Staging the Sites of Masculinity

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INTRODUCTION

The struggle to define gender and sexual identity is an active concern in both the classroom and academic press. Books such as *Sexuality and Space* and the recent *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity* are being discussed in the studios and lecture circuit. The reciprocity between space and program as conceptual frame and the individual's practices as intervention is an important part of these debates.

This paper serves as an inquiry into masculine space: it uses the gay male clubs of the 1970s to discuss masculinity, performance and spatial configuration. Within these spaces, gay men underwent a conversion (public to the other men at the clubs, private to society at large); they inverted dominant culture for their own purposes, projecting, acting upon and maybe even transcending their imaginings and desires.

In the 1970s, most of mainstream society believed that the homosexual male violated the very notion of masculinity. In the margins, however, gay men used their new found freedom to open places in which they developed their identities, flaunted their styles and fulfilled their fantasies. The men gave meaning to these spaces while the spaces offered the specialized and possibly ghettoized surroundings for self-invention. In New York City, the emergence of exclusively gay sex clubs such as the Mineshaft and Anvil, dance clubs such as the Saint and Flamingo, bars such as the Spike and Eagle, and bathhouses such as Man's Country and the St. Marks, helped create a new ideal against which the visualization of the gay male was judged.

The economic and ideological environment of most of these clubs created an arena for the masculinization of the gay male. The clubs overturned cultural stereotypes of effeminacy; the mythic power of male images and materials became fundamental to the appearance, attraction and imagination of these domains. A journey through the clubs, through points of transition, choreographed the transformation from repression to performance. In creating new visual, spatial and social structures, these clubs found, combined and reinvented a repertoire of emotions, desires and symbolic icons that remain prominent in the gay male community today.

DEFINING THE GAY MALE

> Simply as human beings, all of us are locked into categories of the imagination, and in our culture the "locking into" the opposites of gender begins at birth with the color coding of "blue for boys and pink for girls" and from then on gathers to it almost endless accretions of appearances. . . . The homosexual betrays the fundamental *appearances* of sexuality and sexual attraction, and therefore, in the male case, the fundamental appearance of "masculinity" . . . He becomes a symbol in the cultural myth of gender, gender roles, and gender identifications — the hieratic figure of the outcast who is used as an exemplary warning to those who may question the veracity of the myth. (Read, 166.)

For those who are gay, performance is an everyday issue, whether it be passing as straight during high school or keeping quiet about a homophobic joke while at work. In fact, while growing up, some gay men overemphasize their heterosexuality and masculinity to hide their homosexuality. Others, upon realizing their difference from the dominant iconography that surrounds them and their exclusion from popular activities, find or create satisfying communities of their own. They fight convention, inventing and inhabiting places to satisfy their needs.

> The self-construction of a gay identity (all our formative years we are told we are not what we know we are) must necessarily include many dimensions of rebellion, contradiction and combination, consciously chosen or otherwise. (Bergengren, 154.)

The emergence of exclusively gay clubs mocked the collective view of and one source of oppression for the gay male. In these clubs, gay men overemphasized their masculinity as a symbol of their homosexuality. Men used costumes and gestures to construct and re-present themselves, to fight any undecidability about their gender. These poses and adornments signaled their desires to prospective partners.

> The stereotype of [gay men] being less than totally manly may lead many gay men to feel a need to perform public display of traditional masculinity in order to allow them to integrate a self-image of manliness. (Preston, 324.)

Masculinity was just another form of masquerade, albeit an important one as an indicator of power in a sexist and homophobic society. Gay men transformed figures of working class utility, exemplified by the leatherman, biker, jock, cowboy, outlaw, soldier, policeman, and construction worker, into fetishes. Gay men signified themselves with uniforms and everyday objects that elevated the familiar into personal and readable symbols of desire. This re-arrangement and re-decoration emphasized the visual emblems of authority and danger.

The assertion of a "look" became an important political strategy. Gay men staged a rebellion against the constraints of homosexuality and the limitations of stereotypes; they projected a new image to the broader society, the appearance of a masculinity that was culturally denied to them. The emergence of this macho posturing also changed self-perceptions. A choice of clothing, a particular mannerism stood in resistance to gay male oppression. Putting on male drag became part of the performance, subverting gender and sexual orders, mocking conventional categories, and compensating for the thing gay men were told they lacked.

STAGING SEX OR SEX CLUBS WERE NEVER ONLY ABOUT SEX

> Human beings exist in space. Their differences and social relations are inherently spatial. The relations of sexuality are no exception. (Knopp, 159)

To participate in sex that was prohibited in both private and public spaces, gay men found out-of-the-way places in which to engage in sexual relations. Wooded parks, often called Meat Racks, became a web of passageways and meeting rooms. Intended for contemplation away from urban congestion, these secluded areas were accessible to and occupied by men from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Darkened alleys and dead ends were disrupted by the watchful eyes of seemingly aloof but ultimately eager partners. The uniformity of individual bathroom stalls became less confining with drilled peep and glory holes carved into the partitions. Enclosures such as empty meat trucks or abandoned warehouses and piers were appropriated and inhabited.

The clubs of the 70s brought the sexual activity from the city parks and public restrooms indoors. Recreating these dark, raunchy city spaces became a commercial enticement, reminiscent of previously clandestine encounters now safely celebrated inside. Pleasure was an important part of the conceptualization of the clubs. While the encounters may have been anonymous, the spaces were not. Bathhouses captured the erotic charge of the gymnasium or YMCA locker room. Labyrinthine clubs maintained the mobility of cruising. The look of jail cells, auto repair shops and army barracks were inserted into bars, enticing the fantasies of their patrons. At Man's Country, for instance, a fake, hollow truck was installed on the top floor of the bathhouse. These structures arranged and supported the customers while the customers conceived and produced the goings-on within them

> [The active male figure is] free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action. (Mulvey, 20.)

Gay male clubs used design to transform gay male "identity." Some clubs, located in former theaters and upscale bathhouses, produced a structure of vistas and challenges, establishing a spatial distance between the subject and object. These clubs relied on the pleasures of looking as well as doing, framing the exhibitionism and voyeurism of their users. The male body, presented, lit and objectified, performed its activities on a variety of stages for a diverse audience. The architecture organized the physical and visual interaction of bodies. One navigated a path through tactility and motion. Mirrors confused surface and depth. Pleasure was derived from one's own objectification; the clubs were socially sanctioned spaces where men became available for exchange.

> Our positioning as "to-be-looked-at," as object of the gaze, has, through our own positioning, come to be sexually pleasurable. (Kaplan, 314.)

Clubs, located in abandoned urban spaces such as warehouses and factories, enhanced a sense of place by choreographing a series of encounters and narratives. These clubs relied on fantasies of power, stripping boundaries and compressing exchanges. The benefits to those who looked and acted "powerful" as well as those who liked those looks and actions became increasingly evident. Highly charged sexual activities such as bondage, fisting and urination were put on public display. Within the safety of a male domain, men questioned the reality of sexual categories and the stability of a single identity. They were willing to take on different personas and positions depending on the moment and desire.

As alternative sites inserted into the city, these places of containment and consumption used a mixture of possibility and isolation to attract their patrons. The environments allowed men the opportunity to break rules and express what is ordinarily denied; men pushed their eroticism in multiple directions. While sex clubs have come under a lot of attack in light of HIV and AIDS, they were not the cause of HIV. Today, many consider it safer to have sex in public venues because behavior is self-patrolled due to the surveillance of neighboring bodies. Certainly some of the sex that took place in the clubs helped spread the HIV virus, but the range of sex also helped develop a sense of independence and self-recognition among gay men. Spectators became participants in the spectacle; the witness of events implied consent.

> The individualistic emphasis on strict boundaries between self and others promotes a sense of isolation and unreality... To be alive in relation to another person we must act in such a way as not to negate fully the other, and the desire in our act must be recognized by the other. (Benjamin, 282-284.)

Having sex was a crucial part of the activities in the clubs; as a result, being comfortable in the space, with oneself and one's actions was necessary.

While dominant culture tries to divide public and private space, these clubs challenged the appropriateness of such divisions. Men gained confidence by seeing other men engage in sexual behavior. They became bolder, their activity heightened and intensified. Initiation into sexual play was self-directed, sometimes motivated by the desire to transform oneself publicly, to be recognized by the larger group. Events seen were often imitated later. There was a fearlessness associated with breaking taboos.

In writing about the gym, Marcia Ian writes:

> Gym discourse [and I would argue sex club discourse as well] plays its part by helping to fill social "space" in such a way as to all but eliminate social intercourse and evacuate mental space in order to make pure "action" possible. In its unintended Zen wisdom, it prevents thinking about what one is doing to a degree that may prevent doing it. (Ian, 192)

The Saint, located in the old Loews Commodore movie theater, turned the entire first floor into a lounge with black mirrors reflecting hard, gleaming bodies. In this never, never land, the senses were assaulted by energetic music, the aroma of sweat and amyl nitrate, and the ceaseless lighting effects. On the second floor, a dome created as a planetarium enveloped and unified the shirtless, sweaty men in constant movement to the pulsating, repeating music. Dance became ritual, a transcendent experience, a sacred bonding and circling of bodies. The continuity, cooperation and trust transformed human relations upstairs as well. On the third floor balcony, the furthest point from the front door, nightly orgies occurred. This "backstage" area, where one looked down onto the super-structure of the dome, accommodated accessible sex.

> Bruce Mailman [the owner of the Saint and St. Marks Baths] culminated and codified and realized physically the climax of the '70s. He provided the settings, literally the theater, for all of these fantasies. (Andrew Holleran quoted in Peters, 80)

At the St. Marks, the bathhouse, located behind two dark doors on the street, became an institution. When all the rooms were taken, men opted for lockers. And when all the lockers were in use, men waited in the cafe. And when all the cafe stools were taken, long lines snaked their way along the sidewalk. Men were not afraid to make themselves visible to the neighborhood, waiting for other men to leave.

> In place of the Everard's rotting marble, gummy tiles and terminal pool, the St. Marks substituted an unobtrusive, quietly masculine decor.... There is no television, and disco music is confined to the front office and a back lounge, on the theory that nothing should compete with or mask the sounds of sex. (White, 277.)

At the Anvil, an after-hours dance and sex club downstairs from the Triangle Hotel, men performed on a small stage as well as on the undulating bar. On the lower level, a coat room and bar looked onto a makeshift theater with chairs and movie screen illuminated by porno films. The back room fed off of this area. In order to enter the backroom, one had to pass in front of the screen. This initiation led to a completely dark corner which privileged sound and touch rather than sight. The bartender became monitor, warning men to watch their wallets. This back room, far from the front door, assured heavy traffic on the stairs.

> In low-ceilinged, dark or dimly lit back rooms (or back grottoes, since the rooms seem like cool, rocky caves), bodies ceasely conjugate. (White, 276.)

One of the most famous clubs, the Mineshaft, accommodated hundreds of homoerotic fantasies and physical realities. By turning the male body in sexual action into a public event, the Mineshaft as fantasy fulfilling machine unified everyone who was there.

Joel Brodsky wrote about the Mineshaft because in it, he found the possibility of a non-violent community in a fragmented society.

> The ability of the Mineshaft experience to accommodate the individual homoerotic realities of hundreds, if not thousands of gay men, was its most interesting feature. While each participant performed his own ritual with his own meanings, the Mineshaft functioned somehow to hook up all these performances with a common set of facilities, rules, symbols and emotions. (Brodsky, 246.)

Sex at the Mineshaft was theater, but without one stage nor one audience. As a series of staged events, each room had a focus, a set piece, with ancillary activities surrounding it. Everyone was an actor moving through the playing area; distinctions between on stage and off, public and private, audience and participant, individual and social were broken down.

Architecture conveys social values that influence behavior. The exploration of diverse social relations at the clubs is tied to the emergence of particular spatial relations the clubs created. The owners enhanced a sense of exhibition, commonality and refuge by framing the paying customer's experience, by organizing spectatorship and visual authority. Men were put on show in an illicit and erotic setting. They were as unreal as images, set apart from everyday life. But they were also quite real, in that each was available in a game of desire and seduction.

MAPPING THE MINESHAFT

> The context within which sex takes places adds meaning to it - a fact certainly true of sex between gay men in public places. The public nature of many sex acts between gay men betrays their nature as theatrical, in the sense of being an exhibition. (Preston, 324.)

The Mineshaft, which had no sign (you had to know where you were going), was located in the wholesale meat packing district, just south of 14th Street at 835 Washington Street. Upon entering the unmarked door, you climbed a steep flight of wooden stairs. Something seemed different here; there were no clues as to where you were going because nothing adorned the walls.

At the top of the stairs, a bouncer examined your identification and took the admission fee. He also checked you out. Each patron had to meet the codes of clothing, attitude and stance. While Studio 54 also had a door policy looking for good looks, cool clothes and celebrity status, the Mineshaft looked for working class masculinity, only work clothes, uniforms and leather allowed. At both places, if you did not meet their criteria, you did not get in.

The club was made up of two windowless floors. Because you entered on the second floor, a walk down to the first acted as a descent into the basement, dungeon or Dante's hell. (Another bar in the Village was called the Ninth Circle.) Walls determine the organization of space and restrict or direct the movement of bodies within the space. The walls in this club were painted black, disappearing from sight yet carefully leading the viewer through a series of sexual playgrounds. In this entertainment complex, the scene was played out in each room on both floors.

The first room, fairly well lit with red and yellow bulbs, had a long wooden bar, pool table, benches, and to the right, a coat check where many people checked at least some of their clothes and a rest room. The rest room had a trough and a couple of sit-down toilets. There were no dividers between them. In this first bar, men mostly stood and talked although the pool table sometimes served as an elevated bed.

A darkened archway covered with a leather curtain led to the "equipment room." Along one wall, there were doorless wood stalls. Along the other was a small bar and rest room. A flimsy wall near the center of the room was perforated with glory holes. Youth and beauty are less important when the lights are dim or a temporary wall separates you. The man on one side of this dividing wall had no idea what kind of body or personality was attached to the mouth or penis on the other side.

Sawhorses, benches, stockades, and a shoe shine stand were dispersed in the room; each prop had some sexual function. Slings and shackles hung in the recesses of the wall or from the ceiling. While a man on a rack had restricted mobility, he also had the best view of the room. In this space, partially clothed men acted in relation to the others while the lights focused on the equipment and the ritual activities taking place around them. Spotlights captured the scene, something you could move into or out of.

Two staircases led to the even darker street level rooms. A conventional steel and concrete stairway was hidden behind a door. More popular was the single width, wooden hinged ladder that cut through the center of the floor. I have heard the experience described as lifting the hatch to enter a dark mine or descend into the belly of a ship.

Downstairs were a series of rooms divided by concrete walls. They smelled of urine, leather and cigar smoke. One space was built like a small maze, with wooden cubicles, more glory holes, cages and cells. The central room was white with spotlit bathtubs on the concrete floor for watersports. The bathtubs were placed for maximum visual exposure and also surveillance. They could not be avoided; if this was on public view then anything was possible.

The furthest room to the rear, the "backroom," contained a large bar with an overhead mirror inviting anyone nearby to watch or participate in the arena. In this privileged room of the club, the gaze was turned back on itself. One result was that this room, when it was open, contained the most intensified action. Beside the bar was a stage with an ever changing group of props. Performers engaged in the most extreme sex acts imaginable. Men wandered and stumbled through the scenes, while other men applauded. The commonality of recreational sex, the physical revelry, was a liberating experience. They were all participants in circulation, connecting with one another despite polarities and differences.

> People have seen things at the Mine Shaft they would not dream of performing themselves, but the spectacle of such varied sexual scenarios can awaken their imaginations. (White, 284.)

CONCLUSION

In the 1970s, gay men moved to urban areas because of the anonymity of the city and the growing population of like-minded individuals. With varying needs and practices, gay men participated in the public sphere creating a narrative of the sexual hunt. With its abandoned urban spaces, the city, produced by desire, supported a wide range of possibilities.

The clubs I have described were both creator and product of this blossoming community. Using the signs of a sexualized city, they came to represent the new, liberated urban life. While constructed within the context of social institutions, they redefined themselves outside the heterosexual reality. Even though the clubs were in the midst of the city, they were mostly invisible to the straight culture that surrounded them. The height of activity within them happened while most people were sleeping. It was not unusual to come out of these dark clubs with the sun bright in the sky, the coffee shops well into their morning rituals.

The Mineshaft and other clubs of its kind were sites of construction; they exaggerated masculinity through the collection of spaces, the attraction of their activities, and the imagination of their environments. Gay men, taught that

their desire for same-sex pleasure was unacceptable and ashamed of the effeminate stereotypes portrayed in the media, sought another identity. They became more "masculine" than straight men in order to escape a homophobic culture.

The clubs were their image guides. Patrons confirmed their right to be by becoming regular customers; men gained confidence by knowing there were others "like me." They became "members" by adopting the behaviors and attitudes they saw around them. They learned what activities to perform and what actions to suppress. Men seeking acceptance from their peers began to conform. The Clone was created. Gay men took the visual appearance of working class masculinity, building their bodies, growing mustaches and replicating a butch attitude. They reformulated the archetypal male to fit into the context of an urban gay male identity.

Occupying dense spaces of desire, safe from public scrutiny, the men who frequented these places eroticized life in the big city. The clubs also "sequestered" or isolated their patrons. Begun as a subversion, these spaces had the potential to either liberate their users or to reiterate the dominant power structure around them. Tragically, in these places of containment, sexually transmitted diseases spread rapidly. In the 1970s, safe sex had not been created.

The power of self-creation came from claiming a space. In the clubs, gay men developed architectural conventions. They used the conceptual apparatus of theater and spectacle in order to form space and facilitate activity. They played with materials and their details to conjure a physical dimension. These places turned men on; their production and modes of operation, the physical surroundings and progression of activities helped foster the development of community. As sites of sexual identity, these places fabricated rules, types and conventions.

Through self-sustaining and self-defined codes, postures and clothing, through communal sex, gay men came together at the clubs and kept the system running smoothly. Men acted by themselves or with the crowd. They negotiated between the individual and collective experience. They lost their egos to the camaraderie of the place and asserted their independence by self-consciously playing with sex and masculinity. In a symbiotic relationship between subject and object, between container and contained, they used the clubs as a stage with a constantly responsive public.

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