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Visual Arts Critic

The year is 1953, the place is the opulently appointed lobby of Toronto’s King Edward Hotel, the hour is after dinner.

On the evening we drop by, the King Eddie’s entrance hall, like grand hotel lobbies everywhere, is a theatre of ceaseless comings and goings — the bustle of staff and the hotel’s distinctly upmarket guests. All this stately movement flows, like a slow stream running over rocks, around a few fixtures — a heavy oak table near the front door, for instance; and old Colonel Blimp up from the country for some regimental do to celebrate the Coronation, ensconced in his favourite overstuffed chair, reading the business pages of the newspaper.

Glancing up, the colonel notices a well-tailored young man take his place next to another one on a nearby sofa, and, let’s say, ask for a light for his cigarette. Whereupon a casual, but obviously purposeful, conversation ensues between the strangers, ending with both men strolling out of the lobby together, into the dusk gathering along the sidewalks of King Street West.

The chat between the young men
Material World

has taken place out of the colonel’s earshot. But, given the officer’s acquaintance with the fallen world and its ways, it’s possible that the thought flutters across his mind that he’s just witnessed a gay pickup. The colonel might note the connection between similar occurrences he’d witnessed in the lobby on earlier stays at the King Eddie, and recall that the lobby had long been famous a place for discreet meetings and greetings by Toronto’s gay men. Everybody in the uptown circles frequented by Colonel and Mrs. Blimp, after all, knew such things went on, even though they were never discussed.
Nobody in their social circle could have imagined that, only a generation or so later, the love that once dared not speak its name was to turn into a full-scale academic industry, with homosexual urbanists, activists, architects, social scientists, literature professors and myriad other interested parties in Europe, Canada and the United States.

For anybody interested in cities, how they operate and how they serve as public stages for the pageants of human life, this recent explosion of gay urban studies has been an exciting occasion. So has the bumper crop of scholarly discussions, personal stories and historical vignettes gathered into *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, published this summer by the Bay Press in Seattle. The book, and the recent studies from which it springs, contains revelations about nooks, side-streets and textures in the (mainly North American) metropolitan fabric many urban explorers know little about, but are out there for the know-
ing, for those with a spark of curiosity about the unfolding complexities of city living.

*Queers in Space* is a book that shows the patterns in disparate phenomena, the large implications of small, quiet quakes in city's underpinnings. It's such constructions of luminous historical wholes from shadowy bits and pieces of personal experience that give this 530-page anthology its immediate and enduring value.

In an essay by Toronto artist and local historian John Grube, for example, we find that the pickup the colonel witnessed at the King Eddie was no secret, isolated encounter, but merely another routine erotic event in a famous spot on the city's large homosexual map, as drawn on the cityscape by gay people between the Second World War and the 1960s. (Other sites on that map — this is a book full of maps and illustrations — include the now-vanished Pearson Hotel out on the Toronto Islands, a discreet resort for gay couples, and Rosedale's beautiful David Balfour Park, still a favourite trysting spot for homosexual men.) The map of gay Toronto has become more intricate
The lobby of the King Edward Hotel was a famous spot for routine, erotic events.

(RICHARD RHODES/The Globe and Mail)
BUT it is also about "housing and employment, repression and tolerance, the presence of particular services and institutions, and demonstrations and other forms of activism." Along the same lines — and of peculiar interest to everyone interested in the volatile social physics of cities — *Queers in Space* provides several close looks at "how queer enclaves emerge as refuges in relatively inhospitable territory. . . . the social, cultural and economic dynamics of placemaking." Various authors look at gay male hangouts in Mexico City, Los Angeles lesbian neighbourhoods in the 1970s, New York’s famous Christopher Street, and the history of bath-house architecture. But queer "placemaking," as it turns out, is not merely a replication of the old structures of city life.

Indeed, at stake is something much
Indeed, at stake is something much more important than merely homogenizing the queer population into the old straight institutions. Public architecture and policy, the editors argue in their final essay, have always been tools for regulating the movements of urban populations, "rather than to spark creative forms of social change." And such change is what the editors hope "queerscapes" will instigate. "It takes nerve, a sense of humour," they write, "and a dedication to envision and advocate ... viable spaces that foster old and new ways to enjoy each other...."

It may also take a mighty change of heart on the part of the many homosexual men and women who are apparently quite content to reproduce the traditional two-parent family, the urban household, the 9-to-5 work pattern, and B.A.-to-burial career path, all long hallowed by heterosexual culture. But never mind: *Queers in Space* should be read by everyone with a yen to dig one level deeper into the richly veined and variegated social strata our cities have been raised on.