PRACTICE PRACTISE PRAXIS

Serial Repetition, Organizational Behaviour, and Strategic Action in Architecture

Edited by Scott Sørli
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(On the Beach)
Practising Queerscape Architecture

Gordon Brent Ingram

A mythic Musqueam rock in a gay male zone
(sometimes used in public sex).
Under the intense pressures of globalizing capitalism, most of the freedom to live well and to construct a specific identity involving erotic expression has been closely linked to an individual’s purchasing power. But of all the things that we need to live well, access to space, as in indoor and outdoor areas with security in which to exist and to communicate, has been the least easy and straightforward to commodify. Until recently, post-Stonewall lesbian and gay life has involved something of a Faustian bargain where sexual minorities sufficiently compromise their identities and economic positions in order to buy access to “queer space,”¹ often at grossly inflated prices.

The often indirect and closeted regulation of and limitations on queer presence in public space remains a key element of social control in this fin-de-siècle. A mildly homophobic political economy such as this functions to deterritorialize relationships and communities.² The new “threat,” the new queer menace to the sexual economy of late capitalism, is the lesbian, gay or bisexual person who unabashedly uses public space and through this action attempts to take a “place at the table.” Queerscape architecture, as a conscious and collectivist effort to reprogramme and redesign erotic landscapes for greater contact, equity and security, is foremost about a celebration of freedom of consensual expression in public space. Such an activist project of linking specific aspects of minority sexualities to the formation of new communities with more pronounced presences, and with forms of reterritorialization that go well beyond insertion of consumer icons, is at the heart of queerscape architecture.³

A broader paradigm of queerscape architecture for nurturing communities and countering homophobia across sites, neighbourhoods and regions requires a multidisciplinary reordering of architecture and landscape architecture, urban design, regional planning and public art-making. Presently, much of queer architecture practice involves insertion of and management of imagery and is allied with new developments in public art.⁴
For me, it is these longer-term questions of the linkages between public space, communality, body space, pleasure and ecologically sustainable design that make the project of constructing an architecture—-that does not further marginalize—-the sexually marginalized so necessary and interesting. While there may be many specific reasons for queerscape architecture (only one of which is countering the homophobia and misogyny that persist in the design fields), I am especially interested in the implications of the influence of better sexual citizenship on environmental stewardship for a gay beach in Vancouver.

**Identities and alliances: queer space/queer sites/queerscapes**

The term *queer* is no longer used in the pejorative, as it was in pre-Stonewall times (1969). "Queer" in this essay refers to the grouped category of lesbians, gay males, bisexuals, transsexuals and transvestites, and is a departure from earlier lesbian and gay male movements in its implicit and indefinite construction of a decentred community of difference and the positing of a "new stance for opposition." Simon Watney has noted:

The great convenience of the term "queer" today lies most immediately in its gender and race neutrality. This is only to remark that for many young Americans [Whatney differentiates this from the British usage of queer] the term gay is widely understood to mean white, male, materialistic and thirty-something. On the contrary, queer asserts an identity that celebrates differences within a wider picture of sexual and social diversity.

Postmodern ideas of "queer" communities and neighbourhoods emphasize the fluid nature of alliances across places, neighbourhoods, and regions. But markedly different gender-related experiences persist. David Bell states that "straight space thus becomes the underlying frame with which we work: the space that gays subvert and the place that lesbians cohabit." The notion of "queer space" can be traced back to Barbara Weightman’s 1981 essay which outlines
"gay spaces," often sites of discard which have the following aspects: gay interactions and relationships, knowledge of heterosexual worlds and "certain unique psychic and experiential dimensions of the gay world." As late as forty years ago, supposed liberal Jane Jacobs launched her career exposing the supposed evils of "pervert parks" and Frantz Fanon complained about "homosexual territory." It was only in the late 1960s that gay liberationists such as Carl Wittman began to talk about "building [homophobia]-free territory."  

1. between visible assertion and more subtle placemaking;  
2. between claiming/queering of public space versus inclusion and integration of sexual minorities; and  
3. between creation of private homosexual space versus public queer space.  

In the 1990s, finding approaches to programming for and by the marginalized has become a central question in urban design and the related professions. With the increasing globalization of capital in urban centres, there has been a trend toward a de facto privatization of public space, as well as renewed movements to reclaim and reconstruct public spaces to include broader sets of social groups. Queerscape architecture represents just one more module that not only forces professionals to become more sensitive to so-called special interest groups, but is also part of a broader project to reconstruct architecture to make the addressing of all forms of marginality a key design response.

The problem: reconstructing places/redefining communities

Public spaces have always been strategically important to various marginalized groups. With globalization and "post-modern dislocation," public space has become increasingly important particularly for people not in traditional family units. Within contemporary lesbian and gay activism, the following dynamics have emerged:
Another problem: gendered versus eroticized space

In a patriarchal system, public space is gendered and dominated by males from the outset. By having those spaces a priori gendered, a huge amount of potential social life, especially erotic life, is either suppressed or censored. Patriarchal space is usually maintained through a combination of laws and policing, economies and violence (some of which is eroticized) or the threat of it.

Present theories of sexual orientation and outdoor space are largely derived from feminist critiques of designed space. Queer spatial theory must therefore first recognize the role of gender. For women in the city, a contradictory set of relationships emerges with the construction of places of both increased personal freedom and intensified vulnerability. The concept of the "spatial caste system," and its relationship to gender disparities, was articulated by Leslie Kanes Weisman when she stated that:

space, like language, is socially constructed; and like the syntax of language, the spatial arrangements of our buildings and milieus reflect and reinforce the nature of gender, race and class relations in society.

The uses of both language and space contribute to the power of some groups over others and the maintenance of human inequality. Under patriarchy, space is first gendered before it can be eroticized. This means that any characterization, concretization through design, or actual erotic expression by sexual minorities within this system, no matter how subtle, tends to also reinforce disparities in power and access to environmental resources among men, women and children. In other words, gay spaces primarily function for homosexual males and may be no more "queer" than heterosexual spaces that tolerate some homoeroticism. In contrast, vital queer spaces that create a basis for explorations of new depths of erotic expression and communal discourse are inherently arenas for contesting both homophobia and patriarchy, while not constraining
consensual contact. The problem has been that in the ghettos and suburbs of post-Stonewall capitalism, only parts of which are really controlled by gay men and lesbians, privatization of queer spaces involves inevitable tradeoffs between eroticization and the continued efforts to counter male domination and the possibility of sexual violence. So far, lesbian feminist spaces have often emasculated eroticism. Hence, there is the growing strategic importance of private sex-positive women’s spaces and the emerging, although presently rare, sites of public bisexuality.

Marginality and maps of identity and experience

We still have very little descriptive vocabulary to create and properly design queer space. Central to queerscape architecture must be the formation of new written, verbal and drawn language oriented to countering forms of domination. One strategy for creating this new language is to chart how we already experience erotic aspects of place. Such complex, non-linear and sometimes contradictory descriptions of place are sometimes called cognitive maps. Minorities often experience outdoor environments in substantially different ways than more privileged groups. But as Keith and Pile note:

Cognitive mapping is in some sense recognized to be both imaginable and impossible...

Nevertheless, it is also meant to allow people to become aware of their own position in the world and to give people the resources to resist... These spaces need to be mapped so that they can be used by oppositional cultures and new social movements against the interests of capital as sites of resistance.

In his UCLA master’s thesis Queer Spaces: The Space of Lesbian and Gay Men of Color in Los Angeles, Eric Estuar Reyes explored the implications of cognitive maps for queer theory and activism, and posits:

Just as there is a physical structure of the spaces we inhabit, there is a cognitive structure that we use to locate ourselves in the landscape. For queers and for queers of color,
what is this cognitive structure? Is it spatial? How is this important to being, becoming, or negating a queer individual and/or communal identity?²⁹

How people view themselves as members of an erotic network of sexual minority, with prerequisite processes of coming out, of finding out where they can go and cannot go, has tremendous implications for personal as well as professional relationships, to respective communal environments. To a large extent, queerscape architecture responds to programmes based on certain historically rooted notions of desire, identities, acts, and the “publicness of space.”

The functions and inequities of public and private (queer) space

The crucial issue in the making of queer space, and in the identification of the lack of it, is how we regulate the private use of public space. Since Stonewall, there has been a drastic shift or withdrawal to privatized space.²⁰ Henry Urbach describes the dilemma this way:

In his 1977 book The Sexual Outlaw, John Rechy wrote about public gay sex in Los Angeles. Rechy’s characters endlessly rove.... They constitute a loose coalition of renegades united in rituals and codes of sexual practice.... The scenes described by Rechy may continue to occur somewhat, but, in the context of AIDS and increasingly violent gay bashing, sex clubs have emerged as an alternative: for a fee, queers gain access to enclaves of semi-public sex that are free of police, bashers and the unsuspecting passerby.²¹

Confronting homophobia and misogyny as queerscape architecture

Architecture is the simplest means of articulating time and space, of modulating reality, of engendering dreams.... The architecture of tomorrow will be a means of modifying present conceptions of time and space. It will be a means of knowledge and a means of action.

– Ivan Chetcheglov, 1953
the gay male zone is not very attractive for most women. The thick forest suggests danger and the lack of easy exits suggests vulnerability.

**Interventions/reprogramming/design proposals**

In reconstructing this queerscape for equity and diversity, a few possibilities emerge. Broader questions and dilemmas about strategies for equity and sustainability remain. Fortunately the management authority, the Greater Vancouver Regional District, is fairly committed to representing a wide range of user groups in the park — that should include lesbian, gay and bisexual users. But symbolic inclusion is not the same thing as responsive programming, especially where conflicts are inevitable. While most women may not want to use the south end of Wreck Beach very much, some do and there is very little space for them. Perhaps some sort of female separatist camp-out needs to occur, but those women would perhaps be doing more to educate males than to create viable space for themselves.

The emergence of queerscape architecture is but one result in the shifts and crises in planning and design in response to increased concerns around marginality. There has been the creation and appropriation of sites for homosexual contact for well over a century but most of the respective spaces were hidden, discarded places. Now queerscape architecture is part of a more systematic process of visibility through demanding adequate and equitable distribution of necessary resources like security, access, aesthetics and space.

The long-term impact of queerscape architecture will not only be its particular strategies and techniques for expanding inclusion and minimizing disparities between women and men and between queer and less marginalized space, but also providing a basis for looking at disparities between lesbian and gay groups of various ethnicities, languages, ages and disabilities. Queerscape architecture poses some exciting new opportunities for the field of landscape architecture in particular, which far too often has neglected and obscured basic communal needs for outdoor space.
1 For an overview of the concept of queer space see "Manifestos: Queer Space," Storefront Art and Architecture, June 1994, and "Queer Space," Storefront Art and Architecture, 4 newsprint pages. Herbert Muschamp's review of the exhibition in Architecture View, "Designing a Framework for Diversity," The New York Times, June 19, 1994, page 32 notes "Queer space is a catchy term but what does it mean? Don't ask, don't tell, one is tempted to say." In what is probably veiled reduction of queerness to sexual acts, Muschamp also explains that "Queer space can be ghettoized social or sexual playgrounds."


6 For an example of a pre-Stonewall use of the term queer for sexual minorities, see Albert Reiss in his 1961 essay, "The Social Organization of Queers and Pariahs," Social Problems 9 (1961), 102-120.


12 Frantz Fanon, Black Skins, White Masks (New York: Grove, 1967), 183.


14 For an example of contemporary processes of de facto privatization of formally public open space, see Mike Davis, “Chapter Four: Fortress LA,” City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles (New York: Vintage, 1992), 221–264.


16 By the term sexual violence, I refer to both unwanted contact and possible assaults as well as less overt intimidation including verbal and visual contact.

17 These kinds of sites of public bisexuality are usually temporary and nomadic and, due to a range of threats (particularly to women), are usually members-only parties held in rented indoor spaces.


20 Mostly through the creation of “gay ghettos,” whether gentrified or not. One of the most seminal discussions of the gay ghetto, even though the term had already been in use for well over ten years, is Martin P. Levine, “Gay Ghetto,” Gay Man: The Sociology of Male Homosexuality, 182–204. For key discussions of gay male gentrification in North America, see Larry Knopp, “Some Theoretical Implications of Gay Involvement in an Urban Land Market,” Political Geography Quarterly 9 (1990), 337–352; David Bell, “ Bisexuality — A Place on the Margins,” The Margins of the City: Gay Men’s Urban Lives, 65–83.


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