

RISING STAR SCHOLARSHIP

DESIGNING URBAN SPACE: 'QUEER THEORY' AND IDENTITY POLITICS

1. INTRODUCTION

'Queer theory' is likened to language because it is never static; it is fluid, ever-changing and evolving (Norton 2002, p. 112). Its roots, Norton (2002, p.112) believes, seem to have stemmed from the imposing structures and labels from external, predominantly heterosexual, male dominated, mainstream culture. Queer theorists aim to explore categorisations of gender and sexuality (Halperin 1999, p. 340). It is their belief that because identities are not fixed and consist of a variety of different aspects and components, they cannot be categorised by one characteristic alone (Halperin 1999, p. 340). People are seen to have individual identities and should not be grouped into minorities based merely on gender or sexuality (Nicholson 1995, p. 127). Similar to its stance of categorising people, queer theory could be seen to oppose categorising places as either gay/lesbian or male/female. In essence, queer theory attempts to deconstruct preexisting views of sexuality and identity, in terms of person or place, and challenges the notions of traditional heterosexual ideology. Using the deconstructive qualities of queer theory, the assets and shortcomings of "gay villages" and "gay precincts" will be discussed in accordance with gender and identity politics. Finally, the qualities of what creates a successful urban space will be analysed, while exploring the notion of 'queer space'.

2. QUEER THEORY

One of the main goals of queer theory is to question the common thought processes that separate heterosexuals and homosexuals and men and women into different groups. This querying is based on the belief that simplified grouping tends to emphasise differences and make exclusions, rather than facilitating tolerance and understanding (Nicholson 1995, p. 128). Furthermore, this first binary distinction between the heterosexual/homosexual or male/female can then lead to other misconceived and simplified patterns of thought. The

heterosexual/homosexual or male/female figure may then be separated into categories, such as “secrecy/disclosure, innocence/initiation, majority/minority, masculine/feminine, same/different, new/old, voluntary/addiction, natural/artificial, health/fitness, and sincerity/sentimentality” (Nicholson 1995, pp. 128-133) based on preconceived knowledge. Subsequently, judgments are made in relation to these preexisting ideas and a person or place may be liked or disliked based on sexuality or gender rather their own, individual characteristics. Many of these ideas may be outdated or ignorant because in actuality “identities are unstable...multiple and fluid” (Nicholson 1995, p. 133) and they are only the limited ideas of certain aspects of society at a certain period in time. Thus, due to these predetermined ideas, there are desirable/undesirable connotations involved when labeling people or places as gay or lesbian or male or female.

In fact the terms, “queer” and “gay and lesbian”, themselves are rather contentious. The phrase “gay and lesbian” emphasises the dichotomy between heterosexuals and homosexuals, whereas the more fluid ambiguity of “queer” includes all “deviants...who may traverse or confuse hetero/homo divisions” (Nicholson 1995, p. 144). It encompasses anyone with a complicated sexual identity, different to the conventional and normative practices. The term “queer”, possibly borne from the ideals of queer theory, is more inclusive rather than exclusive.

The city represents a central site where all these differences come together producing a diverse range of experiences and encounters. Certain areas in the city appropriate particular types of behaviour and occurrences. These areas are often defined by boundaries of inclusions and exclusions, and identities are made visible and invisible within the urban context. Chisholm (2005, p. 30) depicts queer space as a result of “wishful thinking or desires that become solidified”. She describes it as a place where, for a few brief moments, “queerness” stands out over the heterosexual norm and is able to provide the “dominant social narrative” of that particular landscape (Chisholm 2005, p. 30). Thus, based on her belief, there is seen to be an obvious distinction between queer spaces and other urban spaces. Perhaps there is a need for all urban spaces to become more like queer spaces, making them more welcoming to all minorities.

3. IDENTITY POLITICS

With the emergence of “gay villages” in the 1970s and early 1980s in a number of major western cities, gay subcultures materialised within pockets of the city (Ellison 2007, p. 26). While this visibility of gay villages helps to affirm the existence of gays and lesbians and allows them to express their sexual identities in a safe environment within a community of sexually similar people, the issue of segregation arises. As Knopp (2003, p. 193) states, such concentrations of subcultures in urban space make “it easier to both demonise and control them and conversely to sanctify majority cultures and spaces”. Indeed the gentrified gay neighbourhood of San Francisco’s Castro district is portrayed as a centre of hedonism and self-indulgence (Knopp 2003, p. 193). Similarly, San Francisco’s South-of-Market is seen as an area of dangerous sadomasochistic underworlds and red-light districts. Similar to its opposition of the terms “gay and lesbian”, queer theory would perhaps challenge the labeling of places as male or female and the existence of the “gay village”.

In Melbourne, the main “gay villages” or “gay precincts” are St Kilda, South Yarra and Prahran, with Prahran’s Commercial Road being the traditional centre of Melbourne’s gay culture (Smithz 2005, p. 513). Also, other gay-friendly neighbourhoods include Collingwood and Abbotsford, with Northcote being a popular area for lesbians (Smithz 2005, p. 514). A string of gay businesses and venues can be found within the Collingwood/Abbotsford area. These include gay clubs and saunas, Dungeon Warehouse, Eagle Leather, as well as IQ, a popular “indie/alternative” nightclub on Thursdays (Smithz 2005, p. 514). There is also a significant gay population residing in and around Collingwood. South Yarra has many gay clubs and gay-friendly businesses, making it attractive to the affluent gay men that generally reside there. In both areas rainbow pride flags fly high and rainbow stickers adorn shop fronts, labeling these areas as gay places or announcing their gay-friendly attitudes. However, how authentic are these “gay-friendly” places? Are all cafes with rainbow flags actually welcoming to people from all walks of life? Do these symbols of equality actually help to promote understanding and tolerance, or are they merely methods to enhance economic viability?

While gay villages have historically developed “organically”, without any deliberate marketing, we have recently seen the promotion of queer urban

space as an investment for cities (Ellison 2007, p. 27). In order for modern cities to be competitive, they must be desirable for all types of consumers, gay or straight. In order to maintain a competitive edge, some cities develop gay themed spaces and events that help to attract more people to the city and enhance the economy through consumption (Ellison 2007, p. 27). The Tyne City Council was the first in the United Kingdom to announce the development of a gay village. In this way, gay villages are increasingly becoming sites of queer consumption, “where the queer citizen is now constructed either as the consumer citizen or as the consumed ‘other’” (Ellison 2007, p. 27). This change is threatening to de-authenticate queer space as gay villages are becoming commoditised and marketed by urban governments. The once organically evolved gay villages are becoming more and more artificial. This perhaps can be seen in Melbourne’s South Yarra, as many of its shops, spaces and even people are increasingly looking like clones of one another. It is losing its diversity and unique qualities that made it attractive to the gay community in the first place.

Queer theory brings to light the flaws in identifying spaces based on these grouping of gays and lesbians, and men and women. Such grouping does not take into account the individual and excludes those who do not fit into mainstream culture. Some gay public spaces can be seen to exclude the “queer-unwanted” (Ellison 2007, p. 28) and the areas cease to be the safe, diverse and welcoming communities they were intended to be. Indeed the city of Vancouver, British Columbia, demonstrates such exclusionary behaviour (Ellison 2007, p. 28). Vancouver has two identified gay and lesbian areas: the West-end, primarily gay-men, and the East-end, primarily lesbians. Research on these queer communities showed that the West-end was generally associated with an image of ‘yuppies’, wealth, materialism, trendy gay fashion, carefree attitudes and a lack of ‘family/household’ responsibilities (Ellison 2007, p. 28). On the other hand, the East-end generally identified as being lesbian “ghetto” with a lower economic status, ‘family-oriented’ space, cultural diversity, less materialism and a greater sociopolitical awareness and activism (Ellison 2007, p. 28). Lesbians living in the West-end tended to blend into the male defined neighbourhood and were not as visible as the East-end lesbians, who “made greater public claims to their sexual identity” (Ellison 2007, p. 29). Thus it can

be seen that queer identities differed within the queer communities of Vancouver and the West-end lesbians blended into the broader community, while the East-end lesbians were able to make their mark on the urban landscape. Thus it can be seen that spatial inclusion/exclusion based solely on sexual identity fails to represent the myriad of identities and aspects within the queer community.

In respect to Melbourne's context, certain gay precincts in South Yarra are perhaps becoming very much like the West-end of Vancouver. Development is lead by gay consumerism and more of the same types of people are residing there. There is a risk of South Yarra becoming an exclusive gay village that has a single identity, regardless of its other residents, leading to conformity and segregation from the outside world. The urban quality of the space becomes predictable, functional and artificial, and the various qualities that make urban living so special are lost. Whilst it is important for gays and lesbians to feel comfortable within urban spaces, queer theory would argue that this categorising, or "zoning" would perhaps create more issues rather than solve the current ones. All this could also be applied to gender issues. While gender issues are not as prevalent as queer issues, the "Ladies only" seats outside St Paul's Cathedral are an indication of past prejudices in Melbourne. Feminists and promoters of gender equality should also learn from the important lessons of queer theory. The labeling of university "Womyn's" rooms and groups that exclude all men should be wary of their priorities. These spaces specifically designed for females should be focused on enhancing general wellbeing, equality and understanding. Like gay villages, there is a risk of these places becoming too exclusive, leading to over segregation and issues of superiority. This would simply increase the lack of understanding, creating a larger rift of tension and bitterness. Equality should be based on mutual respect, recognition and acknowledgement and not be focused on separation and exclusion.

4. QUEER SPACE

The labeling of places for certain types of people and the existence of the 'gay village' seems to challenge the notion of the modern Western city as being a "world of strangers" (Knopp 2003, p. 195). It moves away from queer theory by adhering to the traditional heterosexual/homosexual segregation. Modern urban life has many characteristic experiences, such as anonymity, authority and

resistance, danger and power. These sorts of encounters are only possible within the city due to the “large, dense and permanent cluster of heterogeneous human beings in circulation” (Knopp 2003, p. 195). In a gay village or urban space that is only designed for certain genders or ethnicities, full exposure to the randomness and chaos of urban life may not be truly experienced.

In some cities, such as Stockholm and Copenhagen, there are no established gay villages. This is partly due to the differing social dynamics, including a low level of social segregation, as well as a greater social acceptance of the gay community within mainstream society (Knopp 1985, p. 152). Perhaps cities should look to these examples to see what makes a successful and diverse city rather than focusing on singling out and separating gay villages. A heterogeneously mixed ‘queer space’ is preferable to a more exclusive ‘gay and lesbian space’. However, it poses the question as to what makes queer space trump over the traditional gay/lesbian or urban space? How does it manage to overcome the shortcomings? Jane Stoddart’s (2007) studies, while in a more private urban setting, explore the meaning of queer space in the modern world.

During the Mardi Gras, Stoddart (2007, p. 1) attended a queer workshop, the “Pervertibles Workshop”, located within Sydney’s *MANACLE*, a predominantly male leather bar. She described the sense of a ‘new community’ being formed there due to the diversity of people that were present, including “bi people, queer people, transgender people...intersex...cross-dressers, totally straight-down-the-middle dykes and gay boys...straight people...kinky straight people...straight out of the ‘burbs’ straight people” (Stoddart 2007, p. 3). All these identities were present at the workshop and all “loved it”. Despite the fact that they were such a diverse bunch of people they were described as being “very different but the same” (Stoddart 2007, p. 3). One of these people, Ali, describes it as a “place where lots and lots of deeply kinky sex happens...it’s a space I felt comfortable to be in” (Stoddart 2007, p. 2). He views queer space as “a space where you can be anyone. You don’t necessarily have to be yourself in any shape or form...” Another interviewee, Adam, believed that there is ‘space’ for everyone and just by appropriating that space and ensuring “everyone around you knows where you’re coming from” is enough of a political position.

While these spaces have different values to each individual, they all seem to agree on the fact that such queer spaces are “rich in image, object, fantasy and

experience” (Stoddart 2007, p. 4). Grosz (Grosz 2001, p. 128) describes queer space as being intimately connected to the body and sexuality. In addition, when discussing memories from the workshop, Stoddart (2007, p. 4) and her subjects refer to the visual and sensory recollections, such as the lighting, artwork, props, dress, appearance; the “vibrant and energized atmosphere, that was playful and perverse, challenging and comfortable”. Ultimately, they describe queer space as a very sensuous, sensory space full of different bodily functions, where “identity became slippery”; a place where one is engrossed by vivid experiences of sights, sounds, smells and sensations. This sort of experience possibly comes close to Bennett’s (2001, p. 4) definition of enchantment. She describes the act of being enchanted as being “transfixed, spellbound”, where thoughts are brought to rest and the senses take over (Bennett 2001, p. 6). It involves surprising, random encounters with unexpected occurrences that are imposing, yet pleasurably charming. While unsure how to fully process or engage with such random encounters, one can experience the novelty and allure of its disposition. Such is the belief of Deleuze (Grosz 2001, p. 129), “something in the world forces us to think...stops us in our tracks...new connections are made...our theories about the world are interrupted, reconfigured in some way, meanings become slippery, and this experience can be a very somatic one”.

5. CONCLUSION

Thus, the search for the ideal urban space is indeed a complicated one. However, perhaps we can look to the teachings of queer theory and avoid the traditional grouping and labeling. Designing the city into gay or gender specific spaces separates and isolates identities, while also decreasing the diversity and ‘enchantment’ of what gives different spaces specific appeal. The city needs to be seen as a ground for discourse and chance encounter, where carnal senses can be fully explored. A place where all sorts of people, “gay”, “lesbian”, “straight”, “queer”, “male” or “female” can mingle and co-exist in an organic urban environment.

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