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## Tiptoeing through the GLBT Preservation movement

By Gerry Takano



Bijou Hotel, San Francisco, California  
USA

Ten years ago, in the tiny conference room of Chip Conley's newly renovated downtown San Francisco's Bijou Hotel, a small gathering of individuals met to explore and discuss the urban physical manifestations of the gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender (glbt) community. *Looking Back and Forward: Significant Places of the GLBT Community*, unofficially the first conference of its kind, was controversial and highly charged from the start. Back then only a few bona fide preservationists sanctioned the legitimacy of the glbt community's minority status. The basis of a cultural resource's recognition and significance, instead, was commonly defined by race and ethnic origin, not sexual orientation. Furthermore the high proportion of gay men and lesbians involved in some form of preservation activity was trivialized as inconsequential and negligible.

The conference presentations centered on quintessentially defined "places" pioneered and settled by glbt businesses and residents. These destinations and locations included West Hollywood in southern California, Capitol Hill in Seattle, Boystown in Chicago, Greenwich Village in New York City and of course the Castro and Polk Districts in San Francisco. In the beginning of the decade numerous books, both scholarly editions and more personal recollections, were also surfacing nationally within the glbt community.

Keynote speaker, writer Will Fellows and author of a newly published book, *Preservation Comrades: Gay Men as Keepers of the Culture*, engaged the audience with his observations of gay men's propensity for preservation: *If outside our sex lives we gays are just like straights, he said, then it must be only a stereotypical illusion that gay men are inordinately drawn to being house restorers and antiquarians... Rather than dismissing these realities as the stuff of stereotypes, I see them as the stuff of archetype, significant truths worthy of exploration.*

By the conference's end participants and members of the conference sponsors, including the Friends of 1800, San Francisco Public Library, Hotel Joie de Vivre, GLBT Society of Northern California, Alan Martinez Architects and various historic preservation organizations, were eager to expand and promote historic preservation. Awareness and attention to new surveys and landmark sites were extolled and cheered. That was the spirit of the conference a decade ago.

But while some progress has been made the effort is in danger of losing its momentum. While major cities such as San Francisco have completed an official glbt context statement, a more definitive survey of the Castro (aka Eureka Valley) and the documentation of numerous sites have been yet to be done. Since 2001 our preservation priorities have been threatened by draconian measures to address economic shortfalls and deficits. Glbt places are being sold or transitioned to new uses without proper recognition of its association and legacy with the glbt movement. This neglect will continue as advocacy becomes yet another victim to different urban directives and measures.

When strolling along Mason and Eddy Street in downtown San Francisco, visit the Bijou Hotel. In the small first floor conference room along Eddy Street, glbt preservation and its proponents were called to action ten years ago. There is no plaque; there is no sign about the meeting of colleagues dedicated to heighten awareness and to honor glbt resources in our communities.

Without the physical places associated with our identity and presence the stories and information will, indeed, fade. Memory will be replaced with a more powerful presence that purports to care about our presence.

It is time to reassess glbt historic preservation.



*Gerry Takano, born in Honolulu, Hawaii, is an architect and planner residing in Daly City and Guerneville, California. He is president of TBA West, Inc. and recently published a journal on his work as a heritage advisor to Levuka, the original British capital of Fiji.*

*You can contact him via email: [gertkno@aol.com](mailto:gertkno@aol.com)*

## Gay Bar

The Fabulous, True Story of a Daring Woman and Her Boys in the 1950s  
Will Fellows and Helen P. Branson

**“Will Fellows uncovers a remarkable time capsule of how gay folks lived and gathered a half-century ago in a small bar on Melrose in Los Angeles, interweaving the remarkable charm of bar owner Helen Branson’s 1957 memoir with his own deft cultural analysis.”**

—Tim Miller, performer and author of *Body Blows* and *1001 Beds*

Vivacious, unconventional, candid, and straight, Helen Branson operated a gay bar in Los Angeles in the 1950s—America’s most anti-gay decade. After years of fending off drunken passes as an entertainer in cocktail bars, this divorced grandmother preferred the wit, variety, and fun she found among homosexual men. Enjoying their companionship and deploring their plight, she gave her gay friends a place to socialize. Though at the time California statutes prohibited homosexuals from gathering in bars, Helen’s place was relaxed, suave, and remarkably safe from police raids and other anti-homosexual hazards. In 1957 she published her extraordinary memoir *Gay Bar*, the first book by a heterosexual to depict the lives of homosexuals with admiration, respect, and love.

In this new edition of *Gay Bar*, Will Fellows interweaves Branson’s chapters with historical perspective provided through his own insightful commentary and excerpts gleaned from letters and essays appearing in gay publications of the period. Also included is the original introduction to the book by maverick 1950s psychiatrist Blanche Baker. The eclectic selection of voices gives the flavor of American life in that extraordinary age of anxiety, revealing how gay men saw themselves and their circumstances, and how others perceived them.



**Will Fellows** is author of the pathbreaking, acclaimed books *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest* and *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture*, both published by the University of Wisconsin Press. He lives in Milwaukee.

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