



The Turret: Unlocking a chapter in Halifax's gay history

Halifax's Khyber building might be sold off soon. A look into its lesser-known LGBT past.

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There's been an outcry from Halifax's arts community since city staff recommended selling off the historic Khyber building in late July. Home to the Khyber Arts Society for the past two decades, the 126-year-old building is famed as a hub for artists and breeding ground for Halifax's music scene. Halifax rock band Joel Plaskett Emergency recorded its first album, *Down at the Khyber*, on the third floor of the building. Many in Halifax's arts scene have come out in support of saving the building, including Plaskett himself.

But there's a less famous chapter of the building's history, central to another community who is also mobilizing now to save the Khyber.

To queer people of a certain age in Halifax, the building is known by a different name: the Turret.

From 1976 to 1983, the Turret was the hub of gay and lesbian social, cultural and political life in Halifax. The Gay Alliance for Equality (GAE) ran both a bar and a community space on the top two floors of the building, and funded various social and political activities with the proceeds from its very successful nightclub. On the wide-open space on the top floor, the GAE hosted dances, live theatre, drag shows, and organized talks and rallies.

The GAE was unusually diverse for a gay organization of that era, says Robin Metcalfe, who chaired the GAE for three years during the Turret days. "Everything from professional class white gay men, working class gay men and lesbians, sex workers, all kinds of people in different economic and social and gender positions were represented in that community and had a stake in the organization," he says.

Metcalfe has written a book about Halifax's LGBTQ history, *Queer Looking, Queer Acting*, and the Turret plays a central role in that book.



Last month, Metcalfe created a Facebook group called *Queers and Allies for the Khyber Enduring*. "The arts community is mobilized in support of the Khyber, but I've been realizing that the queer community also needs to be mobilized in defense of it," he says. Within two hours, the group had more than 200 members. "It clearly struck a nerve."

Those in the group are rallying to save the building from being sold off, as they see it as an integral part of the gay community's history.

Municipal staff won't comment on the issue until the Halifax Regional Council meeting on Sept. 9th, where the Khyber is expected to be a hot-button issue. But Coun. Wayne Mason has been outspoken in his support of keeping and maintaining the aging building - within a certain price limit.

Scroll through here for some of the community's memories.

An incredible high





Above: Jerry States, who was runner-up for the first-ever Miss Gay Halifax Pageant. (Photographer unknown)

The Turret started as a one-off dance organized by the GAE in 1976 - but it was immediately clear that they were on to something big. "There was this incredible high," says Metcalfe, "a sense that something wonderful had been created."

They went from throwing one party a week, to two, to eventually taking the space over from a struggling coffee house. The GAE got a liquor licence, and operated a private club out of the space, seven nights a week.

Metcalfe says the Turret was rare at the time in North America, and even internationally: It was both a community organization and a thriving night club, it was extremely financially successful, and it brought gay men and lesbians together. "The Turret brought a diverse coalition of communities together around a common cause," he says.

No place like home



Above: Standing (left to right): Travis Tynes, Alec Kennedy, and Pini. Front (left to right): Emerald Gibson and Jerry States

For Emerald Gibson, the Turret was home. From 1981 to 1983 he ran the Alternate Book Shop on the second floor of the building, "Atlantic Canada's gay book store".

But he was also an active member of the Turret's drag scene, favouring risqué bustiers and black nylons. "When I do drag, I'm a whole different me. It's a whole different persona that comes out," says Gibson.

Drag had the added benefit of being a big money-maker for the Gay Alliance, which helped to fund the organization's activities and pay rent for the building. "It was my way of giving back to my community," Gibson says.



Above: Mary Ann Mancini protests outside the CBC building in 1977, after the local CBC radio station refused to broadcast a public service announcement for the Gay Alliance's helpline.

The 1970s were a key time for gay rights activism in Canada. There were many reasons to mobilize. Stories of police raiding bath houses in Toronto and beating people at the Truaxx bar in Montreal terrified queer communities across Canada.

Lynn Murphy, a bisexual woman and feminist activist, says she was afraid to sign her real name at the Turret the first night she entered as a member.

In Halifax, the Turret was a hub of gay rights activism. The GAE organized rallies and campaigns to protest violence, censorship, and exclusion of queer people from bars and other spaces.

Robin Metcalfe says the Turret community would also band together to stop violence and intimidation against its members.



Most GAE members will tell you that one of the organization's crowning achievements was that it united queer men and women at a time when segregation between those groups was common. But that doesn't mean they always saw eye to eye. This is perhaps best illustrated by the "mural incident."

Celebrated gay artist Rand Gaynor, who designed the Turret logo, was invited to paint a mural in the unofficial women's section of the Turret bar. The mural was supposed to be a celebration of women's sexuality, but not everyone saw it that way.

"All was not sweetness and light," says Lynn Murphy, "but at the same time, we kept together for more than twenty years, an organization in which men and women worked together." And that, she says, was ground-breaking.

One last time



High rents caused the GAE to leave the Khyber building in 1983, although the organization stayed together until 1995.

But many people see the days at 1588 Barrington as a golden era. Some are part of a Facebook group called Turret Memories, where they reminisce on what one member refers to as "the gay old days".

Emerald Gibson, now living in New Brunswick, says he would love to be able to bring them all back together for one last show at the Turret.