a gay couple, one of whom is our city council member Derek Kitchen. He and his partner Moudi were also plaintiff’s in [Kitchen v. Herbert](https://www.courts.utah.gov/court/utah-supreme-court/Utah-Opinion-PDF-1508371965108.pdf), which was the lawsuit that made gay marriage legal in Utah.” Nothing is stopping The Marmalade (or Salt Lake City) from its dramatic growth, even in a Mormon dominated state. It feels like the old city is finally coming of age.

The neighborhood continues to transform with new real estate and a number of new businesses, including the [Marmalade Library](https://marmaladelibrary.org), a cool, architecturally commanding building that opened in 2016. [Salt Lake Acting Company](https://slac.org), a local, off-beat theater company housed in an old Mormon church, produces several shows throughout the year, which are a must when visiting The Marmalade. Naturally, during Sundance Film Festival, many gay travelers stop in Salt Lake City to explore the neighborhood. In June, visitors flock here to take part in The Utah Pride Festival, which sees close to 50,000 visitors and is the state’s largest parade.

**Bywater/Marigny**

**New Orleans, Louisiana**

Gay history runs deep in New Orleans, particularly the French Quarter, the oldest neighborhood in Crescent City. It’s home to historic gay bars, including The Golden Lantern, opened in 1966, and [Cafe Lafitte in Exile](https://www.cafelaffiteinexile.com), the oldest continuously running gay bar in America (since 1933). Outside of Mardi Gras, the French Quarter is popular for hundreds of other festivals, including Southern Decadence, a gay event considered the gay pride of New Orleans (in addition to the official pride) that has seen record turnouts since it began in 1972. Even notable members of the gay community past and present have major ties with the French Quarter. Playwright [Tennessee Williams](https://www.tennesseewilliams.com) was a frequent visitor; [Truman Capote](https://www.truman-capote.com)’s mother was in labor with him at the luxurious [Hotel Monteleone](https://monteleonehotel.com) (and the author came back to write his first novel on Royal Street); and [Ellen Degeneres](https://www.elle.com/life/entertainment/a5221/:href=elle.com) was a regular visitor and the emcee of New Orleans Mr. and Ms. Gay Pride contest in 1981.

While the French Quarter will always be home to the gay community, many residents are moving past Esplanade (a main avenue that divides the French Quarter’s east side) over to [Marigny](https://www.parishinfo.com/page/1510) and the [Bywater District](https://www.parishinfo.com/page/1510). Historic Frenchman Street is Marigny’s Bourbon Street, and the pulse of the artist movement started here. Crammed with jazz bars, clubs, and cafes, this famous street was developed in the 1980s for locals when famed Bourbon became too touristy. Now, Frenchman Street is bustling every night of the week and offers an open-air market with local artists selling handcrafted merchandise. It’s also the go-to street during holidays, like Halloween, for locals, and the gay community is making the areas surrounding and near this street home. Gay-owned [Who Dat Coffee Cafe](https://www.whodatcoffeecafe.com) has become a staple to the neighborhood for brunch, and St Roch’s Market, a historic 1875 building, was transformed into a contemporary food hall in 2014. There’s even gay bars, like [The Friendly Bar](https://www.therriendlybar.com), an unassuming dive bar visited by local artists and hipsters alike.

The Bywater District was put on the map for the LGBT community decades ago when [The Country Club](https://www.countryclubneworleans.com) (a renowned members only social club with outdoor pool) opened its doors particularly for gay clientele in 1977. Now, it welcomes gay and straight alike, featuring an indoor bar, an outdoor pool, and a tropical backyard oasis to drink the day away. This mostly residential district is constantly evolving with expanded streetcar service, an upscale hostel-hotel hybrid in the works, and new, hip businesses like art galleries out of resident’s homes and con-
the emerging gay neighborhoods of america

Bywater

Photo: Paul Broussard

temporary restaurants like The Franklin and Red’s Chinese.

Christopher Jacob, local resident, artist, owner of The Grand Maltese gallery and performance artist (her alter ego Slash Madame is a locally recognized personality) has lived in Bywater for six years and witnessed its gradual development. “I moved to this part of town and this city because it felt like a project town to me…a place where my artist sensibility and queerness would thrive. There’s always been queers in the Bywater, but I’d say a general movement probably started about four-five years ago and there is an evident thriving underground and mainstream community here. Us gays are very conscious of when we are welcome and when we are not. We are welcome in the Bywater and in New Orleans, and I’m very thankful for that.”

Andersonville
Chicago, Illinois

In 1997, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley declared the six-block stretch of Halsted from Grace to Belmont as the first official gay neighborhood in America. Known as Boys Town, the neighborhood dates back to 1970 when residents marched in the city’s first annual gay pride parade, and plenty of gay-owned businesses have opened since.

While Boys Town will always be the center of Chicago’s gay community, Andersonville just a few minutes north in North Side has reigned as the Windy City’s best gay neighborhood that celebrates the indie spirit. Known for a strong Swedish culture (it was initially settled by Swedes), a fantastic dining scene, and various independent shops, Andersonville has burgeoned as one of Chicago’s best neighborhoods, period. Naturally the LGBT community would make it home, amping its diversity and giving the neighborhood a wonderful vibe.

What initially triggered the movement was the opening of Women and Children First, an award-winning bookstore that opened in 1979 but relocated to the historic district of Andersonville in the early 90s. Nationally recognized as a bookstore that primarily observes the feminist movement (and offers general, lesbian and gay fiction and non-fiction), Women and Children First is the original anchor to Andersonville. After it opened in the sleepy hood, their loyal followers took notice. It wasn’t long before lesbian-owned small businesses began to open (and flourish) along with a large lesbian community moving in.

Ronna Hoffberg, an openly gay member of Andersonville Chamber of Commerce for the past seven years, had the pleasure of seeing Andersonville’s exceptional transformation, having lived there for thirty years. “I moved here because of the housing stock and I wanted to have dogs. It wasn’t dangerous, it was just kinda boring back then. After Women and Children First opened, you had these indies pop up. It fueled a movement, and Andersonville is still known for independent businesses. The bookstore was the economic engine for all commercial vitality on Clark Street (the main drag). There were lesbians in the beginning, then gay men started coming in the mid-to-late 90s.”

Now, Andersonville has almost a dozen gay-owned businesses, including bars and clubs, giving locals and visitors alike just as many options as Boys Town. “The beauty of Andersonville is that we are not and don’t aspire to be Boys Town,” says Ronna. “There is mutual respect and integration. We still have enormous Scandinavian influence and Middle Eastern restaurants with a large gay population and every possible ethnicity. That’s the success of Andersonville. The diversity—and its independent spirit. I remember a zillion years ago when Starbucks was coming in. Every community in the country want-
ed a Starbucks but not Andersonville. This just illustrates how fiercely independent Andersonville is and how we support local and buy local.”

What further helped put Andersonville on the map for the LGBT community is when gay restaurant chain Hamburger Mary’s opened here in 2007. Since, gay bars have steadily opened like The Call (2009), the largest and wildest gay club, and Replay/Elixir (2015), a dive bar with video arcade games.

Andersonville Brewery, operated by Hamburger Mary’s, is the first local nano-brewery in Chicago, established in 2009, and is as integral to the neighborhood as most independent businesses. A visit to Andersonville is not complete without a beer and a bite at Hopleaf, a gay-friendly tavern that dishes out amazing Belgian eats and brews on tap.

Most visitors also check out the Swedish American Museum, which throws several events throughout the year (like public concerts) and has become a staple to the neighborhood. Andersonville is also known for Midsommarfest (an annual celebration and largest festival on Clark Street), vintage shops and quiet cafes. Book your stay at The GuestHouse Hotel, an intimate, luxury hotel formerly a (wait for it) guest house right on Clark Street. A member of The Chicago Area Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, The Guest House Hotel offers one-to-three bedroom units, making it a great option for larger parties, families, and extended stays.

Downtown LA
Los Angeles, California

If you live in a gay cave, you may have missed the buzz about Downtown LA. In the past few years, DTLA was revitalized, re-conceptualized, and announced as the best new destination in America by several critics and pundits alike. Formerly no-mans-land with little to see, DTLA experienced a major rebirth that had Angelenos not only exploring the neighborhood, but also moving in. Rent was notoriously cheap and is still considerably affordable, whether it’s a massive, artists loft space or one of many new luxury condos erected in recent years. The expanding downtown skyline is no less than commanding, and new buildings and towers continue to add to its legacy.

Not only has DTLA flourished as LA’s central business district, tourism has seen record numbers thanks to the wealth of new hotels and restaurants to open in recent years. Ace Hotel Los Angeles stamped the neighborhood as officially hip when it opened in 2014. The stylish property is an excellent place for hipsters to stay, and it provides the perfect setting for social gatherings with the LGBT community, whether it’s the rooftop bar or several events in its theater (Rupaul’s Drag Race live season finales are filmed here). The hotel landscape in DTLA will continue to grow, especially in 2017 when the ever-popular hipster-approved Freehand, Hotel Indigo, The InterContinental, and Hotel Figueroa are all slated to open.

Due to the fact gay locals were moving to DTLA in droves, it was only a matter of time that gay bars offered them a place to drink. Precinct is a rock-n-roll gay bar that opened in 2015 and is known for its young, oh-so-LA clientele and live DJs. Also new is Bar Mattachine, which feels like a downtown extension of West Hollywood, and its late nights are some of the wildest in town. The gay population is now so present that DTLA had its own gay pride festival, called DTLA Proud, that features more than 50 events throughout the city.

With Los Angeles’ impressive dining boom, new restaurants are becoming a standard like Miro, an elevated New American restaurant, and boutiques are hard to miss like Please Do Not Enter, a notable art and design store owned and run by gay couple Nicolas Libert and Emmanuel Renoird.

Like the original gay ‘hood of West Hollywood, the DTLA gay scene is thriving and truly welcoming. While other lesser-known areas of the city may flourish in years to come, DTLA (like any notable and emerging gay neighborhood in America) will still be considered one of the most progressive and influential neighborhoods that every gay traveler should make a point to explore, if not moving there altogether.
**RIVER NORTH**
**DENVER, COLORADO**

The **ART, a hotel**, 1201 Broadway, Tel: 303-572-8000. Chic, 165-room boutique hotel that focuses on art culture. Rooms start at $225. [www.thearthotel.com](http://www.thearthotel.com)


**Mile High Gay Guy**, Denver’s most read gay blog and resource for all things gay. [www.milehighgayguy.com](http://www.milehighgayguy.com)

**The Source**, 3350 Brighton Boulevard, Tel: 720-443-1135. Vibrant and fun new food market in a landmark 1880s building. [www.thesource.denver.com](http://www.thesource.denver.com)

**Tracks**, 3500 Walnut Drive, No phone. The premiere gay nightclub in Denver. [www.tracksdenver.com](http://www.tracksdenver.com)


**Wrangler**, 3090 North Downing, Tel: 303-837-1075. Denver’s premier bear bar now in a bigger location. [www.denverwrangler.com](http://www.denverwrangler.com)

**THE MARMALADE**
**SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH**

Club **JAM**, 751 North 300 West, Tel: 801-906-8996. The premiere gay club in Salt Lake City, 7 years strong. [www.jamslc.com](http://www.jamslc.com)


**Salt Lake Acting Company**, 188 500 North, Tel: 801-363-7522. Production company for performing arts. [www.saltlakeactingcompany.org](http://www.saltlakeactingcompany.org)

**BYWATER/MARIGNY**
**NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA**

The **Country Club**, 634 Louisa Street, Tel: 504-945-0742. The first gay bar and social club in Bywater. [www.thecountryclubneworleans.com](http://www.thecountryclubneworleans.com)

The **Grand Maltese**, 3040 St. Claude Avenue, Tel: 504-330-1051. Gay-owned multi media art gallery. [www.grandmaltese.com](http://www.grandmaltese.com)

Hotel **Monteleone**, 214 Royal Street, Tel: 504-330-3341. Historic, luxury hotel just minutes walk to Marigny. Rooms start at $259. [www.hotelmonteleone.com](http://www.hotelmonteleone.com)

**New Orleans CVB**, The official convention and visitors bureau of New Orleans. [www.neworleanscvb.com](http://www.neworleanscvb.com)

**ANDERSONVILLE**
**CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

The **Call**, 1547 West Bryn Mawr, Tel: 773-334-2525. Andersonville’s largest gay club. [www.callbarchicago.com](http://www.callbarchicago.com)

Choose **Chicago** is the official tourism authority of Chicago. [www.choosechicago.com](http://www.choosechicago.com)


Hamburger **Mary’s**, 5400 North Clark Street, Tel: 773-784-6969. Well known gay friendly burger chain with bar and brewing company. [www.hamburgermarys.com](http://www.hamburgermarys.com)


**Swedish American Museum**, 5211 North Clark Street, Tel: 773-728-8111. Founded in 1976, The Swedish American Museum is one of the most prominent museums celebrating Swedish culture. [www.swedishamericanmuseum.org](http://www.swedishamericanmuseum.org)

**Women and Children First**, 5233 North Clark Street, Tel: 773-769-9299. Popular independent bookstore. [www.womenandchildrenfirst.org](http://www.womenandchildrenfirst.org)

**DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES**
**LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA**


**Bar Mattachine**, 221 West 7th Street, Tel: 213-278-0471. Popular, bi-level gay cocktail lounge with live DJs. No website.

Discover **Los Angeles**, the official visitor’s guide to Downtown LA with a wealth of information on gay culture and happenings. [www.discoverlosangeles.com](http://www.discoverlosangeles.com)


**Please Do Not Enter**, 549 South Olive Street, Tel: 213-263-0037. Great design shop in minimalist, industrial space. [www.pleasedonotenter.com](http://www.pleasedonotenter.com)

**Precinct**, 357 South Broadway, Tel: 213-628-3112. Cop-themed gay bar with great cocktail list. [www.precinctdowntownla.com](http://www.precinctdowntownla.com)