ARCHITECTURE VIEW / Herbert Muschamp

Designing a Framework for Diversity

Queer Spaces

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One of eight signs in view at the Stonewall gallery that will be placed as a strategic array around New York City.

My Jacoby analyses how Washington's policy in Philadelphia, one of the beer-police bastions, by William Penn—America's "perfect urban." Mr. Jacoby meticulously details gay politics. In fact, she makes a fascinating claim about the "queer" population as a cause. His, her line the "queer" tells of his plight, his trở. And the answer: how to become shrewd, how to change your world for the better? Washington Post.

- George C. A. Gordon

- Joyce L. Smith
NEXT WEEKEND, WHEN LESBIANS and gay men march through the streets of New York and other cities, they will be asserting something more than a political agenda. They will also be asserting the vitality of the public realm and the importance of the city street as one of its major manifestations: a symbol of the openness, tolerance and diversity of democratic society. By occupying that symbol in vast numbers, they hope to bring society closer to these ideals.

Queer space, a term that has been floating around architectural circles in recent months, takes the struggle out of the street and into the closet, so to speak, or at least into the tiny New York gallery Storefront for Art and Architecture (at 97 Kenmare Street), where a show of 13 new projects by architects and artists on the theme of “queer space” opened yesterday. Organized by a cadre of writers and academics to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, the show is more concerned with social space than architectural form per se.

Like feminist architectural studies, which have analyzed how the designs of homes, offices and public buildings embody sexual stereotypes, the projects at Storefront seek to extract meaning from place. Strongly theoretical in orientation, the exhibition reflects the current academic emphasis on cultural
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criticism. Its goal is to show that social and spatial forms are linked in more ways than architects traditionally recognize.

Queer space is certainly a catchy term, but what exactly does it mean?

Don’t ask, don’t tell, one may be tempted to conclude after perusing a statement by the show’s organizers. (They include Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, author of “Epistemology of the Closet,” and the architectural theorists Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley.) The declared intention of this group, which has been meeting in informal queer-space study sessions for the past year, is to “open up the question of queer space rather than pin it down.” And many of the works in the show (on view until July 30) display a similar aversion to exactitude. An installation on the subject of James Dean’s car crash, a battered Dumpster with a gilded interior, a wall covered with a heat-sensitive paint that retains the imprint of bodies: evocation, rather than analysis, forms the substance of this show.
But the show's deliberately unfocused atmosphere is not the usual academic haze. It partly reflects the fuzzy nature of the subject under consideration. Queer space can refer to the closet and to places stereotypically associated with ghettoized gay life: Greenwich Village, Castro Street in San Francisco, social and sexual playgrounds like bars and bathhouses. But it can also refer to places like the Hetrick Martin Institute, a gay youth center in New York, whose design, by Henry Smith Miller and Laurie Hawkinson, explicitly challenges the closet stereotype by emphasizing openness and visibility.

Queer space could refer to the currents of gay creativity that flow through the cultural mainstream, sometimes openly, sometimes in disguise. (The critic Aaron Betsky has argued that post-modern architecture may represent a covert gay assault on the male rectitude of the modern movement.) Or it could be a map of the political advances symbolized
by the gay occupation of stereotypically straight locations like Yankee Stadium, the site of the closing ceremonies of this year’s Gay Games.

This mutable, fluid terrain, at once bound by stereotypes and ranging far beyond them, makes queer space doubly queer. Indeed, what has drawn some theorists to explore the topic of queer space is not, primarily, an interest in gay culture but a fascination with the idea of queerness — a preoccupation with oddity, difference, otherness. This agenda raises the issue of exploitation. Are these theorists using an academic discipline to support an embattled minority, or are they using that minority’s struggle to prop up Derrida?

Probably a bit of both. But what they are mainly doing, it appears, is calling upon gay experience to rethink some of architecture’s fundamental assumptions. Architecture, historically, has been concerned with norms: with the design of forms and images that as-
Demonstrations and the selection of a new council majority led for the legislation to pass on March 20, 1986 and become law.

Storefront for Art and Architecture

pire to universal appeal. Modern architecture, in particular, was geared to the goal of standardization, to the search for a uniform vocabulary that could be applied to objects ranging in scale from teacups to town plans.

But for many architects today, norms are not something to be sought. They are some-
thing to be challenged. For these architects, the question is not how to identify and design a norm. It is, rather: Who sets the norms? Who decides what is normal? The issue, in other words, is power, and the use of power — including the symbolic and physical power of buildings — to impose norms that ignore the diversity of their inhabitants.

Diversity can indeed be easier to live with in theory than in fact. For instance, no one has done more than Jane Jacobs to promote the theory that diversity is the city’s most valuable asset. But her view of diversity could be selective. As a longtime resident of Greenwich Village, she was in a position to recognize the vitality of the urban gay population, particularly after the postwar suburban exodus of the middle class.

Yet in her landmark 1961 book, “The Death and Life of Great American Cities,” the gay subculture does not figure as a sign of life. Instead, in a chapter on neighborhood parks,
Ms. Jacobs analyzes how Washington Square in Philadelphia, one of the four public spaces laid out by William Penn, degenerated into a "pervert park."

Ms. Jacobs was hardly conducting an anti-gay crusade. In fact, she took issue with moralists who regarded Philadelphia’s “pervert” population as a cause of urban blight. But, for her, the “pervert park” was a symptom of that blight, like the rising incidence of crime. And she assumed that readers would have no trouble sharing this view. Just as the baths in Stanley Kubrick’s movie “Spartacus” symbolized Roman decadence, so Washington Park stood for the decline and fall of urban America.

George Chauncey, a professor of history at the University of Chicago, understands that sometimes the most effective way to open things up is by trying to pin them down. The virtue of his new book, “Gay New York,” is its scholarly precision. The book is a meticulously researched account of the gay male culture that flourished in New York in the half century before World War II. As Mr. Chauncey documents, the closet didn’t suddenly burst open 25 years ago. In the early decades of the century, “fairies” were an integral part of urban life.
In a sense, Mr. Chauncey tells the story of pervert parks from the pervert's point of view. He shows how and why certain kinds of public space — parks, streets, piers, bars and baths — became queer space, gay culture's urban matrix. In a nutshell, there was no other place to go.

Undoubtedly the most provocative aspect of the book is Mr. Chauncey's contention that the homosexual subculture was integrally related to the emergence of heterosexuality in the late 19th century. C'est what? Heterosexuality a Victorian invention? Not exactly. Mr. Chauncey is not suggesting that sexual relations between men and women are only a century old. His point is that sexual preference has not always been the crucial standard by which the normality of men is measured. His subject is the "transition from the world of fairies and men to the world of homosexuals and heterosexuals." The terms heterosexuality and homosexuality are of relatively recent vintage, Mr. Chauncey observes. Effeminate behavior, rather than sexual preference, was once the standard for the abnormal.
Men haven't always felt unnerved by intimacy with other men, Mr. Chauncey writes. That fear emerged when middle-class men became subject to new social pressures, like the entrance of women into cultural life and the increasing power of corporate structures in which men were likely to find themselves subordinated to the will of other men. The heterosexual identity, he argues, was constructed in response to those pressures. The homosexual stereotype was a cornerstone of that construction. Everybody continued to check out everybody else, all the time. They just had reason to feel guilty about it.

Although Mr. Chauncey's story unfolds in a succession of colorful urban places, its focus is on sociology, not built form. Even so, his argument opens up a valuable perspective for architects who must design for a pluralistic society. Architects who create norms are at the same time creating abnorms. The meaning of their forms derives partly from the meanings their forms exclude.

The point is not that architects should abandon the norm. It remains a constructive ideal. Diversity itself is a normative concept, a framework that embraces difference. That is the concept to which the city street gives such glorious symbolic form. As a visible record of accumulated and discarded norms, the street shows that one of the functions of the norm is to be queer.
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Reception area of the Hetrick Martin Institute, a center for gay youths in New York—An emphasis on visibility.

A 1903 drawing of a bathhouse done by a police officer after a raid—Queer space can be ghettoized social or sexual playgrounds.