
Politics, Class, and Identity in the Queered City

Discussant: Julianna Sassaman, MA candidate, Architecture and Urban Planning, MIT

Panel Reporter & Summary: Shannon Struble, MA and MLS candidate, History and Archives Management, Simmons College

Panelists:

Laura Braslow and Jacob Lederman, PhD candidates, Sociology, The Graduate Center, CUNY
"Beyond the Gay Ghetto: Socio-Spatial Differentiation and the Contestation of Gay Identity in the Post-Modern City"

Zachary Blair, PhD candidate, Anthropology, University of Illinois at Chicago
"Bodies Built in Queer Space: The History, Politics, and Economy of Chicago's North Halstead Street"

Olivier Vallerand, PhD candidate, School of Architecture, McGill University
"From Gay Architecture to Queer Space? Late-Twentieth Century Changes in Montreal's Gay Village"

For many middle- and upper-middle-class New York City residents, locational choices are increasingly made on the basis of fine-grained representational differentiation among neighborhoods. In this process, which Laura Braslow and Jacob Lederman discussed in their presentation "Beyond the Gay Ghetto: Socio-Spatial Differentiation and the Contestation of Gay Identity in the Post-Modern City," housing—and by extension neighborhoods—are valued not only on the basis of infrastructure and "amenities," but also on individuals' presentation of self through membership in one of many increasingly reputationally specific local communities. Braslow and Lederman drew upon participant observation and interviews in two New York City areas with

concentrated, generally middle- and upper-middle-class gay populations: the West Side of Manhattan (Chelsea and Hell's Kitchen) and North Brooklyn (Williamsburg, Greenpoint, and Bushwick). They examined how the proliferation of concentrated gay populations into neighborhoods not traditionally identified as gay enclaves has produced a constellation of spaces where gay-ness intersects with other cultural and representational categories to produce localized forms of gay identity. The presenters contended that this socio-spatial differentiation produces contestation as to what defines "authentic" gay identity in the city. This dialectical process, in which oppositional identities are mutually constructed and reinforced, they argued, often operates around consumption choices connected to neighborhood belonging itself (consumption of housing), as well as locally specific taste cultures. Finally, the authors showed how gay group identities are constructed through differentiation from "other" gays in other parts of the city, with a particular emphasis on locally valorized consumption practices and the reference to reputational character of neighborhoods.

In his presentation, Zachary Blair discussed the construction of the \$3.2 million North Halsted Streetscape Project, funded by the city of Chicago and completed in 1998. The twenty rainbow-ringed, illuminated art-deco pylons that lined Halsted Street between Belmont Avenue and West Bradley Place, along with two matching golden pylons at West Briar Place and Grace Street, marked the northern and southern boundaries of the North Halsted gay entertainment district. This mayoral thank-you gift to the gay community, meant to promote further economic development in the area, marked the first time a gay neighborhood received official government recognition in the United States. As Mr. Blair showed, the streetscape marking the gay neighborhood known as Boystown is as meaningful today as it is controversial. Through the lenses of the history and politics surrounding this material and symbolic architectural project, his paper explored the link between bodies, space, and the state. Using ethnographic data collected over the past four years, Mr. Blair described how the project developed, how controversial built queer space is negotiated, and how the social, political, and economic impacts of the project remain over a decade after its completion.

Olivier Vallerand presented parts of an ongoing project to understand queer space from an architectural point of view and to think about the relations between changes in built space and society. Because sexual orientation cannot be identified through any particular physical signs,

LGBT people are often identified through the spaces they visit, he contended. Vallerand's project focused on two gay bars in Montréal and their particular significance in LGBT histories as important social meeting places. His project is founded on a belief that discussing and understanding these spaces is an important way to preserve traces of these histories. However, because of their ephemeral qualities, bars, and traces of them, have mostly disappeared without leaving traces. Vallerand argued that gay bars have also been largely ignored by architectural historians because they are perceived as everyday or vernacular. As such, contemporary gay bars' designs have often become attempts to create and present more or less idealized (and sometimes "imagined") LGBT histories in built form. However, Vallerand asserted that gay bars' evolution also follows a shift towards queer politics and that many "gay" districts are today mostly designed for rich, gay, white men. The visual insistence on a certain kind of masculinity in the design and marketing of these spaces also leaves aside other sexual minorities. Nevertheless, the exaggerated and provocative insistence on masculinity contributes, Vallerand contended, to a camp reclamation of symbols associated with heteronormativity, a queer overturning of these symbols. Combined with the reuse of unoccupied or rundown neighbourhoods and buildings that are not only cheaply available spaces, but also symbolically charged ones, gay architecture positions itself outside of the norm, from the inside. Vallerand's presentation showed that LGBT-oriented architecture questions heteronormativity in its attempt to respond to the needs and tastes, perceived or real, of LGBT-identified people, and it illustrated that LGBT-oriented architecture's documentation and analysis is essential to a comprehensive history of LGBT minorities, while the buildings themselves offer a point of reference around queer histories.