

**CITIES** / The controversial concept of 'queer space' breathes new life into the arid subject of city planning

## Redefining urban space

BY JOHN BENTLEY MAYS  
Visual Arts Critic

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One might quibble with Ingram over his contention that specific architectural settings are "becoming increasingly strategic" — my emphasis — for the formation and sustenance of communities. Haven't they always been? If private bath-houses and public parks have traditionally provided opportunities for the rites of community, church buildings are the same for Christians. One can easily

Eisenman recently lamented "Architecture can no longer be bound by static conditions of space and time and there. . . . Architecture must address the problem of how to create a dynamic form of space that can evolve."

Here's a for instance. The delightful daycare centre my daughter attended in her pre-school years was, for most working hours, just that: a daycare centre. But come pick-up time each afternoon, it became a clubhouse for the mostly single mothers whose children had spent the day there — a site for the exchange of child-rearing information, sympathetic companionship in a world, and for most of the women, a place where the adults were not

thing that happens when any little town becomes a big one. Every city on earth has a large population of gay and bisexual men, in and out of the closet, who, for reasons that utterly escape me, like to do so secretly. Other people may feel that mothers should be grateful to place to put their kids for a place to ask a daycare centre as a chat. But it happens as a place for a quiet afternoon. Queen Street strip



**Toronto's Barracks, now closed: 'Architecture can no longer be bound by the static conditions of space and place.'**

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# Redefining urban space

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**E**XACTLY when and by whom the impish term queer space was invented, and sent out to play in the journals, seminars and conferences of serious architects and planners, I cannot tell you. But the phrase had certainly been running round the academic loop for some time before I discovered what it meant, and what the concept portends for the way we think about cities.

The definition came from Gordon Brent Ingram, an environmental planner from Vancouver and a prolific theorist of "queer space" and its terminological offspring — "queer-scapes," "queer place making," and the like.

In a recent paper called *Ten Arguments for a Theory of Queers in Outdoor Space* — a thickly written, densely footnoted academic essay you could leave on any coffee table without fear of corrupting the young — Ingram argues that planners need to ponder the ways gay men and women use outdoor places "because sites are becoming increasingly strategic in development of new services, social formations and communities."

A public park, for instance, is transfigured into queer space (or "queered," to use another Ingramism) by being appropriated for the nocturnal sexual trysts and romps that have historically defined and sustained urban gay communities. Similarly, a Victorian family dwell-

ing on a quiet downtown street can be queered by transformation into a bathhouse for gay men with a taste for leather dress-up — I am thinking here of Toronto's Barracks — then presumably "de-queered" by being closed and boarded up, as The Barracks has been.

One might quibble with Ingram over his contention that specific architectural settings are "*becoming* increasingly strategic" — my emphasis — for the formation and sustenance of communities. Haven't they always been? If private bath-houses and public parks have traditionally provided opportunities for the rites of queer community, church buildings have done the same for Christian community. One can easily think up myriad parallel examples.

What is apparently increasing, due to the work of Ingram and like-minded urbanists, is awareness among planning and architectural professionals of the importance of certain spaces and sorts of space in the maintenance of human solidarities in the centrifuge of urban life.

As the findings and insights of queer-space students slowly leak from academia into mainstream urban thought, the current working definition of *architecture* — park and expressway, house and office tower — may gradually come to cover, not just sturdy *things*, but volatile *sites*, even *events*, changing with the vagaries of human use.

"Traditional architectural theory largely ignores the idea of the event," the distinguished U.S. architect Peter

Eisenman recently lamented. "Architecture can no longer be bound by the static conditions of space and place, here and there. . . . Architecture must now address the problem of event. Today, rock concerts may be considered the archetypal form of architectural event. People go to rock concerts not to listen — because one cannot merely "hear" the music — but to become part of the environment."

Despite Eisenman's urgency, and the flamboyance of queer-space rhetoric, none of this is exactly hot news. Whether or not we theorize about it, we've all experienced the elasticity of sites, the curious instability of what, to the eye, appears as stable as brick and mortar can be.

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Here's a for instance. The delightful daycare centre my daughter attended in her pre-school years was, for most working hours, just that: a daycare centre. But come pick-up time each afternoon, it became a clubhouse for the mostly single mothers whose children had spent the day there — a site for the exchange of child-rearing information, for sympathetic companionship in what was, for most of the women, a very tough world, and for much bitching about what creeps we men be. A loose community of adults was forged in those warm moments together, and friendships formed that have survived long past the time when our kids scattered to schools across the city.

But there was one problem with this otherwise superb daycare centre: It had been designed only for drop-off, good care and pick-up. No space was dedicated to those vital rites of unplanned camaraderie that took place each afternoon. The reason, of course, was that the renovators commissioned to turn the little Victorian building into a daycare centre did *exactly* as they were told. Neither they nor their clients anticipated that the daycare centre would assume additional importance as a site of community-building among single mothers. But in the daycare centre, we have an instance of exactly the issue queer-space scholars (among others) would like to raise for architects, planners and urban designers: the opening of the process of city-creation, of building itself, to the peculiarly uncomfortable truth of *real use*.

It's a topic that makes just about everyone nervous, from high politician to ordinary citizen — especially in Toronto, which has never decided whether it wants to be a snug small town of solid nuclear families or a metropolitan titan with single mothers and men strutting their stuff in high-heels. Many Torontonians, for instance, are revolted by the nightly appropriation of Rosedale's David Balfour Park by gay men prowling for sexual quickies. But like it or not, this is the sort of

thing that happens when any little town becomes a big one. Every city on earth has a large population of gay and bisexual men, in and out of the closet, who, for reasons that utterly escape me, like to do sexual scampers in the poison ivy after midnight.

Other people may feel that single mothers should be grateful for a place to put their kids for the day, and not ask a daycare centre to serve as a place for a quiet afternoon coffee and a chat. But it happens. Still, others are appalled by the rowdy heterosexual sex traffic on Parkdale's seedy Queen Street strip. But here again — he said with a sigh — that's the big city for you: prostitutes with teased-up bleached bouffants and wearing fanny-high miniskirts, yelling at passing motorists. I don't like it. But a sizable number of my male fellow-citizens must be getting a real kick out of this sex scene because business appears to be booming.

IT would be unfair and untrue to suggest that, before queer-space theorists came along, urban planners and architects were giving no thought to questions of real usage, or designing buildings without sensitivity to the needs of tenants, users, the general public. Most of this sensitivity and attention, however, has been lavished on the use of urban spaces by the prosperous, the enfranchised, the mobile and professional. And it has usually taken the form, in North America anyway, of upped, expanded opportunities to consume; to wit, the recent appearance of boutiques crowded into what were once the barren basements and desolate lobbies of office towers.

Queer-space theory — itself a response to sophisticated feminist analysis of "gendered spaces" — would sharply turn the gaze of architects and planners in another direction: toward the uses of cities, buildings, parks and other sites by the non-rich, the non-powerful, the sexually or socially marginalized, rowdy prosti-

tutes and their johns, gay men rustling in the bushes, single mothers seeking mutual support. How can urban and architectural professionals help provide the freedom necessary for all communities in the metropolis — even *these* — to enact their rites of continuation and maintenance?

The classic liberal answer to this question has always involved active intervention. Build better public housing. Confine prostitution to certain urban zones. Install "morality lights" in the parks to encourage homosexuals to do their community-building at home, where they enjoy constitutional protection, and not in the poison ivy, where they do not.

In contrast, the answer queer-space urbanists might be inclined to give — if I understand their position correctly — would emphasize *neglect*, a general *lightening* of the coercive power continually being brought to bear upon sexually and socially marginal citizens by zoning authorities, police, building-code enforcers.

Frankly, I cannot imagine a circumstance that would make the established institutions of mass-democratic bureaucracy willingly surrender a smidgen of their power, even if such surrender would lead to a more peaceable and livable city.

Not that it necessarily would. The queer-space analysts may ultimately have little to contribute to solving the practical problems of real cities; I am inclined to believe they do, or shortly will, have quite important things to contribute. Anyway, Toronto needs whatever help it can muster. Like all North American cities, this one is becoming more dangerous, more riven by class and racial strife, less rich in hope for social and economic coherence. Whatever one may think about queers, queer spaces and the like, the anarchic, inherently libertarian voices of Gordon Brent Ingram and his crowd make a refreshing change from the drone of the big-spending, liberal do-goodniks who continue to dominate Canadian urban planning in the era of the dying welfare state.