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"Queering" Soho: Contesting the borders of normative space in the neoliberal city

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Abstract

In the context of the recent "black lives matter" and "me too" movements, the issue of inclusivity and diversity, identity, gender, race, "otherness", is brought forth in many disciplines, architecture, academia, teaching and design practices. Although this is, of course, a positive progress, one needs to be mindful of the complexities and the potentially conflictual effects of a normalisation, especially if this dismisses or disallows space for further processes of disruption, or if this commodifies queer space, objectifies the other, and hence distances it further. In this context, this study reflects on the relationship between place, bodies, contested norms and social conventions, focusing on Soho, London as a case study, and on the associated evolution of queer spaces and narratives. It reflects upon the complex and shifting relationship between the visible/norm and the peripheral/deviant/hidden territories and their performative nature in the city.

Introduction

Architecture "queers" places. "Queering" is used in the title of the article to signify the intention of questioning and exploring the constantly changing nature of what is considered to be the "other".

It signifies the intention to explore the nature and performance of places, the elements that are at times perceived as deviant, and how the very change of this perception affects what happens in places. With reference to Teresa de Lauretis' reflections, queer and queering is used in order to move away from a vocabulary that juxtaposes the gay/lesbian to the heterosexual, considering the latter as the norm and homogenising it, leaving out other cultural, social, ethnic parameters; is used to avoid or open-up the 'constructed silences', as de Lauretis puts it.[1] "Queering", often used as a verb in the context of gender activism, reflects on the action of destabilising, distorting, shifting a place, through action and performance within it, or at times through the way in which it is approached and discussed. As such, this paper also opens up the question as to what could potentially queer Soho, and other places, now and in the future. What kind of performance or action would queer a place, destabilise perceptions, and allow for other things to happen, other identities to feel comfortable and present? In other words, we reflect and re-address a fundamental architectural question: How can places be queered? We define this as a fundamental architectural question, in the sense that we consider architecture as what shapes places, behaviours and perceptions.

In this article, navigating through the performing of different identities in Soho is seen as a form of queering.

Additionally, we propose some open-ended questions regarding the action of queering, such as: What everyday actions and performances would challenge the current normative perceptions, and create a more inclusive and safe environment for difference? And how would these queering actions and performances be different from those of the past? How do they evolve alongside the normalisation of the former ones? Where are these observed, and by whom are these performed? Perhaps we need to look at what constitutes queering (or performing) in a more open and sensitive way, as we may still be missing out the emerging body languages that queer spaces.

This article considers "queering" in two ways: (a) as an active reading of stories of a place, and (b) exploring possibilities for potentially new actions that queer (verb) places in ways that have not been yet performed or mapped. Walking us through narratives of queering performances of the

past is meant to allow and inspire us to imagine new ways for queering places, for what queering might need to mean now.

The co-authors of the paper – both architects and involved with the performative aspect of places – are addressing the subject through their first-hand experience of Soho and contested places, as well as through their critical reflection on the relevant literature. Both are particularly interested in what constitutes inclusivity, and its inherent paradoxes. We are interested in the behaviours that spaces shape, forbid, trigger, as well as how the perception of the deviant makes spaces evolve. In this paper, when we use "we", we refer to the co-authors. For the first author, as a gay individual coming into their queerness, the concept of gender identity is relevant on a personal level – and I sought a deeper understanding of the relevant spatial implications. What does it mean to be queer in London today, how have the events, spaces and communities I have grown to love and enjoy come to be? What constituted them in the past, and more importantly what will guarantee their longevity/existence well into the future? Or how will they otherwise evolve, shift, re-locate allowing still inclusive expressions of life? For the second author, queerness is not an embodied experience in the same way; for the second author the conversation on one type of otherness is an open question that potentially reveals things about other types of otherness and difference, such as gender, age, ethnic background, beliefs, and way of living. Having lived in several different countries and worked in the building/architectural/academic industries, the perception of difference and the relevant spatial implications have informed the second author's questions. For both authors, the critical observation of the evolution of a queer space and performance brings them in touch with the feeling of uncertainty about the evasive, ephemeral nature of these spaces and raises questions regarding community, safety and inclusivity.

There is no denying the context of which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex spaces may provide for marginalized sexualities and gender identities, in that they may cultivate "safe" spaces of free identity expression and negotiation. Historically, the cultivation of LGBTQIA+ spaces was a result of tireless prosecution of marginalized, sexed bodies that did not conform to a society deeply rooted in heterosexuality and heteronormativity. As Lynda Johnston states, 'sexuality and space are mutually constituted – space makes sexuality and sexuality makes space. Sexuality – as with other identity categories like gender and race – is not fixed or static, yet

is constantly shifting across various cultural and social landscapes.'[2] This seems to be drawing upon Sara Ahmed's reflection on queer phenomenology, where bodies are 'shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling.'[3] For David Woodhead, 'space does not stand waiting for us to give meanings to it, but that space *becomes,* that space is *constituted, through meaning*.'[4] Through different contexts, authors such as the above reflect on the how bodies are situated and oriented by – and orient/define – spaces. The sensual back and forth between sexuality and space resembles an enigmatic improvisation of meaning, language and knowledge, which grows and transforms as the script is negotiated. As such, sexuality, identity, space and sexed bodies are choreographed entities heavily influenced by performance, culture and politics, acting as pleasure houses to explore and practice one's identity.

In this paper we will reflect on the notion of performance and the queer, to contextualise how we use these notions. We then explore a series of queer stories of Soho, which allow us to reflect on the evolving and changing relationships between place, performance/life, cultures and identities. Following that, we reflect on the "deviant" in the streets and public space and on the demonstrations of queerness, leading to our final sections on further reflections and open-ended questions drawn from this journey.

Performance, "Other" identities [& the "Queer"]

Taking a performance-centred approach to queer identity and space, we must ask: what constitutes a performance? What is the culture and history on which these performances are based? Which of these performances enacted by queers are deemed integral, and which are deemed deviant? As these performances of identity and expression are enacted, re-enacted and reproduced, what becomes of their future meaning – and what becomes of the spaces in which they are played? It is important to note the significance of which historic performances of queer expression and identity have been used to contest normative space, and the meaning these performances will hold well into the future as the dialogue of collective and individual queer identities are negotiated. Moe Meyer articulates that Acquired In-Body Techniques are the means in which sexed bodies use performance to create a sexually liberated space, where the meaning these performances hold on space and identity are thereby used as the basis for future performances, and so on.[5] These acts,

according to Meyer, comprised of bodies and meaning, provide "othered" sexual minorities with the space to exhibit strength, power, identity and safety. A parallelism can be drawn to Ahmed's approach and reflection on performance, body and space. From a phenomenological perspective, and with reference to Henri Lefebvre, she uses the notion of "orientation" and "orienting" to describe what effect space can have upon bodies and bodies upon spaces. In this context, for Ahmed, queering would be the "out-of-line" orientation of the body.[6] From the performance of camp and the stage of drag, to cruising grounds and political demonstrations, or the dance floors of bars and clubs, cultural performance holds a significant value within the queer experience, through the negotiation of discourse which hopes to constrain our embodied queer identity and spaces.

This is not to say that these constructed spaces of improvisation and amplification are free from constraint or contestation. It has become increasingly important to continuously question the current structures put in place in the cultural spaces that sexual minorities have relied on so heavily. It is key to note here that, as Johnston remarks, much of the study of sexuality and space has not yet intersected with other identity classifications. It is no surprise that the spaces we inhabit and the haunts we frequent can bring different identities together. It is essential to remember that although different sexual identities may often be categorized under the same umbrella, one must recognise that not all face the same issues and exclusionary processes. Therefore, in the study of sexuality and space regarding queer people and spaces, it is vital that we (the authors) not only question the relationships between sexed bodies, sexuality and space, but other identities as well. Taking a radical approach to the study of space will open future conversation of exclusionary forces like hetero/homonormativity, neoliberalism and gentrification, regarding gender, race, class, age, disability and sexual identity. In other words, we hope that this conversation and observations on the queering of spaces, and on the performative nature of place, will unlock conversations about other types of "otherness".

The term queer is often used in different ways in a variety of settings. Some, simply use it in a way meaning gay, while others use it as an overarching term of identity regarding the totality of the LGBTQIA+.[7] This umbrella term is furthermore used in parallel when referring to "queer" spaces that otherwise predominantly cater to gay men. Lisa Duggan explains that 'for others queer is a

radical political entity better able to cross boundaries and construct more fluid identities.'[8] It is furthermore imperative to note that LGBTQIA+ is not synonymous with gay.[9] Queer, then, is a political statement which contests heteronormativity and homonormativity, celebrating gender, sexuality and the fluidity of both, blurring the binaries of normative culture. Gavin Brown states that 'Queer revels in its otherness, difference, and distance from mainstream society, even as it recognises that this distance is always incomplete.'[10] Queer, henceforth, is an anti-normative, non-conforming powerhouse that seeks to upset the frameworks of normative culture and space, while disrupting patters of exclusivity in public and private space.[11]

Queer Histories of Soho

The most accepted boundaries of Soho are generally marked by Shaftsbury Avenue, Regent Street, Oxford Street and Charring Cross Road, its core being the little grid of streets north and south of Old Compton Street.[12] According to Marco Venturi Soho was initially conceived for the aristocracy, but soon after it gradually was known as a slum stricken with poverty, consumption, prostitution, gambling and crime, and was frequently referred to as the city's red-light district.[13] Its indulgent culture made it the perfect setting for a nightlife culture, where it has continuously been referred to as "the place to be" throughout its history. Likewise, Soho is consistently described as a nocturnal destination of queerness on a variety of different extremes. A distinct urban queer culture. It was associated with nonconformity and deviance from the "normal".[14] It is important to note here that most of the research regarding the sexual history of Soho details the stories and experiences of gay, white men. As Peter Ackroyd explains, 'The crowds, the spaces, the alleys, the incomprehensible babble of voices, induced in some a creeping sense of chaps and confusion where all boundaries were ignored. The crowd itself could be a sexual experience… a labyrinth where gay life could flourish…'[15] With that in mind, the intent of this section is to analyse key moments of queer performance and space which rivaled the sexual and spatial norms of society at the time.

Clubs of Resistance: It was in 1691 that the Society of Reformation of Manners began its undertakings which set to put an end to sodomy and homosexuality within the streets of London. The actions put into place were a result of public consciousness concerning what then became

known as *molly houses*, which were a steadily growing number of clubs and underground establishments in which sexual minorities, mainly gay men, could meet, drink, dance and have sex.[16] It is the performative contestation of these spaces – which transgressed the normative ideologies of sexuality and space at the time – on which future underground queer clubs would be created heading towards the 1960s.

By the late 1800s, Café Royal and Kettners were two establishments known as temples for queer London.[17] In the early 1900s, supply and demand of safe queer spaces increased leading to more underground clubs and speakeasies opening in Soho and the City's West End. The Empire, the Trocadero, the Wellington, the Griffon, Lyons Corner, the Circle and the Tea, the Kandy Lounge, the Pink Elephant, the A&B and Kettle were established as gay bars and speakeasies of the era whose primary customer basis was gay men. According to Ackroyd, there were only two clubs in the West End which catered to queer women, Soho's Ham and Bone Club, however, they soon developed a 'rigid sexual coding which had developed and divided "girls" into "butch" or "femme".'[18] 'You had to pass as one or the other […] Or you were deemed to possess no sexual identity at all.'[19] The notion of the "otherness" and exclusion, of some kind, protrudes and it is worth observing and acknowledging it, like all conscious and subconscious biases. It is also interesting to note that it was not until the 1930s that saw the opening of Soho's first lesbian night club, Smokey Joes, paralleling the issue in present day, where there is a huge disparity of bars for lesbian, transgender and queer people.

The Palm Court Club and "43" were two upmarket queer establishments dedicated to the upper echelons and aristocrats of society which highly contrasted the neighbourhoods many dive bars and underground clubs that adorned Gerrard Street in the 1900s.[20] Revubar, a private club on a membership only basis, was the first to give Soho its sexy reputation, according to Daniel Farson.[21] The 1917 club, the 50-50 Club, the Cave of Harmony, the Little Club, Coffee Ann and 42nd that catered to diverse groups of people. Most notably, Virginia Woolf, founder of The 1917 Club described the patrons of her club as follows:

> Hindus, Parsees, puritans, free lovers, Quakers, teetotallers, heavy drinkers, Morris Dancers and Folk Song Experts […] members of the London School of Economics,

> Trade Union Officials, journalists, poets, actors, actresses, Communists. Theosophists. In short, every colour and creed, every "ism" and "ist" was represented. The club had a reputation of being fashionably or unfashionably bisexual.[22]

Femme Boys & Painted Pooffs: Throughout history, from as far back as Roman London, homosexuals were habitually characterized or identified as 'pretty, long haired, clean shaven, effeminate gestures and ways of speaking and moving. Effeminate was referred to as being self-indulgent and silly.'[23] It was in the eighteenth century when sexual identities of gay men and women began to be tested, where they were able to adopt different personae that aligned with societal gender and sexuality norms of the time, from being butch or femme from one moment to the next. These experimentations of sexual identity, although done from in the privacy of one's home or within the many underground and private clubs of Soho, were political statements which contested the pressures of an incredibly heteronormative society. Similarly, camp, a form of queer performance, was used – as Ackroyd also mentions – by queer and homosexual men to divert, shock, stand out, through eccentric performances of drama and humour. It is important to clarify, however, that camp is not limited to comedic effeminacy. And although the mere idea of camp is to be more funny or more "other", it is important to define camp primarily as a form of sexual and gender identity rather than of comedic performance. Otherwise, it makes way for the argument perpetuated by heteronormative constructs that sexual identity minorities are not to be taken seriously.[24] Once these stereotypes are discarded, camp can be identified as an authentic form of identity expression in both masculine and feminine performances. Simply put, camp exists as a distinct performance of power and sexual identity that transgressed the normative gender and sexual binaries of day-to-day society. Camp, both lived/enacted and experienced, temporarily dominates and defines places, allows behaviours, and shapes them. It shapes places.

Gender expression was one of the ways in which queer and homosexual men would make themselves visible to one another. The use of camp, effeminate gestures, fashion, and makeup were common performances of outward gender and sexual identity expression. These performances however did result in anxieties from police as they took to the streets to control homosexuality and sex between men. According to Dominic Janes, makeup was used by homosexual men for a variety of reasons, to appear more feminine, masculine, or androgynous.[25] Nonetheless, the 'man with the

powder puff' became of significant imagery in London between the 1920s and 30s, as it disobeyed normative gender roles of the time and reinstated the fact that London has space for homosexuals during a time of cosmopolitan transformation, which attracted other young, middle-class gay men from the suburbs in order to identify and express themselves freely.[26] In order to avoid being detained by police wandering the streets private parties were often held in the basements and secret rooms of the flats in Soho.[27] Although not classified as safe spaces due to political and societal norms of the time, these spaces did provide many queer and homosexual men with the space to be oneself, where they would adorn themselves in "feminine" clothing and makeup and speak and gesture with "effeminacy" as if enacting a character from a play truest to their identity. Areas around Drury Lane and Lower Regent Street were said to be "habitual haunts" of the painted pooffs.[28]

It goes without saying that these notions of gender bending, identity and self-expression are undoubtedly still performed today as way to express one's truest self freely in the eye of the public. Gender nonconformity, drag and self-expression are tactile queer performance that transgress the norm and attempt to break or dismantle sexual and gender constructs that may no longer serve a purpose, especially in their current form. Janes says that 'painted poofs should be seen not simply as a sub-category of "effeminate" homosexual men, but as a partially empowered group of people able to make a variety of radical statements about the human condition, including on the advantages of eroticizing its own abject failure to life up to contemporary ideal of gender.'[29] The gender bending expressions are not only expressions of one's own identity, but a manifestation of beliefs and as such they empower others and constitute a political act.

Erotic Theatre: Since its early history, London has been a site of erotic theatre. According to Ackroyd, the theatre and the stage were used as pickup joints for queer men, who proclaimed the theatre as their meeting places. The theatre in post war London was frequently used by gay men and aristocracy as pick up points or cruising grounds for gay sex. The dark corridors and corners of the theatre provided the perfect setting, where gay men 'generally congregated in secret, anyone could join in if they felt comfortable and whatever happened in these spaces was nobody else's business.'[30] These sexed spaces were idealized for sexual encounters at the time as men could "safely" congregate in private without being caught and provided a space away from the streets

and other cruising grounds frequented by gay men which risked being seen by police. The theatre, described by Frank Mort, was integral to the bohemianism and sexual transgression that Soho offered: ‘On stage and off stage, dancers and showgirls projected sexual personalities and bodily idioms that disrupted traditional dichotomies of vice and virtue.’[31]

The theatre scene of post-war London furthermore came with the use of Polari, which was a frequent slang and way of speaking often used by gay men. Primarily, Polari was simply the language of theatre that were associated with the stage. Polari was extensively used by gay actors in the London theatre scene – where Philips adds, ‘while many of these performers were gay there were plenty who weren’t’ – and was then later adopted by gay men who frequented the theatre and theatre clubs of Soho.[32] This theatre-speak became extensively spoken in the bars and theatre clubs of Soho where many of the performers and theatre-goers would gather, thus developing a mutual language and community among gay and queer men who frequented these establishments. While its use originates in the theatre, Polari became a secret code to disguise the use of sexual language between queer men.[33] The use of Polari gradually began to spread amongst other members of the queer community in London, where traces of the slang are often still used today in performances of sexual, gender identity and drag.

The French House, Rockingham, The Ivy, The Players, were private theatre clubs of Soho at the time, while the Prince of Wales Theatre, Theatre Royal, and the Drury Lane Theatre provided intimate spaces around the stage for queer and gay men to gather. Additionally, The Golden Lion, The Salisbury, The Lamb and Flag and The Fitzroy Tavern were other clubs frequented by queer and gay men of the stage.[34] Farson describes, ‘For the most part its occupants were obvious male homosexuals who dyed their hair and rouged their cheeks and behaved in an effeminate manner with effeminate voices.’[35] While the theatre and theatre clubs of Soho did provide space for queers to find expression and identity in a city of suppression, there were, however, still processes of exclusion enacted within them. The primary clientele of these establishments were young, white, homosexual and queer men, aristocrats, and stage performers. Classism and racism ran rampant in these communities, leaving out many marginalized identities. Instances of anarchist performance like these contested the normative societal beliefs of the time and scattered small pockets of queer community across the London theatre scene. Of course, these performances would be considered

a political statement of the time. However, it is important to recall that these instances were acted out in the private to ensure the safety of individuals and the community. A hushed and faceless aggression in contest of unjust inequalities.

Deviant in the Streets

It is widely known that throughout history sexual minorities often had little freedom to express themselves in the privacy of their own homes due to family pressures. Lacking any sort of safe privacy, sexual minorities, primarily gay men, would find spaces of "insecure privacy" in the public to enact sexual activities.[36] These redefined spaces of privacy disrupt conventional discourse between the public and the private and constructs space for gay men looking for queer sex, with a sense of safety and anonymity without the pressure to be "out". This is, however, not to say that all forms of public homosexual sex acts are derived from a scrutiny of family life and heteronormative values of private sex. As Richard Dyer argues, some – the sadomasochist and the voyeur – thrive in the mystery, excitement, anticipation and chance of being caught.

Public toilets, the streets, parks, railway termini, the theatre, bars and clubs are all places throughout history where public queer sex was shared. Mapping of cruising in London shows Soho (and London's West End as a whole) has been a popular destination for gay men on the hunt for public queer sex. The framework on which Soho was built, spaces of consumption, Georgian architecture, narrow streets and wandering alley ways invisible to the public eye, made it an ideal destination of secure public sex.[37] Ackroyd notes that Theatre Royal, the Red Lion Soho, the Drury Lane Theatre and the Prince of Wales Theatre were regular, interior haunts of gay men. Bart Eeckhout adds to this list to include Nantwich's Gentlemen's Club, Royal Opera House, Corinthian Club (The Corry), Queensberry Hotel and Brutus Cinema.[38] Ackroyd goes on to signify that Jermyn Street, Windmill Street, the eastern ends of Regent Street, the small alleyways between Orange Street and Trafalgar Square, the Burlington Arcade, and Leicester Square were frequent spots of gay men to engage in public sex in the streets and dark corners of Soho and West London. 'But the public lavatories were still number one and were the leading spaces for public sexual encounters […] The toilets were covered in pornographic graffiti. Holes carved into the cubical walls to pass noted to one another.'[39] The toilets at Jermyn Street, Hill Place, Edgware Road,

Oxford Circus, Tottenham Road, Chancery Lane, the bottom of Argyll Street, Piccadilly Circus, Brydges Place and Rose Street – these public spaces not only gratified the voyeur's itch but provided a new sense of private security and complete anonymity as they defied the normative structures of both private and public space, restructuring space for themselves.[40]

It was the Wolfenden Committee which recommended the partial decriminalisation of homosexual sex between two consenting men over the age of 21 in private, which eventually passed into law as the Sexual Offences Act in 1967. Although at first glance this seems like a step in the right direction for homosexual men, the capacity of the recommendation truly came from the ambition to regulate homosexuality by bringing it into greater visibility within the public realm. This legislation put considerable danger on the men who practiced sex in public space. As space was now made available in the private for gay men to have sex through legislation, it made way for increased police raids of public gay spaces and establishments of consumption in a fight for power and control. This authoritarian shift of homosexuality from the private to the public meant that gay men who could not practice homosexual sex in the safety of their home, could no longer sexually exist in the public, removing all spaces of gender, identity, and sexual expression, forcing them to hide in plain sight.[41] Juridical systems, as Judith Butler – with reference to Michel Foucault – argues, 'produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent,' and, in a way, define categories that shape behaviours and perceptions.[42] In this context, the various reiterations of laws demonstrate the cultural and societal shifts, while, in turn, shaping perceptions, categorisations, and shifts as to what is allowed, and what – else – no longer is.

Purification of space in the guise of health promotion demonises cultural spaces like cruising grounds as deviant, "other" and unsafe. These spaces should be granted significance as these spaces of sexualized phenomena cannot be promoted or reproduced in the same ways as metropolitan spaces of consumption, as they are 'democratic spaces and encounters that resist purification.'[43] Cruising is a leading example of a counterculture of queers that disrupts neoliberal and heteronormative structures and redistributes and tests the levels of power they put into place.[44]

Demonstrations of Queerness

Following the partial decriminalisation of homosexual sex between men in 1967, a new social change was prompted within the LGBTQIA+ community in London. In the summer of 1969 in New York City, a series of violent police raids of prominent queer spaces of the city's gay village prompted retaliation from the queer community, where they took to the streets in protest of the discriminatory acts they faced. The Stonewall Riots demanded equality and rejected discrimination, which incited the formation of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF). The GLF 'was marked at what seemed to many, to be the first assertion of gay identity without apology or equivocation[…]. It represented, therefore, the single most vocal sexual opposition to what soon became known (at least among many queers) as "straight" culture.'[45] The following year, in 1972, the first Pride parade was held in London, where prideful supporters marched in the streets from Trafalgar Square to Hyde Park in a demonstration of power. This newfound unapologetic visibility provided sexual minorities with the space and opportunity to live and act as openly as they would like. Of course, many still lacked the confidence to do so in an unbalanced and normative public society. Importantly, discrimination and violence against queers was quite obviously a prevalent issue in London, therefore, many sexual minorities that were less tolerated and accepted than homosexuals and did not yet feel comfortable to express themselves freely in public. This movement of visibility did however lead to the opening of many large-scale gay club nights in Soho, modeled after New York City's Studio 54. In 1976, Sundown Club was opened off Tottenham Court Road, hosting queer parties *Bang!* on Mondays and Saturdays, and *Propaganda* on Thursdays. Following, Heaven was opened in 1980, was introduced under the rail arches in Viller Street.[46]

In 1982 there were whispers of a new gay illness, soon being referred 'gay man's cancer' and the 'gay plague'. The AIDS crisis devastated London's gay community as a result of the government's lack of response and intervention. The general public of London became hostile and believed that gay men had deserved the crisis, bringing it on themselves. Suddenly, the lives of gay men and AIDS was broadcasted everywhere – in the papers, forums of health, housing and government, developing a destructive dialogue that would set back progress of equality and acceptance within public society.[47] In 1988, the Conservative government introduced Clause 23 into the Local Government Act, which commanded that authority should not promote homosexuality, teach of

homosexuality in school or broadcast information that would promote homosexuality as an authentic lifestyle choice or sexual identity.

It was believed that AIDS was synonymous with spaces, pushing harmful stigmas of “cleanliness” onto the gay identity and gay spaces of pleasure and consumption and would therefore transform the homosexual aesthetic surrounding gay men themselves and gay spaces. [48] As Anderson argues, ‘Constituting a “clean break” with earlier forms of urban gay culture now stigmatised as “dirty” and “unhealthy”, the homonormative aesthetic can be viewed as an example of “de-generational unremembering” following the first traumatic phase of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s’.[49]

In response to the unfair scrutiny and stigmatization from the government, media and general public radical queer activist organization, Act-Up, was formed. Taking to the streets in powerful protest, fueled with aggression and determination to reclaim their space and fight for the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community. Although an incredibly meaningful moment in queer history, radical activists had, ‘painted the contemporary white gay male clone as the poster boy of white middle class gayness’.[50] By doing so, this statement of homonormative performance of aesthetics questions the identities and value of other sexual minorities as authentic and reconstructs the relationships between queer theory and intersectionalities of race, gender, class, ability, and age, thus reinforcing inequality and exclusionary norms.

Given the scale of the AIDS crisis and the trajectory damaged identity placed onto the gay community by media government and society, all aspects of homosexual culture and aesthetics were skewed. Throughout the 90’s references were made of the “clean” and “hygienic” gay male and gay space. From then on, the homonormative image of homosexuality was painted as young, white, fit and clean shaven. As a result, the purification of gay space had begun and the ‘desexualized gentrified gay district’ was born.[51] Because heterosexuality is seen as the norm, gay establishments of consumption began to open themselves up to the street. Reinventing their interiors as “clean” and “sanitary” following international styles of European universalism, or a projection of whiteness, and a direct contrast of the blacked-out windows and dark spaces which lined the streets of Soho in anonymity. According to Johan Andersson, ‘the first new generation gay bar in Soho was Village Soho, opening on the crossroads of Wardour Street and Old Compton

Street.'[52] More bars opened soon after – Bar Code, KuBar, Kudos, Village Soho, the Yard and Freedom, which followed the same purified normative aesthetics.[53]

Is Soho Queer? The conflicting effects of legitimisation

Soho exists today as a pleasure economy of entertainment and consumption, with rainbow flags adorned in the windows of the businesses that line its streets, as Mort describes it.[54] David Bell and Jon Binnie argue that 'many "gay" consumption spaces are bounded communities, where processes of exclusion operate, for instance on the basis of race and gender. However, boundaries can be seen as necessary, to keep "unwanted others" out; which eliminates possible hostilities regarding the safety, scrutiny and acceptance of marginalized queer individuals and groups within a queer space.[55] Yet, as a result of neoliberal consumerism and the pink pound, institutions of which Soho thrives on, the screening of unwanted others has is forgone. Tourism and mainstreaming of gay culture have allowed for "unwanted others" to "infiltrate" the gay spaces of Soho, pushing sexual minorities out as a result of distaste and feeling uncomfortable or unsafe in their own spaces. A major topic of debate here has been that of straights, primarily groups of women in hen parties, establishing a space within Soho. Although this does provide homosexual culture with a greater visibility in the public eye, it has brought on the sanitation and purification of queer space on the terms of heteronormativity.[56] This gentrification of space 'has driven the less-assimilated queers underground, back into subterranean, back-street bars and cruising grounds.'[57] Moreover, an inflated pleasure economy has furthermore made the establishments of Soho greatly inaccessible to many sexual minorities of the city regarding costs and affordability of the establishments it hosts. Additionally, high rent costs and affordability issues have struck the community's venues, as well as other venues scattered around the city. A recent study of queer nighttime spaces completed by UCL evidenced that 58% of LGBTQIA+ licenced venues have closed in the past decade, two of Soho's long standing venues, Candy Bar – a bar catered to women – and Madam Jojo's, are most notable.[58] Most significant in their research is the severe disparity of venues dedicated women, POC, transgender and queer identities.

However, trans-inclusive venues and parties have always existed in London. Due to processes of gentrification and exclusion, many of these established events have been taken to East London, mainly in the areas of Hackney, Dalston and Shoreditch, and are constructed as temporary events

and parties in existing venues and urban structures.[59] The lack of permanent establishments questions the longevity of these temporary spaces; however, they prove to show resistance and persistence. Events such as Adonis, Pxssy Palace, Crossbreed and Lazarus exude gender-fuck mentality, open sexuality, fluidity, nonconformity and queerness. Queer events like these, which reinvent space and reconstruct norms of identity, gender and sexuality, could be examined further as a model for the future production of queer spaces. Their non-permanent nature might on one hand disrupt the development of a longer-term sense of belonging, while at the same time might create conditions of resilience; the ephemerality of such spaces might welcome change, adaptability and negotiation regarding the norms.

Shim Sham Club was a renowned destination of queer excellence in the 1930s. The club closed, yet years later was opened again as a temporary event in South London:

> The Promoter agreed, but once the space was filled with drag queens, butches, femmes, dykes, twins, it became very clear that they loved the idea of the space but only when they weren't there. In their minds we are all white men in classic drag and dishing out snappy one-liners. We are not women, we are not people of color, we are not trans and we are certainly not supposed to be hooking up with each other or simply chilling with our friends. We are only 'fun' when they don't have to engage with us as three-dimensional human beings. The diversity of our community is invisible to them and they don't want to see it.[60]

Since the 1980s and 90s, media have described Soho as being queer, and maintain this argument still today. Conversely, it remains vividly clear that the venue owners of the neighbourhood are branded as inherently homosexual, attracting a majority clientele of white, young, gay, middle-class men. As Andersson concisely argues, 'these terms are not mutually exclusive, but whereas queer, which was used to reclaim some of the wounded aspects of sexual minority experience – at least as a poststructuralist critique deconstructs binaries such as hetero/homo and male/female, gay exists in opposition of heteronormativity, but reiterates these dichotomies.'[61] As a result of these political institutions, as Lawrence Knopp warns, the homogenizing of these spaces in the form of gay ghettos or gay villages run on bases of exclusion that force other queer identities and minorities within the LGBTQIA+ community to exist elsewhere in other underground or less permanent

spaces – the term queer, in this context, is constantly evolving to express the non-normalised and supressed identities, that perform on the periphery of the "legitimised" and often commodified places.[62]

Duggan's definition of queer community and queer theory comes with an interesting take; however, it is not to say that it is without flaw or in need of transgression. They explain that queer communities are used to construct a collectivity of unity that is no longer defined exclusively by the gender of its members, rather by shared exclusions of sexuality and gender. Although a significant recognition, queer communities and queer theory in this sense still ignore exclusionary processes and fail to incorporate other sexual minorities and other identities we may describe as queer today. Though this statement is transgressive in some sense, this failed opportunity to delve deeper into intersectional issues regarding "deviant" sexual performances, race, class, ability and age further perpetuate hetero/homonormative dichotomies.

In a paper discussing the role of the queer anarchist and radical queer theory, Sandra Jeppesen lists 'sleaze, perversion, deviance, eccentricity, weirdness, kinkiness, BDSM, and smut' as synonymous with radical queer values.[63] As evidenced by the proclamation of the white gay man as the poster boy of queerness during the AIDS crisis, queer activism generally has failed to include sexual and gender dissidents, as well as other minoritised identities within its dialogue and in turn, 'reinscribes a homonormative subject complicit with capitalism, racism, environmental destruction, ableism, patriarchy, beauty myths and so on.'[64] Jeppesen goes on to define the queer anarchist as 'considering all consensual, non-coerced intimacies and sexualities legitimate, challenging homonormativity via anti-oppression politics,' while intersecting issues of gender divisions, sexual orientation, class and ethnicity.

Taking this a step even further, the introduction of race theory into queer radicalism and queer anarchism strengthens relationships of identities. The proclamation of whiteness as the embodiment of queer aesthetics, as previously mentioned, questions the authenticity of queerness surrounding black bodies, further perpetuating the stereotype that black signifies heterosexuality, questioning the authenticity of same sex black relationships. Elena Kiesling questions what happens to the black experience when black is inherently referred to as the antithesis of queer, the

erasure of black bodies from queer activism and queer neighbourhoods while queer bodies are seen as a sign of progress and safety. The inclusion of blackness and queerness, with a focus on racialized inequalities, queerness, then, becomes a critical stance of power for marginalized identities, the most marginalized being trans black women. Reflecting on the earlier mentioned question on queering places, an emerging question regards the evolving performances that may not have been yet observed or theorised, and which queer spaces in new ways, and by new groups and identities. Performances of other race, transgender, and underrepresented identities queering places in emerging and not-yet-standardised ways may be leaving them outside our visible field.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the earlier question "Is Soho queer?", a possible answer could be "not quite". By queer, we mean ever-changing non-normative identities; and by queer space, we mean the place that hosts and allows disruptive and transformative processes to emerge. It is clear however that throughout histories of queer performance and normative transgressions, Soho did exist as a queer space at points in time. Although there are elements of queerness in Soho today, and of course there are queer demonstrations and bodies that live there, Soho simply functions atop heteronormative and homonormative political structure, which queerness explicitly opposes. According to Aaron Betsky:

> Queer space exists as a space for orgasm or pleasure. There is no architecture or planning of queer space. It does not have an order or an identifier. A flag does not create a queer space. Much like there are no physical attributes to being queer or homosexual. These stereotypes are inaccurate, and less accurate as progress is being made. The body dissolves into the world and your senses smooth all reality into a continuous wave of pleasure – you are happy and vulnerable because your vulnerability comes from the centre of your existence and experience.[65]

This study also observed the subsequent displacements of "queer" spaces, happening alongside other types of displacement; gentrification, in the sense of physically moving the actual

performative spaces outside the city centre, or their former places, and replacing them with a simulation or symbolic, gestural representation of inclusivity and otherness. The friction, the "peripheral" and "deviant" nature of places was the very fact that was rendering them in some sense "safe". As architects and designers, we sometimes overlook the power of the "in-between", contested, negotiable, ephemeral spaces and their paradoxical nature.

It is often in this in-between that some type of freedom is found and negotiated. This in-between is first observed as spatial; one space next to another and room for the "different" in between. However, the in-between is also often temporal; between one situation and established use of a space and another. In the case of Soho, and similarly other places in other cities, the queerness, or the freedom experienced in a space, was over a certain period of time; it was a transitional space in that respect, an in-between. What is deviant/"allowed"/normative or not has been associated mainly with the "queer" in this article. However, we wish for the reader to reflect also on other manifestations of difference, protest, non-normative inhabiting of places in the context of the above conversations.

It must be reinstated that shame is not the cause of production of queer spaces, as some in queer theory might think. Queer space, queer bodies, queer anarchy and queer identities are performances of resistance and transgression against shame birthed from the heteronormative and hegemonic structures sourced of marginality and exclusion.[66] The way in which queer places are at times commodified and portrayed in the neoliberal city, or associated with an image – or illusion – of acceptance, or even spectacle, are obviously counterproductive, as they contradict the inherently disruptive nature of the debate on the "otherness". The analysis and study of these cultural performances, through the lens of radical queer activism and queer anarchy, are imperative in the production and maintenance of queer space, therefore maintaining intersectional spaces of acceptance and safety regarding sexuality, gender, race, class, ability and age.

This article aims at queering space by navigating through stories, by observing and questioning. It raises open questions on how emerging performances and actions can shape places and potentially disrupt normative assumptions. It associates the displacement of the queer with the displacements of other "othernesses". And it navigates through the in-between places in the city – spatially and

temporally – and examines their nature as fractures/gaps that allow the deviant and the norm-challenging to happen.

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