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The Gay Right to the City

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It's impossible to imagine gays—our cultures, habits, presence—without cities, without urban spaces. The sparse freedoms of urbanisation, starting in Europe in the early modern period, created a crack in society, large and dark enough for men who prefer men to meet, socialise, mix, and grow something in. What we grew was an identity; not just a sexual identity, but a collective identity, and a cultural one.

Likewise, it's almost as hard to imagine cities without gays, although many people have tried. I remember as a young teen visiting London from a quiet and pretty rural county, and realising that something was different here, something anxiety-inducing and thrilling, in the presence of bars which hung flags from their windows. A few years later I came to realise that these bars were a key part of a social and sexual infrastructure for gay men. Later still, I visited them, and then I took them for granted. I'm only just realising that there's nothing about gay bars that isn't entirely contingent, transitory, vulnerable. Perhaps the last few decades of the 20th Century will be looked upon as a brief social peace, when such places could operate openly, profitably, and provide a home for a few snatched moments of joy. A peace, of course, straddling a cataclysm.

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The bars and saunas have always been commercial ventures, and lucrative ones at that. Prior to decriminalisation in the United States, they were frequently run by organised crime, and profitable enough to be worth the kickbacks to law enforcement. The *Continental Baths*, a vast subterranean bathhouse opened beneath the Ansonia Hotel in New York City in the late 1960s was an early honourable exception of being one of the first run for gay men by gay men. Even then, Malcolm Ingram's documentary on the baths strongly hints that funding for the premise, which quickly became a cultural lodestone for the city, wasn't all above board.

The premiums paid by customers remain, and so now they're often prohibitively expensive for many LGBT people, who are priced out. This remains a contentious issue, but highlights an important truth about them: for generations, private gay bars have been de facto public spaces for gay men. Their gayness is often strictly policed, and by punters rather than landlords. The exclusion of otherwise hegemonic heterosexuality is somewhat the point, but whilst some work hard to be welcoming and vibrant community hubs for queer people, others display worryingly restrictive cultures, excluding people of colour, queer women, trans people, or any gay subculture deemed unworthy, inappropriate, or, godforbid, unsexy.

Significant problems notwithstanding, these curate's eggs help demonstrate that gay men, through choice, necessity and oppression, have created a different relationship towards a simple public/private dichotomy within our understanding of urban space. There's a reason they call us *queers*, after all. In his excellent history of London's queer life in the early 20th Century *Queer London*, Matt Houlbrook draws attention to this: "Residential space was only legally private if it were domestic space. When domesticity was defined to exclude queer men, the privileges of privacy—the freedom from official surveillance—were nominally afforded only to those who conformed to bourgeois notions of family life."

The intrusion of the police and judiciary into sex lives became a powerful tool not just of legal policing, but of social and class policing too. Private homes and chambers could, despite the potential for arrest, afford enough privacy for an independent sex life, whilst shared rooms, lodgings and tenements opened up rich pickings for blackmail and worse. The rich would buy not just sex, but the space for sex.

Faced with this, public space can become a form of private space: space to fuck, unwatched by cops and neighbours. Literal space too—space to get lost in, space unlit by public lamps, space where you can see trouble coming and lose yourself in the undergrowth. Fear, flesh, the smell of mulching leaves and the sensation of wet knees; smokey breath and dew and secrecy: all these things are a heady erotic brew, like hot *löyly*, the heat that fills a sauna. The necessities for stolen moments of sex become the desire itself. Backlit by a summer storm, sheltered under the vaulted boughs of a rhododendron, the taste of iron on your hands from climbing the Victorian railings—these are not sexual sensations equivalent to running your toes along the soft cotton of a continental duvet.

The development of new digital technologies is also having its inevitable effect on the relationship between the public and private within gay lives. In both the popular and gay press, there's an implicit assumption that the biggest change has been that of hook-up apps such as Grindr, Scruff, and Growlr removing the function of the gay bar as a venue to hook up. There's no doubt some truth in that, as both anonymous sexual encounters and dates can be arranged discreetly and cheaply from home. This narrative, however, can hide a multitude of sins that mark the shifting uses of gay space. For example, some of the hundreds of London gay bars that have closed since 2000 reported earning healthy profits, but were forced to shut down after developers bought the land they were sited on.

Perhaps a less obvious change engendered by hook-up apps is how they can act as a mediator of the city. Within their

small grid of profile photos is a picture of a sexual subculture in your local community, previously less-than-visible. The predilections, perversions and prejudices are laid almost bare, making the apps into mediators of a gay city that is less and less visible in the gay villages of urban centres. In the process, they can act as a cultural, political and racial map of the city, as well as a contested and often fractious online space in their own right. Sitting in your small shared flat, unable to afford to go out for the night, and logged on to hundreds of other men in a similar situation, all looking for contact; there's no doubt that the questions of public and private space raised in the early 20th Century are once again live and important.

The passage of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act might have enabled a legal safety in a limited bourgeois homelife, but it takes longer to remove the learnt lessons and lived experiences of a shared culture. These public-private spaces are not only sexy in themselves, but the quality and nature of the contacts they enable are also different. In his double essay on the sexual culture of porno cinemas in Times Square, New York, novelist Samuel R. Delany reflects on these relationships. True public space enables complex, messy, erotic inter-class contact:

...if every sexual encounter involves bringing someone back to your house, the general sexual activity in a city becomes anxiety-filled, class-bound, and choosy. This is precisely why public rest rooms, peep shows, sex movies, bars with grope rooms, and parks with enough greenery are necessary for a relaxed and friendly sexual atmosphere in a democratic metropolis.

The gentrification of Times Square by Mayor Rudi Guiliani in the mid-90s was, Delany argues, not simply an exercise in economic regeneration, but an exercise in a class war that “perpetually works for the erosion of the social practices through

which interclass communication takes place”. This process has gone hand-in-hand with the gentrification of gay identity. The sex lives of gay men necessarily fell into the category described by Henri Lefebvre in *The Right to the City* as “specific needs which are not satisfied by those commercial and cultural infrastructures which are somewhat parsimoniously taken into account by planners.”

Since then, the “pink pound” has given both planners and business an opportunity to attempt to satisfy those needs through the market, smoothing the edges in the process and removing the non-profitable and deviant behaviours that were perhaps the most rewarding. Now we're just like you, which for many of us was never the aim. The question raised by Lefebvre at the start of *Right to the City* is as pertinent as ever:

Would not specific urban needs be those of qualified places, places of simultaneity and encounters, places where exchange would not go through exchange value, commerce and profit? Would there not also be the need for a time for these encounters, these exchanges?

For some people, including other gay men, the idea of public sex is not just personally risky, but socially dangerous and morally disgusting. So be it. For others, like Delany, the risk and reward of anonymous and unchecked interpersonal contact is the very essence of the city. It's why we moved here in the first place, from those small towns and quiet and pretty counties where everybody knew their place and your business.