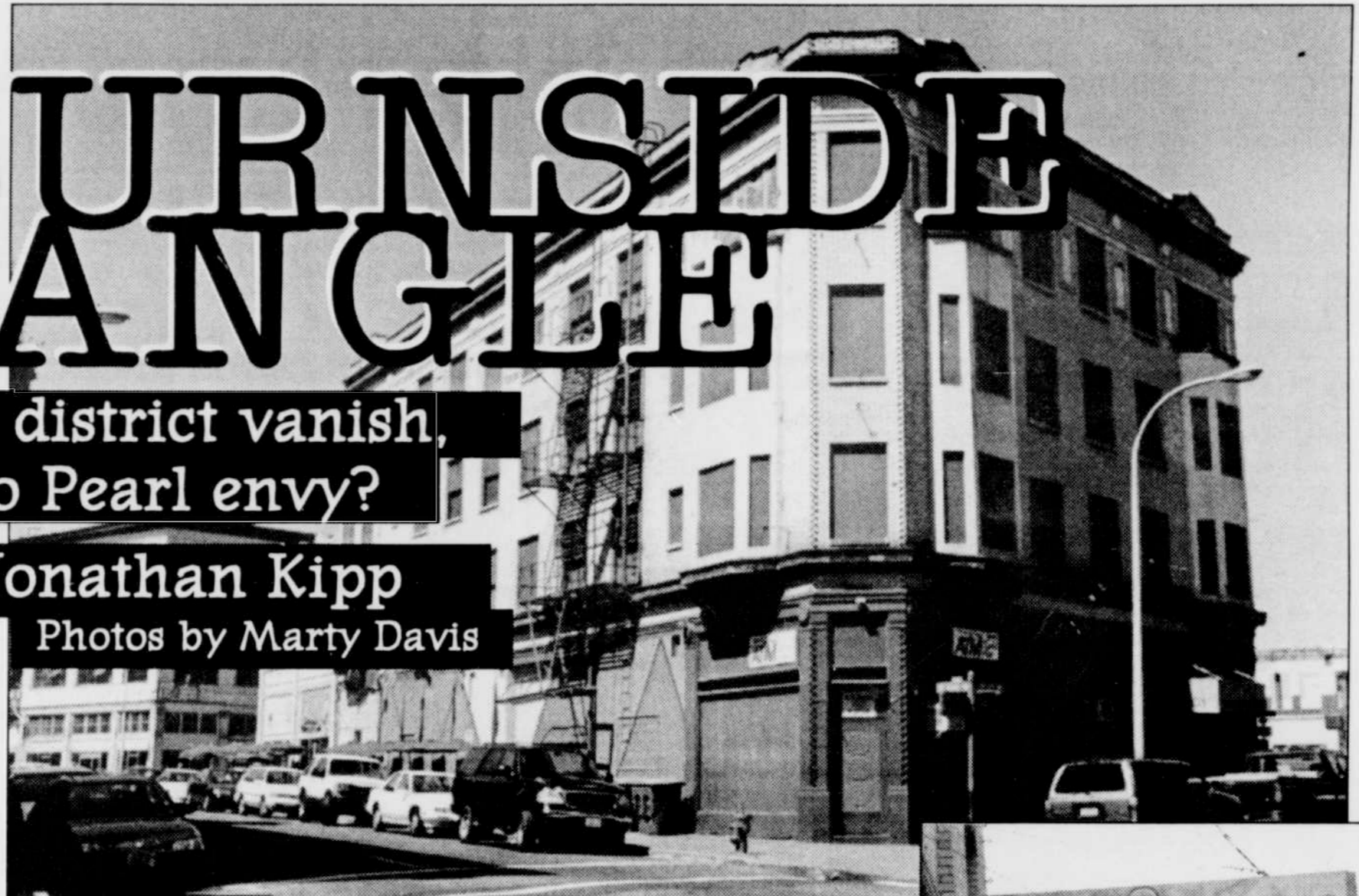


# THE BURNSIDE TRIANGLE

Will Portland's gay bar district vanish, or will it succumb to Pearl envy?

by Jonathan Kipp

Photos by Marty Davis



To some Portlanders, Southwest Stark Street—the central corridor of what now is being called the “Burnside Triangle”—is colorful, funky, diverse and fun.

It illustrates quintessential urbanism: a place where you can see someone pop out of his \$60,000 Jaguar, then sit next to a stripper and sip a Heineken. In many ways, Stark does not abide by the rules about money, beauty, sexual orientation, style, gender and power that typically divide a community.

But to others, this street—so well-known for its gay bars and nightclubs, a famed seafood restaurant and historic hotel, drug dealers and users, the tired and disenfranchised and drag queens looking for breakfast at 3 a.m.—is run down and in desperate need of a facelift if not an entire renovation.

Some want to see that transformation; others hope the area stays the same. But almost everyone sees serious change ahead.

“You know the wave is coming. Get on your surfboard and ride with it,” advises Rob Mawson of the Association for Portland Progress. “This is a destination!”

Portland residents are used to neighborhoods beautifying. It is part of the experience of living in this city. In general, we like things to look nicer, and we aren't particular about the process.

But the Burnside Triangle might be different. Some say this particular street is the closest thing Portland's gay community has to a “living room,” so it should play a vital role in planning the area's future.

Stark Street is no Greenwich Village, Castro, Capitol Hill or West Hollywood. Few would dispute that. But it is the place old and new friends meet to talk, dance, drink and find any number of other pleasures.

Stark Street is dripping in hedonism yet

has a relatively wholesome, small-town appeal to it. Change might be fine.

But others think the imminent metamorphosis could mean the end of Southwest Stark Street as we know it. Will those rainbow flags be coming down?

## MONEY CHANGES EVERYTHING

The Burnside Triangle is a small patch of property bounded by West Burnside Street on the north and Southwest Washington Street on the south. The east-west borders are Southwest 10th and 14th avenues.

The triangle is but one neighborhood in what city officials call the “West End,” which stretches from West Burnside to Southwest Market streets between Interstate 405 and Southwest Ninth Avenue. Most of the property within those boundaries is zoned “central residential,” an attempt to create a residential area within walking distance of the downtown office core, preserve affordable housing and help create a 24-hour city populated by downtown workers.

The concept of making the West End a “residential enclave” is not a new one. But critics now are asking whether this 30-year-old vision has helped the area live up to its potential. Two fairly recent changes have brought this concept under scrutiny and the debate to the forefront

within urban planning circles.

Development in Northwest Portland's nearby Pearl District has exploded during the past five years. The gallery spaces, lofts, retailers and restaurants are hip and expensive, and developers have flocked there to invest. Secondly, the city center also finished out the decade booming, as new hotels and office buildings quickly rose.

Then came along an experienced investor, the Gergin/Edlen Development Co., with enough capital and vision to take a risk. Its \$200 million project at the former Blitz Weinhard Brewery will sit across the street from the Burnside Triangle.

Suddenly, developers are seeing gay-central Stark Street as a link between downtown and the burgeoning artsy neighborhoods of Northwest Portland. In a matter of months, the area went from near obscurity to center stage. “This should be the bridge between the Pearl and downtown,” Mawson says.

The Burnside Triangle will stand between the Brewery Blocks—what many expect to be “Yuppie Central” (and likely “Guppie Central” as well)—and the high-rise offices where its residents are employed. To get to work, commuters from the north side of Burnside will be walking and riding through the heart of the closest thing Portland has to a “gay district.”

Not only that, at least some of the 65 market-rate condominiums planned for the Brewery Blocks literally will look across Burnside toward the former Majestic Hotel. A view of a majestic hotel doesn't sound bad.

But what residents likely will see is the four floors of not-so-majestic red boarded-up win-



dows of what now is called the Continental Hotel Club and Baths, better known as Club Portland—a men's bathhouse complete with a military-themed sex club in its basement. Some say the club is an unlikely, if not unheard of, neighbor for condominium dwellers with enough money to afford a city-lights view.

The entire project is expected to be finished by June 2002, but some blocks will be completed next year.

## A PLAN

For the past several months, the city's Bureau of Planning has been working on a proposal for a West End Development Plan. The process has included interested developers, community members, retailers and building owners in addition to planning professionals and activists. The Burnside Triangle is part of this larger plan.

Mawson says all of the property owners and many of the gay bar and nightclub owners within the district were contacted and invited to participate in the process. The consensus supports a mixed-use vision for the area, dominated by residential use and active retail and building on existing diversity—including the night life.

Mawson says that people seem to like the idea of an entertainment district but that prominent business owners—McMenamins,



*“You know the wave is coming. Get on your surfboard and ride with it.”*  
— Rob Mawson, Association for Portland Progress



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