

# **The Spectre of Spectacle: Gender, Gentrification and Ghostliness in Portland's "Pearl"**

**By Kenya Gutteridge**

"Ever squinted your eyes and tried to imagine something that's only in your head?" This question is the befitting title of the "History" page of the Portland Pearl District's official website, a commercial locale whose centrality to the city relies heavily on the story of the spectacular conversion of its once-animated warehouses into stoic art galleries, nail salons and boutiques (Pearl). Its feminization pivots on its gentrification, and the fashionability it sells reflects this not entirely unselfconsciously: the story of its so-called "uplift" haunts the district and the goods sold in it. However, Portland's "Pearl" also romantically and worshipfully recuperates the precise activity its commercial existence supplanted — manufacture — into the fashionability of its setting and products. The story circulated by the Pearl District is one of "progress" and process, a tale of "development" and haunting told in reverential tones.

## **GENDER**

The "Pearl" draws its cultural centrality to the city, like so many other North American shopping districts, from its marked feminization. A district now replete with women's boutiques and home decor stores, Pearl's website proudly boasts that its "North Park Blocks" include the first park to cater *exclusively* to women and children — and later, the first supervised children's park (Pearl). The feminization of this space persists into

the present, and — as with shopping districts from London’s Mayfair to NYC’s “Lady’s Mile” — is heavily reliant on the development of leisure culture (Breward 98). Much like Mayfair between the World Wars, Portland’s Pearl is among the only neighbourhoods in the city whose electric lighting — both from streetlamps and shop windows — goes well into the night (Breward 107).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, it appears to be perhaps the only Portland area with a wide, walkable network of sidewalks: unlike most other of its districts, it’s clearly designed with pedestrians in mind.<sup>2</sup> Though the park is no longer supervised to relieve women of their (stereo)typical roles as primary caregivers, it remains central to the district, and the profusion of green spaces — including many with playgrounds — and children’s stores makes abundantly clear the area’s hospitality to women with children. These green spaces also indicate that the Pearl’s presumptive patron is one with abundant access to free time. Geographically speaking, one is encouraged to frequent both park and boutique as part of the same leisurely stroll. This is further confirmed by the Pearl’s many theatres and art galleries, which tell a tale about businesses’ expectation of leisure-rich clients. The boutiques are — quite literally — framed by these artistic neighbours, and thereby imbued with the same cultural value accorded to them.<sup>3</sup> Hair and nail salons, an extremely distinct example of the marriage between the

---

<sup>1</sup> This is my own observation. I cannot cite any evidence of this, it is just based on my impressions having traveled to Portland a handful of times. I am always astounded by the total lack of streetlamps everywhere — everywhere, that is, except for in the Pearl.

<sup>2</sup> This is also my own observation, without any proper citation. I am also always struck by the narrowness and poor quality of Portland’s sidewalks, which seem so much less populated and well-traversed than so many other major cities that I have visited.

<sup>3</sup> One home decor shop stands between two small art galleries. Its window display centres a Rembrandt print of flowers and peaches in a vase with a black background, in a decorative gold frame. This piece seems to leak outwards into the display, which is itself dressed entirely in black, its handmade mahogany side tables bearing two gold-gilded vases replete with carnations in dark, bold shades. The tables are thereby rendered into artworks themselves.

development of leisure culture and the feminization of space, are plentiful in the district; there is hardly a block without one, and many house two or more. It is clear who the Pearl desires — and expects — to attract: a woman with money, energy, and, perhaps above all, time.

## GENTRIFICATION

The Pearl's organization around access to leisure time is ironic given its history: the district was historically founded in the fast-paced, gruelling business of manufacture, rather than the unhurried pleasures of consumption. While the district now plays home to a number of trendy loft developments, it once almost exclusively housed the mostly blue-collar immigrant men that laboured in its warehouses and their families (Pearl). The extremely racist history of Portland notwithstanding, the Pearl would have at one time been among the most likely areas for Portland's racialized people to live and work (Mapping).<sup>4</sup> Thus, the feminization of public space comes with a cost: as with every retail mecca, the Pearl District's existence relies on a long history of gentrification (and an even longer one of gentrification's parent process, colonization). The fact that most of these warehouse buildings have been transformed into hip shopping spaces rather than torn down (and indeed, that some still-operational warehouses and factories remain) is a testament to the fact that the spectacle of the Pearl is partly drawn from its own gentrification. The proud genesis story on the Pearl's website is one of "a vision come to

---

<sup>4</sup> Oregon was the only state to outright ban all Black people from within its borders when it entered confederation and Portland in specific has a well-documented history of redlining its Black residents, including into parts of the Pearl (Brown, Mapping). Largely because of this history, Portland remains the most demographically white large city in the U.S. today (Badger).

life” against the odds of its “rundown and dilapidated” appearance, which “plagued” it until as recently as the 1990s, when the area was commercially “revitalized” according to a city-planned project (Pearl). This unembarrassed celebration of gentrification, heavily laden with the colonial myths of progress and “uplift,” is made fashionable through the district’s architecture. The Pearl makes no pretense to cover for the violent upheaval that pre-existed its cultural and commercial centrality. Rather, these stylish shops’ warehouse bones are preserved precisely to shore up their fashionability: against a backdrop of a blue-collar masculinity, middle-class (white) women’s arrival in public culture is made all the more spectacular. “Like all pearls of value, [it] took time to develop” (Pearl).

## GHOSTLINESS

The juxtaposition of feminine commercial wares in a warehouse setting is striking not because of its contrast: the products do not shore up, by virtue of their glamour, the palpable “grittiness of steel [and] brick” that “can still be felt” from their setting (Pearl). Rather, there comes to be something haunting and even reverential to the vaulted ceilings, exposed rafters and soaring windows of these edifices when their floors are populated with commercial objects rather than busy workers. Halo Shoes, a shop in the Pearl’s heart, serves well as an example: this boutique clothing and shoe store freely boasts that it used to be an elevator-servicing factory (About). Once bustling with a factory’s energy, the building now stands almost empty, its 20-foot windows streaming sunlight onto the sparsely populated display tables. The building’s overwhelming

emptiness and church-like silence lend a sacred quality to those few items that do line its shelves: they appear singularly, as icons. A sewing station — with two vintage-looking Singers and matching notion cabinets — stands in the far corner of this temple-like grandeur. Like the shoes and clothes, the station is spotlighted — a light dangling 20 feet above from an old-growth ceiling beam shines down on it. The process of sewing — the manufacture of the store's goods itself — is subsumed *into* the fashionability of the store's products: the sacred framing of the sewing station underscores the sanctity of the goods sold alongside it. It is impossible that all the store's wares are made in-house; more likely, this sewing station is employed only in occasional repair or alteration. Halo Shoes in this way recaptures the long-gone elevator factory's business of servicing and repair as a revered token of the bygone regime they have supplanted. Halo Shoes' sewing station acts out on a small scale what the Pearl's remaining operational factories perform as part of its larger order. Standing sentry and void of patrons in amongst the boutiques, these factories recuperate the business of manufacture into the fashionability of the district. The Pearl thus celebrates having moved “onward and upward” from its warehouse days precisely by refusing to entirely dispense with their spectral presence: the process of manufacture is subsumed by the Pearl as a glamorous ghost, the primordial haunting that defines its cosmopolitan fashionability.

## CONCLUSION

The name that the “Pearl District” takes relays so much about it. Its moniker both indicates the white, middle-upper class femininity that it mostly trades in, and betrays

the violent removal of life from an organism — be it an oyster or a neighbourhood — required for it to do so. That it should be known as Portland’s “Pearl” of course implies its centrality to the city, a quality that so many feminized commercial spaces share in their relations to their own metropolitan settings. These spaces remain dense with the hauntings of the “progress” by which they came to be and the processes by which their goods are made.

## Works Cited

- Pearl District Business Association. "History of the Pearl District." *Explore the Pearl*, [explorethepearl.com/about-the-pearl/history-of-the-pearl-district/](http://explorethepearl.com/about-the-pearl/history-of-the-pearl-district/). Accessed 18 October 2019.
- Breward, Cristopher. "The Hostess and the Housewife: From Mayfair to Edgeware, 1918-39." *Fashioning London: Clothing and the Modern Metropolis*. Oxford: Berg, 2004.
- "Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America." *Digital Scholarship Lap*, [dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=5/39.1/-94.58](http://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=5/39.1/-94.58). Accessed 18 October 2019.
- Brown, DeNeen. "When Portland Banned Blacks: Oregon's Shameful History." *The Washington Post*, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/06/07/when-portland-banned-blacks-oregons-shameful-history-as-an-all-white-state/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/06/07/when-portland-banned-blacks-oregons-shameful-history-as-an-all-white-state/). Accessed 18 October 2019.
- Badger, Emily. "How the Whitest City in America Appears Through the Eyes of its Black Residents." *The Washington Post*, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/03/24/how-the-whitest-city-in-america-appears-through-the-eyes-of-its-black-residents/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/03/24/how-the-whitest-city-in-america-appears-through-the-eyes-of-its-black-residents/). Accessed 18 October 2019.
- "About Us / Shipping / Returns / Privacy." *Halo Shoes*, <https://haloshoes.com/pages/about-us-policies>. Accessed 18 October 2019.