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Dissertation

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The loss of London's queer space: How has the movement of London's gay meeting spaces from the illegal underground, to the mainstream, had an impact on queer interiors in the city?



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Abstract

This research paper analyses the significant decrease in our queer meeting spaces within the gay neighbourhoods in London. Through looking at the historical timeline within gay culture in the city, starting from the partial legalisation of male homosexuality. The research primarily highlights the lack of safe and welcoming meeting spaces for gay men in London, and the unfortunate commodification and commercialisation of queer spaces. The context of the present day is examined in this research paper to explore what may be the future for gay meeting spaces in London. The relationship between stereotypes of visitors to these venues and hotspots is discussed in this paper to present how different areas of the city welcome a variety of different individuals and serve purposes to different classes, ethnicities and identification of gay men. The appropriation and misuse of these spaces is common, consequently this topic is investigated within this dissertation. The mainstream media outlets are criticised and contrasted against queer news publications to highlight the issues within the unreported cases of problems which occur in queer venues, and how this has an effect on the visitors to these spaces. This research paper looks deeper into the themes that have potentially resulted in the decrease of queer spaces and why it is vital that these places still have a presence in the modern day.

Key words

Queer history, London nightlife, equality, venue design, homosexual stereotypes,
gay culture, queer meeting spaces, Public interiors, taste, commodification

Introduction

The queer scene in London is something that has swiftly evolved in a relatively short amount of time after the pivotal moment of “the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967” (De Lise, 2022). The law which passed at this time stated that “a homosexual act in private shall not be an offence provided that the parties consent thereto and have attained the age of 21 years” (Shariatmadari, 2017), this meant that although no longer “punishable by imprisonment for life” (Shariatmadari, 2017), inequality between heterosexual men and homosexual men was still present as the age of consent for gay men was a higher age than for straight men.

As a young gay man in London, my experiences with queer culture are limited and reflect only the past few years, I want to report and research into the histories of the places that I visit and how they have become the venues that they are through key events in gay culture that have had an implication on these hotspots.

Drawn from my own experiences and diaries of nights spent at these venues to analyse the behaviours of people within these spaces, and how these differ from their heterosexual counterparts. Furthermore, reviewing the design, curation, and decoration of the venues, to see how these factors may have had an impact on the closure of these spaces. Endeavouring to find precedents for how an inclusive and safe space can be created for young gay men and what other venues are on offer for different minority groups.

In this paper I intend to reflect and critique the past history of queer culture in London, explore when gay culture presented into the mainstream, and what has been responsible for the decrease of queer meeting spaces in the city.

Akin to many other areas of queer culture, the decline of the presence of queer spaces remains largely unexplored. I will delve into the factors of the present time to determine what has been the cause for the quiet disappearance of these important venues and think about what the future for these hotspots may look like and why it is important to have a thriving queer scene in London.

I have selected these fields of research to analyse these topics with the following rationale that the queer space is frequently somewhere of danger and threat for a naïve young person who is encountering the queer space for the first time.

Tragedies and incidents within these places are commonly not reported on by mainstream news outlets which does not correlate with the integration of these

venues into the mainstream, and leads to an inequality and concern for homosexual men visiting queer spaces.

This research paper is organised into chapters with sub topics exploring homosexuality in London; the queer history which allowed the queer space to move overground; the problems faced in these spaces, and finally looking at the new types of queer spaces which are emerging.

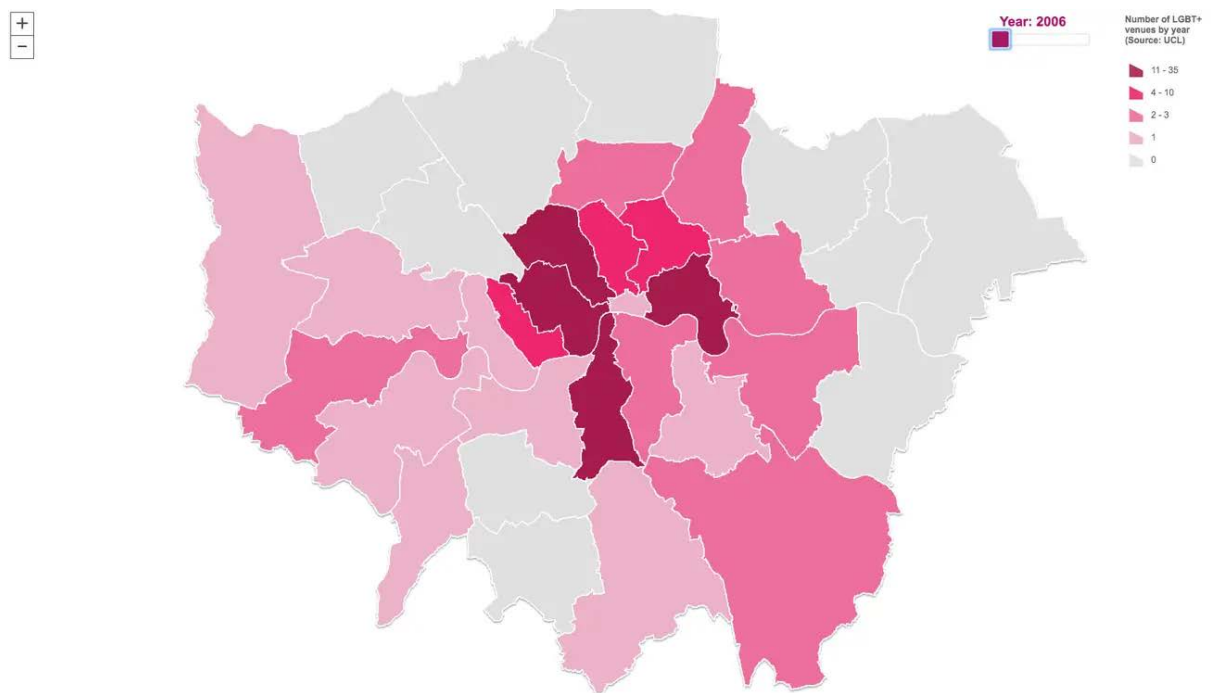


Figure 1. A map showing the distribution of LGBT venues in London in 2006.

Numbers have fallen by 58% in the decade since (Corcoran, 2017)

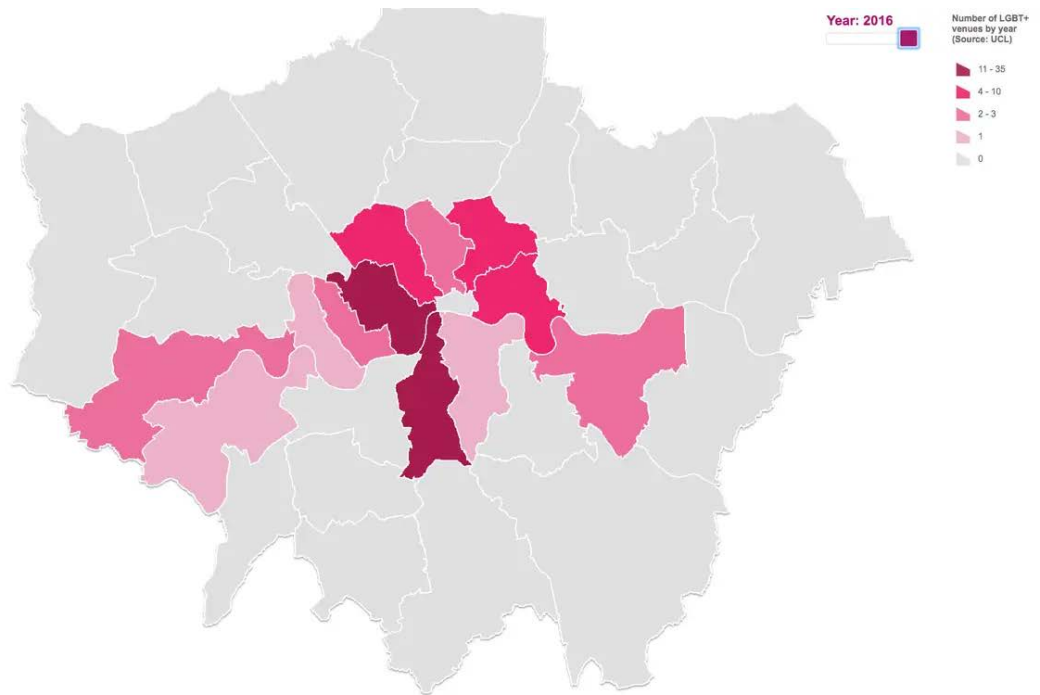


Figure 2. The map above shows the state of LGBT venues in 2016. (Corcoran, 2017)

1. Queering London

1.1 London's queer geographies

The unfortunate stereotype of a gay club in London is probably correct for a lot of the venues in the city: coloured neon lights; mirror balls; cliché pop music; cheap drinks; and the chemical aroma of amyl in the thick air.

Each hotspot of queer culture in London comes with its own stereotypes of its venues too, as well as the people who belong in these spaces. The tribes from each queer neighbourhood in the city tend to stick to their local venues, with a distinct sense of belonging and entitlement to their presence in their space. The different zones appear to have a particular uniformity of the genre of patron to the establishments.

For me, when I first moved to London from the conservative Hertfordshire countryside at the age of nineteen, like many my first port of call was Soho, in particular the infamous Old Compton Road. The first bar I chose being G-A-Y bar, probably the most trivial bar on the street, with one hundred and eighty two 'terrible' reviews on tripadvisor, it is surprising how popular this venue is after receiving bad

press for their “poor hygiene rating after some of its ice machines were found to have not been cleaned for five years” (Clark et al., 2022).

This bustling district is notorious for being an area which attracts the new to the city, fresh on the scene young homosexual, what members of the gay community would call a twink. Soho has always had a reputation among the homosexual male, as far back as the 1600’s the area was a place where “men would solicit other men for sex” (Kheraj, 2021). The close proximity to the frivolous West End’s theatre district perhaps makes Soho the oldest and most renowned hotspot for gay activity in London. After years of destitution and a bad reputation, Soho finally flourished and became the vibrant neighbourhood for gay culture in the 1980’s, and still thrives today.

Of course the street has an energetic ambience which you would expect from London’s most famed gay hotspot, but an unfortunate sombre past, still housing the Admiral Duncan pub, a venue which was the target of a fatal bombing in the nineties during an April bank holiday weekend. The man behind the attacks “had ties to the far-right British Nationalist party” and was a member of a “Neo nazi group” (Kheraj, 2021). The pub has become somewhat of a place of remembrance for targets of hate towards the LGBT community, with vigils being held at the venue in aid of the more recent 2016 mass-shooting at a gay bar in Orlando, Florida, and in 2019, when a remembrance ceremony was held twenty years on from the bombing at the “rainbow flag adorned Admiral Duncan” (Kheraj, 2021).

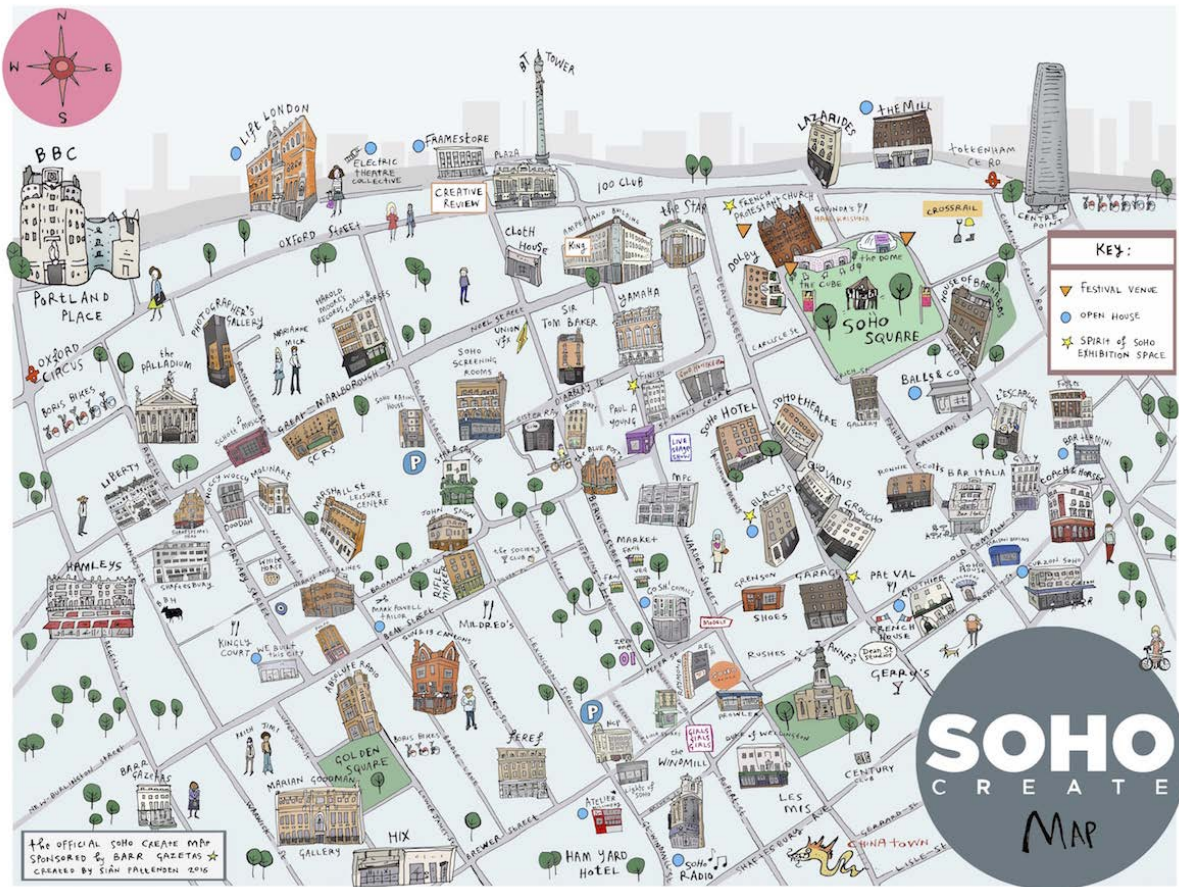


Figure 3. Mapping of Venues in the Soho District (London Art Maps, 2021)

1.2 Gentrifying neighbourhoods into gay hotspots

Some other popular queer hotspots exist in the city, including Clapham, with its more mature, slightly banal looking crowd in their skin tight jeans and patterned short sleeved shirt combinations, the Clapham gays are known for their tight knit friendships and false exclusivity. Perhaps an embarrassing strategy that they use to

appear superior to their inner London counterparts, it paints the image of gay men in a negative light, creating a tension between the committed regulars and new visitors.

East London's liberal Dalston, hosts trendy parties on the weekends popular with eccentric students and those working in creative fields. The distinct genre of visitor to these venues highlights the gentrification of East London from a working class area to a new district of successful creatives.

Vauxhall , with its historic Vauxhall tavern still provides themed nights with their tongue in cheek names, has a loyal fanbase. Each district of queer culture in London provides a different scene and experience catered for every tribe of homosexual.



Figure 4. LGBTQ+ pin badges at Barbican Out And About! Exhibition (Margetson, 2022)

1.3 The impact of Heaven

One of the city's biggest nightlife venues, Heaven, is probably the most renowned and longest running gay club in the city. With a significant history of hosting music events and providing a space for gay men to meet since 1979. The chintzy nightclub has a history of surprise celebrity appearances and as a place for performers who are considered as 'gay icons' to perform "Heaven has opened its doors to artists including Madonna and the Pet Shop Boys" (Klugman 1996).

This venue definitely has a bias towards gay men compared to other members of the LGBTQ+ community, and has a poor reputation for mistreating visitors who do not fall into this category. A quick type of 'heaven nightclub' into a search engine provides you with a variety of mishaps at this venue, making you wonder what makes this a place that people want to queue for hours every weekend to visit?

The club is situated by Charing Cross railway station, and the entrance is downstairs under the railway arches around the corner. On the weekend you can expect to see queues of people backed all the way up to Trafalgar Square until the door staff no longer decide to let people in. During the pandemic the Heaven queue was reported by the American CNBC news publication as "an incubator for new Covid variants" (Taylor, 2021), proving how the Heaven queue itself dominates the charing cross district during the evenings.

The queer space has always provided an important space for members of the community to come together in a unique surrounding. A whole subculture has been created within these space and “fostered new talent that wouldn’t be platformed elsewhere” (De Lise, 2022).

2.The emergence of queer space

2.1 Mother Clap's Molly House

London's Molly Houses were the first spaces where "gender roles were ignored, and people could present and dress as they liked" (De Lise, 2022), safe spaces "which men could meet in secret to socialise and have sex" (Jackson, 2017). The area of Shoreditch, in particular around Moorfields, was a flourishing district for molly houses, known as "sodomites walk" (Norton, N.D.), a wretched place that would be hardly inviting. They allowed LGBTQ+ individuals to explore their identities, express themselves freely, and build new creative connections" (De Lise, 2022). At a time when homosexuality was punishable by death, until 1861, the molly houses thrived underground and granted a space for gay men to connect with other like minded individuals. Queer culture by no means spoken of in this time but with "legal records document investigations into about 30 molly houses" (Jackson, 2017) *during this time period, this is about the equivalent to "having 200 gay clubs in the 1970s" (Jackson, 2017), considering the population of the city at this time.*

As well as a place for cruising, the molly houses also turned into venues with parties being held “labelled festival nights” (De Lise, 2022), which gave the visitors an important outlet to relax with and take away from the stresses of life outside of the molly houses. Although celebrated for the allowance of expression of queer identity, Molly houses have a melancholic history of raids, in one example “three men were hanged at Tyburn for the crime of 'sodomy'” (Jackson, 2017), *demonstrating these queer spaces were not safe spaces.*

Today’s version of the molly houses could be considered to be the gay saunas which are dotted around the city, often branded as gyms and fairly incognito from the exterior, it is probable you have walked past one without realising. The most famous is sweatbox, a chain of gay saunas with a large venue less than a minute walk down a side street off of Oxford Street as well as another venue by Waterloo station, open twenty four hours a day seven days of the week.. On the company's website, it boasts of a thirty-man jacuzzi, ‘private cabins’ for intimate activity, and free entry for under twenty fives on certain days of the week. Sweatbox’s website describes these under 25’s nights as “Hard up Mondays” for people feeling ‘skint after the weekend’. The free events for young gay men which happen twice a week, which still welcome paying older customers, could be an opportunity for the abuse of power by older gay men towards vulnerable gay men in need. The unfortunate fact of young gay men being ostracised from their relatives due to their sexuality often puts them into vulnerable positions of not having anywhere to go. Big cities

such as London, where gay culture is in the mainstream and LGBTQ+ people are widely accepted, often seem like a sense of hope for young gay men to escape to find themselves. It is the norm for queer men to “have a love-hate relationship with my hometown” (Cahill, 2022) and that “the gay flight stereotype by moving to London” (Cahill, 2022), is common. With many gay men moving to the city with nowhere to go and no agenda other than to be themselves, they find themselves in vulnerable and dangerous positions and often having to sell themselves for somewhere to sleep. The concept of “Landlords Are Offering Young Men Free Rooms In Return For Sex” (Strudwick, 2018), is something that has occurred in times of social media but provides opportunities for gay men to be taken advantage of. One story states that “for the newly graduated straight-A student to find himself exchanging sex for somewhere to live. He did not know what he would lose, that what awaited him was a succession of men who would drug and abuse him, that he would be infected with HIV, and, on several occasions, raped.” (Strudwick, 2018), showing the extent to which this issue can escalate to. I view the free events at Sweatbox in a similar way, a space where impoverished and in need young men can potentially be taken advantage of by older men, who can manipulate them by offering them the things they need to live their life.



Figure 5. Illustration of arrests at Mother Clap's Molly House (City of London, *Mother Clap's Molly House*)



Figure 6. Mother Clap's Molly House (City of London, *Mother clap's Molly House*)

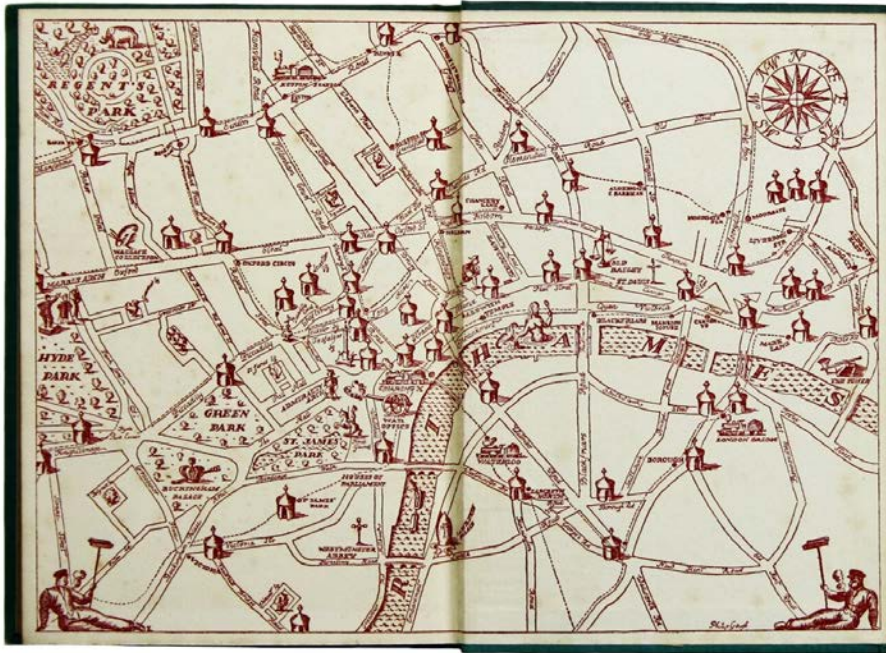


Figure 7. Historical map of public toilets used as cruising spaces (Palmieri, *Mapping queer southwark* 2020)

2.2 The decline of queer spaces

From 2006 to 2017 “the number of LGBTQ+ venues in London has fallen from 125 to 53, a net loss of 58% of venues” (Campkin, 2017), the percentage of closures of LGBT venues compared to mainstream venues is considerably higher during the same time period.

Possibly the reason for the decline in gay venues in the city would be the abundance of online platforms to connect with other gay men instantly over the

phone, thus rendering the need for queer spaces to meet others unnecessary.

London is reported to have “the highest registered users globally” (De Lise, 2022) on the gay hookup app Grindr. The presence and popularity of smartphones in the last ten years which provide online dating apps, correlates directly with the decline of queer spaces which is being seen in numerous cities around the world.

The queer scene in London arguably peaked during the 1980’s, despite this being the period in which the AIDS crisis took hold, homosexual men honoured their new found freedom and celebrated in queer spaces. This is in contrast to today, where queer spaces are at an alarming all time low, and the ones remaining seem sterilised, “The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan has pledged to do all he can to protect the capital’s LGBT+ nightlife” (*LGBT+ venues in crisis, 2017*), showing the importance of the need to protect these venues.

When one thinks about a queer venue, it is often that the idea that it is a place visited just for the gain of sexual interactions is imagined. The use of these spaces for sexual interaction is something that comes from the history of the spaces developing from the early molly houses into legal gay saunas which still exist. The legalisation of these venues is still relatively new, only happening within the last 50 years, so unsurprisingly, the idea that these spaces are dirty, dangerous and sleazy hookup venues still exists. When the closure of queer spaces is discussed, the topic of the closure of gay saunas is something that is often left unspoken about, due to

the negative connotations and lack of education of the importance of these venues to the queer community. Even among the gay community the popularity of gay saunas is diminishing, with the LGBTQ+ publication *Attitude* releasing an article in 2017 with the title “Perhaps the time has come for gay saunas to close – and that’s fine.” (Jones, 2017). The article paints the picture of the gay sauna being a place where risky sexual acts are performed by lonely men under the influence of drugs, and described as being “A poor show for a sex club in one of the gayest cities in the world” (Jones, 2017). This does not show the spaces for what they are, or once were and is surprising for a gay magazine to encourage the closure of gay venues which hold important cultural value to the queer communities. The presence of gay bars will always be considered a symbol of the fight for equality, “It’s hard to overstate the importance of the gay bar within the LGBTQ+ rights movement over the past couple hundred years. These bars have served as (not always) safe places for the LGBTQ+ community to be together, to mingle, and to simply *exist* as their true selves.” (Philemon, 2022), making it a surprise to read a queer publication speaking of a gay venue in such a way.



Figure 8. Barbican Out And About! Exhibition (Margetson, 2022)

2.3 Commodifying Gay sex

The city's various saunas across the city, including the chain venue, *sweatbox*, provide visitors with sexual health support and HIV testing, as well as providing condoms in the venues so that safe sex can be practised between partners. The saunas are providing measures to try and alleviate the poor press that is given

about them. Had it not been for the HIV crisis maybe the popularity and acceptance of these spaces would be more prevalent, and the existence of these spaces would become something more widely encouraged.

The importance of these spaces is also highlighted when the use by gay men who are not out as gay is considered. The commodification of gay sex is higher than ever with the presense of the gay hookup app grindr, but for some gay men the thought of publishing their face on the internet for the world to see them as a homosexual man is not something that they would ever consider.

The gay 'dating app', "For the uninitiated, Grindr is a phenomenon that has totally changed the gay community in London, its most popular and active city, with more than 500,000 users." (Cohen, 2012). You will probably find that most of your gay friends have the app, however the app does not necessitate the confirmation that the person using the app is who they are portraying as online. The app is often used for the exploitation of young men and is known for the 'Grindr Killer', who murdered young men by using the app, "The families of four men murdered by Grindr killer Stephen Port after basic police failures say officers have blood on their hands and must "put things right"." (Chowdhury, 2022), this shows how dangerous the app can be and the frequency of which young men are being abused on the app.

The acceptance and equality of members of the LGBTQ+ community is rising, however there still remain men who do not feel as though they could come out for reasons such as their families not accepting them, or for work or religious purposes. The gay saunas provide a venue where one can be anonymous, not recognisable by any clothing or material possession, but just for their body.

Sexuality is “as wide as the sea” (Jarman, 1994) and the concept that someone can be interested in sexual relationships with men but not romantic relationships exists. This is where the presence of gay bathhouses becomes beneficial for men with this identification. Gay saunas are frequented by men who identify as straight more than one might imagine, “All men are homosexual, some turn straight. It must be very odd to be a straight man because your sexuality is hopelessly defensive. It's like an ideal of racial purity.” (Jarman, 1994), they provide a place for men to experiment with their sexuality with no commitments to a serious relationship before they are ready to come out as gay. This concept from Jarman provides a perspective on sexuality that is left unspoken about by heterosexual members of society, homosexuality being an almost taboo subject among straight men and something that would still be uncomfortable for ‘straight’ men to talk about. This is a stark statement made by Jarman that would likely be quickly disapproved of by straight men, however it is common among the homosexual men I know to have had at least a couple of encounters with men who claim to be straight.

There are still non commodified queer spaces in the city that garner a lot of attention not only from the queer community but also now the mainstream media. The BBC recently published an article covering the closure and sale of the public toilets in Soho which were “known as a place for men to meet for casual sex” (Soho toilet, 2022), and surprisingly covers the detriment that could be caused from the closure of this space.

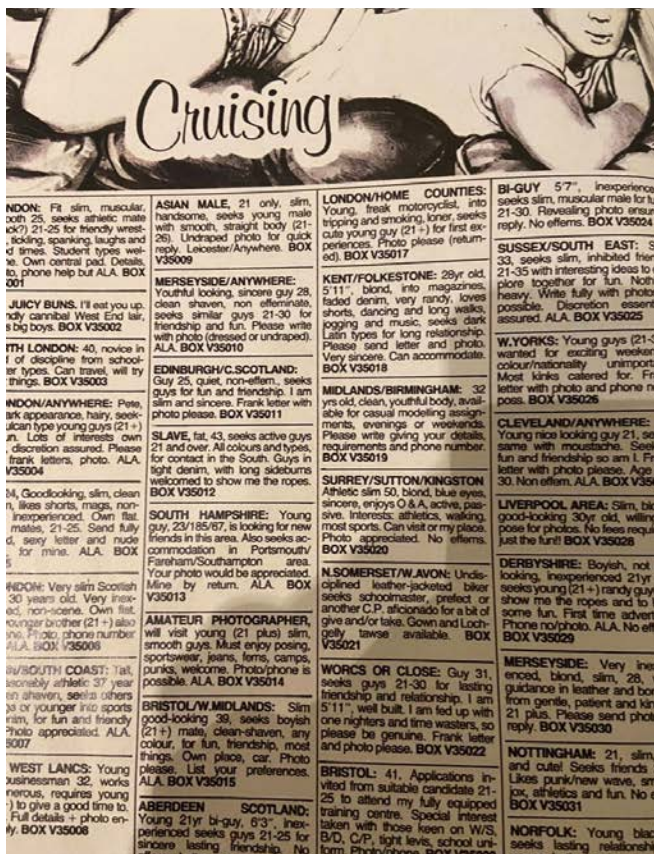


Figure 9. Cruising advertisements on display at Barbican Out And About! Exhibition

3. The effects of Interior architectural design on queer meeting venues

3.1 The adaptive reuse of London's industrialised architecture

Looking at nightclubs, the most stereotypical venue for a queer space, the design of nightlife venues is often ephemeral, due to the darkness, bright strobe lighting deceiving your sense of the space and the architecture within repurposed buildings making it hard to map out the space.

It is a place that you may only visit for a couple of hours each week and most likely not remember the morning after, As well as this, these spaces are most often visited under the influence of some sort of chemically induced high, along with loud music, heightening the senses of the user and creating a space whose design may portray itself as more enthralling than it actually is.

When I think about the design of nightclubs of the many I have visited, not just in London, no particular elements of design have struck me in any way which has benefitted my experience of the venue. Nightclubs are often placed in sites of reuse such as Heaven nightclub, which is underground the Charing Cross railway arches. The interior design of the space has to adapt to fit the complex architecture of the space it is inserting itself into. This theme is particularly common in London, a city

with many historic listed buildings; it would be impossible to provide a newly built space big enough for a nightlife venue in the middle of the city. This explains why the design may not be highly decorative or have any striking design choices, the concept of the design of the club is that it has adapted to house itself within an existing structure and claim the historical elements it contains as its own. This is present in the design of Heaven nightclub where instead of one large bar to serve drinks to the crowds, there are smaller bars staffed by one bar person housed in cavern like arches placed around the main dance floor. The spaces are barely tall enough for someone over six foot to stand straight, but the reuse of this area of the industrial building create a charm and sense of intimacy between the visitor and the bar staff serving them.

Nightclubs serving straight and gay customers are both on the decline, due to gentrification of the inner city areas becoming more frequent and raising the cost of property. This creates a higher demand for property and thus these venues are sacrificed into becoming housing, ironically the gentrifiers moving in often being the ones who bear the most emotion to the loss of these venues.



Figure 10. Floor Plan focus area of the ground floor of Heaven Nightclub London

(Buenvista Architecture, n.d.)

3.2. The field is dominated by the oppressor

Architecture being stereotypically an industry dominated by white straight men, the most privileged and trouble free group of people. Meaning that a lot of queer spaces were probably originally designed by white, straight cisgendered men, and then taken over by the homosexuals for use as their own. Increasingly in recent times it has become a saddening fact that people in nightlife venues often fall victim to being taken advantage of in various ways. Men getting too close to others and abusing the need for personal space, and more prevalent now the spiking of people's drinks. The occurrence of these events could be down to the original architecture of the space, could these spaces be subconsciously designed as spaces to take advantage of vulnerable people? Being spaces that were most likely designed by highly privileged men, the considerations needed when designing a safe space for homosexuals, and women are forgotten about, leading to the incidents that can occur in these spaces increasing.

3.3. Nightlife venues as exhibitions of design

A precedent for this topic but in Manchester is the infamous Hacienda club designed by Ben Kelly which was built in an unpopular part of the city in 1982 and lost due to the need for housing. The Hacienda is a rare example of a nightclub wherein the interior design and decoration of the space could be the main attraction

to the space for some visitors. “Playing host to many underground and mainstream musical acts selected by Factory Records label boss Tony Wilson, the Hacienda was synonymous with the growth of the city’s acid house and Madchester music scenes” (Rossi, 2018).

It is a well known fact that interior architecture and decoration is often seen stereotypically as a career path taken by gay men and women “interior design industry has been built on the talents of gay people” (Nicolaus, 2020) with the inventor of the term of interior design, Elsie de Wolfe, being a lesbian herself.

It is then surprising that more of the city's queer nightlife venues are not highly considered and decoratively designed spaces, like the Hacienda. I would state that London’s queer nightlife venues are more decorative in a camp manner, but nowhere near the consideration of design that the Hacienda portrays. Looking at the Dalston Superstore and the Queerly Beloved night which both take place in spaces reminiscent of any Victorian pub in London, these spaces take the host building without any real adaptation apart from the addition of a stage to perform drag shows. Instead these places are decorated in a way which almost defines the meaning of the word camp. Think disco balls, pink lights, rainbow flags and buckets of free condoms which, although useful, I think are there to provide a queer decorative element to the space. I believe that instead of decorating the place in a manner that reminds the visitor of their fifth birthday party, it would be intriguing and

more future focused to provide a queer space of architectural interest, akin to a modern day version of the Hacienda. This would attract a new crowd of design focused queer individuals who are perhaps put off by the traditional queer spaces and their tacky design which would possibly put off someone interested in design.

This could be a reason for the loss of the city's queer venues; the queer spaces haven't developed and adapted themselves into the present day to allow for the more diverse range of gay men who visit them. In the eighties when the venues are said to have peaked, the image of the London homosexual was more uniform and less developed. Whereas forty years on being gay is much more widely accepted and it is less easy to distinguish what one identifies as without the need for secretive styling cues, like the right ear piercing, for example.

The lack and need for more design focused nightlife venues for the new genre of homosexual man in London would provide a resurgence in the queer nightlife scene. Nights in London for design creatives in the fields of fashion and music already exist, with queer nights at the aforementioned venues providing a space for new young, queer fashion designers to freely exhibit their work on the likes of drag queens. This concept becomes a transactional way for upcoming designers to garner interest in their work, the queer club acts will happily take a costume or outfit in exchange for the exposure on the night and on their social media. The nightlife in

these venues is considered as a place of networking for those trying to gain exposure in London's fashion scene.

This concept of using the queer space for the exhibition of one's queer self is something that needs to be replicated in the realms of interior design and architecture to preserve the queer space. The movement of queer nightlife into the mainstream, meaning that these venues which were originally only visited by those belonging to the minority, are now the norm, whether seen as good or bad these means that there is no longer a distinction between the two venues.



Figure 11. Ben Kelly's Hacienda Manchester (Kelly n.d.)



Figure 12. Ben Kelly's Hacienda Manchester (Kelly n.d.)

4. Regaining Queer Spaces

4.1. The peak of queer space

The 1980's is often considered to be when gay nightlife culture peaked, homosexuality had been legal long enough for people to feel more comfortable to be themselves, and queer meeting spaces were beginning to emerge from the underground scenes to the mainstream. Despite the HIV/AIDS crisis which was beginning to emerge, as well as homophobic laws implemented by the conservative government at the time, gay men fought with their new found freedom to make this an iconic decade of queer nightlife. In this time of the epidemic of AIDS, it was unclear what the virus was and how long victims of it would have left of their lives, "The odds are very great and, in fact, the symptoms already exist. My friends are dropping like flies and I know in my heart that it is only divine intervention that has kept me alive this long. I don't know if I have five months or five years, but I know my days are numbered.

This is why my activities and projects are so important now. To do as much as possible as quickly as possible" (Haring, 2010). This quote by the infamous queer artist and AIDS activist shows how people with AIDS living in the time where there was no cure, still wanted to make the most of their lives and go out and party which

contributed towards the growth of the queer space. The knowledge of the inevitable death sentence after being diagnosed with AIDS in the eighties contributed towards the rapid growth of the queer scene at this time, as a response to and in protest of homophobia.

This meant that although the eighties has a sombre past in queer history, the period of time is known for its partying and cause for celebration. The recent legalisation of homosexuality at this point overshadows the problems that were still prevalent in queer spaces in the city. Gay men were only just getting used to having similar rights to heterosexuals and so even the act of being able to express your true identity was a success at the time meaning that queer men in the city looked past the issues that were present in these new queer spaces. Just being yourself legally felt enough to be a 'safe' space at this period of time, but not much has changed in the way of behaviour at these venues, and the way of operating is still the same.

Many of the most popular queer spaces in London are spaces that have been around since the time of legalisation, meaning that a lot of London's gay clubs are very gay male focused. This leads to the exclusion of minority groups or people who may be struggling with their identification feeling pressured to fit into a certain category, which should not be something that is promoted in queer spaces.

4.2. The modern day queer space

To bring a sense of 'queer' back into the queer spaces, the gay community needs to regain a consciousness of the need for enriching spaces where homosexuals can go to and feel safe. Sadly the majority of the original queer venues have now become commodified in London and turned into replicas of any model of a nightclub in London. An example of the celebration of 'queer' and prioritising the difference between one another is the pxssy palace night which is held in various spaces in the city. The night is put on as a space for trans and black lgbt members of the community, and entry fee is based on a scale of how much you need to be there. For example, if you are a straight white man, who probably should know that the space is not designated for himself, he would pay the most entry fee to be a part of the event. A ticket for a straight white man to the event costs in excess of a hundred pounds, whereas for black, Indigenous, and people of colour the ticket is on sale for only sixteen pounds. Pxssy Palace describes itself as 'inclusive, not exclusive' and advises guests to question their need to be in the space. In my opinion the model on which Pxssy Palace operates is an innovative and successful approach to creating a modern and inclusive queer space. The space which allows and encourages diversity to its spaces through its unique ticketing system shows potential visitors that this is a space in which they are welcomed and prioritised. The success of pxssy palace lies within the forward thinking of the space and the fact that it has developed in line with the expansion of the LGBTQ+ community.



Figure 13. Poster Advertisement for Pxxsy Palace (Pxxsy Palace, n.d.)





	BIPOC ONLY Queer Women, Trans & Non Binary BIPOC (Third Release) 16,80 £
	BIPOC ONLY Queer Cisgender Men (Second release) 16,80 £
	Allies – White Trans & Queer/Straight BIPOC Women (Second release) 24,64 £
	Straight CIS Gendered Men (General Admission) 112 £

Figure 14. Pxssy Palace’s ticketing system (Ojomu, 2022)

4.3. The need for revival

The failure of some of London’s queer venues is down to the fact that the way in which they operate are still stuck in the eighties, although this is when the nightlife scene peaked, it was not a time of full inclusivity as London is today. Bars were very focused on a type gay man only, and catered towards them and allowed them to become the prioritised customer. Unfortunately this way of operating is something that still exists within some of the establishments in the city, with reports in LGBTQ+ publications stating discrimination towards people that do not fit within their desired ideal. It is quite a sad and shockingly accepted fact within the gay community that these spaces are not actually as inclusive as they really should be, “considered part

and parcel of the LGBTQ+ community, and thus accepted, these behaviours were problematic then and continue to be so today” (De Lise , 2022). The casual racism that is rife within London’s queer spaces is confirmed by owner of the G-A-Y chain in London and Manchester, Jeremy Joseph, who in 2016 posted a tweet stating “in the nine days since he had been away for Christmas, there had been two stabbings in central London. He went on to say, “one was fatal, the scum bags, Somalians, drug dealers are on the increase”, and that his New Year's resolution was to “claim Soho back”.” (Maxwell, 2016). It is evident from this tweet that if the owner of the cities biggest queer spaces is publishing his racist views towards certain groups, that this is probably a view held by many of the owners of these venues. It is quite shameful and sad that the owners of spaces which could be so impactful and important to members of the community, are displaying such poor views of inclusivity.

Perhaps the reason for the decline of these spaces is the venues are owned by people who are stuck in the past, and remember what the scene was like in the eighties, and are trying to get this back and failing. Instead of publishing themselves with old fashioned views the owners really need to understand what queer culture in the present day is and that the old days of what Soho used to be are no more. It is inevitable that the queer spaces will fail if they keep using memories of the past as the model for their businesses, and what they need to do is take precedence from spaces like Pxssy Palace to create modern and inclusive safe Spokane’s for the growing diversity within our community.

The lack of interest in the spatial design of the venues and the poor operation are the main contributors towards the failure of these spaces leading people to move the queer space onto the virtual world. The new modern day queer space has moved online “That’s the tea, right? These apps have made us a little bit less able to-

-Connect? Go to the club!

And have a conversation!” (Moore, 2022), showing the transition of the queer space to the online world, thus rendering the physical queer space less of a necessity for gay men to meet each other.

“Heaven used to be great, now it’s closer to hell. The stress of getting in, getting you stuff into the cloak room and getting a drink is enough to make you want to leave immediately” (Pharaoh, 2017), This review summarises what is happening to many of the popular queer venues in London, the owners are forgetting about the visitors to these spaces and prioritising the money they make over the experience of gay culture.

To revive interest in these now outdated spaces, the venues need to adapt to become something that the new type of young gay man in London would want to visit. After a search into google of ‘gay London design nights’, nothing is presented that would excite and entertain myself or any of my younger, queer designer friends. As an interior design student I think that an exciting concept would be to have

young designers come into these spaces and work on short term installations and sets for these spaces which carry the theme of the club night and provide a reason for more people to visit these spaces. The nights of the events held in these spaces are often heavily themed with people making a big effort in the way they dress to turn out for these events. The need for the same discipline to be taken in the design of these venues, such as the Haçienda, is imperative.



Figure 14. Illustrations from BUTT Autumn 2022 Issue (Ababri, 2022)

4.3. Perfecting inclusivity

Since finding myself lacking interest and often finding myself disappointed by London's queer nightlife venues, as part of this research paper I explore queer venues that did not operate in the toxic way that I have found from many nightclubs. Upon listening to an episode of 'Queer Spaces: Behind The Scene' podcast, created by "Photographer Tim Boddy (he/him) and journalist and author Alim Kheraj (he/him)" (Boddy, N.d.), I discovered the inclusivity-driven space 'Open Barbers' in Hackney. The space is a hairdressers which is LGBTQ+ owned and run for the community, offering haircuts that do not conform to genders like traditional hairdressing shops, and allows the client to pay whatever they can afford. A similar salon 'Stunt Dolly', also runs their business in a similar way, describing their "vision is to be the SALON OF THE COMMUNITY, welcoming anyone and everyone through our doors" (Stunt Dolly, 2019), showing the growing need for business that also act as spaces for the LGBTQ+ community.

I personally have always found that getting my haircut as a gay man to be a nerve wracking experience as it is usually a space dominated by straight men and is often unintentionally made to make gay men feel uncomfortable. Since listening to the podcast I found that this issue is commonplace for the LGBTQ+ community and that this was the reason for the founding of the shop. As part of cleansing myself from the negativity of the previous queer spaces that I was regular at I visited open barbers for a haircut to analyse the space and since it has become my regular

hairdresser. The space is made accommodating before you even enter the salon, as part of the booking system the visitor is welcomed to give their pronouns and any adjustments that they may need during their visit, meaning that the staff would never assume one's identity.

Upon entering through the wheelchair accessible entrance, the waiting area is set up in a way that is almost reminiscent of someone's home, comfy well worn sofas and a large dining table for anyone to use for however long they need. As well as this, the walls are decorated with posters of LGBTQ+ support groups and information that may benefit members of the community who are suffering due to their identification and need help. Instead of the usual selection of fashion and lifestyle magazines that you would expect to find in a salon, there is a library of LGBTQ+ texts on a broad range of topics, for the visitor to use and gain knowledge of LGBTQ+ history. The Soho bars and clubs are a far cry from the inclusivity of Open Barbers which in my opinion is the perfect precedent for an example of the ideal modern queer space. The space not only serves as a place for members of the LGBTQ+ community to get their haircut, but also as a safe space which provides much needed information on housing, therapy and support groups for people who may be in a vulnerable position due to their identity. This is in stark contrast to the queer interiors I first visited upon moving to London, which provide minimal access to these services. I believe that Open Barbers is an innovative advancement in forward thinking queer spaces which celebrates the differences within the already minority group of the LGBTQ+ community.



Figure 15. Tom of Finland, Untitled (from Sex in the Shed), 1975, (Waite, 2022)

Citation for pictures *figure 1*: citation

Conclusion

To conclude this report, the research that I have carried out consolidates the concept that London's modern queer spaces rapidly evolved from the underground at the point of legalisation of homosexuality, however most of these spaces have not adapted the experience of their venues in line with the growing diversity within the queer community.

The spaces which peaked in popularity in the eighties are still popular with certain communities, however the fact that they are operating on a historic ideal creates spaces which are seen as exclusive and old fashioned to the forward thinking gays in London today. The success of new variants of queer spaces which promote inclusion to minorities within the LGBTQ+ community should serve as an example to owners of queer spaces who are being affected by the decline in queer spaces in the city.

As well as the prioritisation of the queer space for those who need it the most, the importance of design-led queer spaces and events which serve as safe places as well as spaces of architectural importance are needed to appeal to the influx of young, creative queer people in the city. The lack of good design standards within nightlife in general in London is poor, and particularly within queer nightlife venues, the spaces are cliché and dated and so they also require modernisation and

innovation to prevent further loss of queer venues. This overlooked problem was highlighted to myself as an interior designer, and I believe it is imperative that these spaces become more architecturally significant to preserve the culture of queer meeting spaces. It is vital to have spaces that feel comfortable and inclusive in terms of design, as well as the way in which they operate.

The presence of a continuously adapting space for members of the community to meet and feel as though they can be themselves is essential to queer culture. The venues which I have critiqued need to realise that there is now a greater audience of people whose needs have to be satisfied in order to describe their venues as inclusive queer spaces. Just serving as spaces which aim to please gay, white, cisgendered males is not enough and some of London's queer spaces have aided the discrimination of minority groups in the LGBTQ+ community.

The presence of inclusive queer meeting venues in the city is critical to the lives of queer people in London, as the city is often a place people move to in order to find themselves. The benefits of adapting outdated queer spaces in response to the research that I have gathered would help to sustain the venues as viable businesses and lessen the discrimination which is present. The operators of these venues need to understand that what 'queer' means is not linear, it is an ever changing definition and their spaces need to grow with this to be effective.

London's queer spaces are known as necessary venues for LGBTQ+ education, personal growth and happiness of the city's queer population. Ultimately I have found that the majority of these spaces are stuck in a historic frame of time which no longer represents the queer population in the city. Evolving these spaces to benefit a wider population within the community would allow for more cultures to be shared and celebrated within the minority, whilst ensuring that these venues are prosperous and long lasting queer spaces.

Relation to studio practise

After the research I have carried out regarding queer venues and the application of my practical specialism into LGBTQ+ spaces, I want to use this research to ensure that the spaces I am designing are not naively leaving out any members of the population.

The theme of creating accessible and inclusive spaces is something that I am applying to my interior design practice through the exploration of using one's senses to benefit their wellbeing. From the research gathered in this paper, it is evident that the inclusivity of an interior is acquired through the recognition of the need for a space which caters to and prioritises smaller minority groups within the community.

The idea of a space contributing to wellbeing is a key theme which is to be explored within queer spaces as having venues where members of the community can be themselves is essential.

Too many spaces are not catered to the inclusion of minority groups which creates architecture which is outdated and not suitable for serving the communities of people we have in today's society.

I am curating spaces intertwined with sensory installations to benefit the visitors' wellbeing in an innovative way which is something that I explored is lacking within the city's queer spaces. I am experimenting with the transgression between fine art installation and interior design to use lighting as a beneficial holistic treatment for certain groups of people.

I hope that this serves as a precedent for queer spaces in the city to use and replicate to best benefit the people within their community.

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