

4. Public Space

For the purposes of this study, a public space is a physical location where people can gather and discuss their ideas and opinions, similar to Goodsell's place-bound public space, defined as a "space-time continuum for connected and interactive political discourse consisting of face-to-face interaction in a single physical location."⁵² Cattell et al. used a similar but more socially than politically targeted definition. Public spaces are sites of "sociability and face-to-face interaction," and their quality is "commonly perceived to be a measure of the quality of urban life."⁵³

4.1. Types of Public Space

Public spaces include, but are not limited to, restaurants, theaters, and bookshops. Urbanization spawns a myriad of new public spaces and allows for groups to connect that previously would have had limited socialization.⁵⁴ Cities, where belonging to a heteronormative family unit is no longer a necessity, allow for single people to operate independently of their parents and support themselves financially and socially.⁵⁵ Single gay people living on their own in urban settings have more opportunities to explore their sexual identity and meet other gay people.

State-sponsored spaces may or may not allow for or encourage public discourse. It often depends on the architecture, atmosphere, and décor.⁵⁶ Goodsell's examples of state-sponsored public spaces are city halls and US state government cabinet rooms, but a library or school could just as easily qualify as a state-sponsored space. Sites of political speech are not inherently different from sites of nonpolitical speech. In the context of gay public spaces, speech that would not qualify as political for any other group, such as discussions of sex and family, can be seen as political in nature. Laws in the US and UK have discriminated, and continue to discriminate, against homosexuality,⁵⁷ so social speech among gay people often contains political themes. In a state-sponsored public space, there is an increased possibility that limits will be placed on openness and free discourse.⁵⁸ Privately owned public spaces are also susceptible to limited openness, however, since trespassing laws often allow for indiscriminate exclusion of individuals from private buildings or real property.⁵⁹ (Note that for the purposes of this research, openness is discussed in its intangible atmospheric context, rather than its alternate definition of literal, architectural openness.)

Shopping venues are an important source of public interaction, especially in areas where larger, state-sponsored venues are sparse or nonexistent. They are often used "to stroll or to sit down on benches to eat lunch"⁶⁰ and to build a sense of community. In London, "commercial space was integral to the formation of queer social networks"⁶¹ in the 1930s, and various commercial venues such as bars and clubs are still important meeting places for gay social interaction.⁶² Similarly, other minorities use shopping

venues to communicate with each other in a relaxed environment. For example, Green Street in London attracted “Asian older people who were not confident speaking English.”⁶³ On that shopping street, they had the ability to converse with each other and could therefore be more relaxed and comfortable expressing themselves and socializing. Shopping venues allow for casual socialization, sometimes leading to long-term casual relationships, as well as the option for isolation.⁶⁴ One can be anonymous and away from everyday settings and obligations without actually cutting oneself off from public life and other people.

A public space need not necessarily be place-based. Many communities, especially those spread out geographically, have migrated to the internet for socialization. Goodsell defined electronic public space as a “space-time continuum for connected and interactive political discourse achieved at dispersed geographic locations through information technology.” When that information is “broadcast by television, radio, internet, or other means,” it falls under extended public space.⁶⁵ In an age where extended public space is so readily accessible, the importance of place-bound public space may be questioned. It is much less expensive and time-consuming for like-minded individuals to congregate over the internet than to meet face-to-face. Online social networks catering specifically to gay audiences include Only Lads, I’m Gay So!, and GayVibes.⁶⁶ These sites range from dating (Only Lads) to professional (I’m Gay So!) to general social interaction (GayVibes), but according to Alexa data, do not attract large amounts of traffic. The most popular of the three, Only Lads, for example, is ranked 23,000 (approx.) in the UK.⁶⁷ Of course, gay groups on more popular general social networking sites can attract more visitors.

4.2. Discrimination and Public Spaces

The discrimination faced by gays has often been compared to that experienced by racial minorities and the gay liberation movement in the US linked to the civil rights movement of the 1960s.⁶⁸ Public spaces can actually heighten racial discrimination. Cattell et al. gave an example of a neighborhood where ethnic minority groups experienced “problems which they believed had a major impact upon their physical and mental health.”⁶⁹ In early London, men in public spaces “entered into an ongoing conflict with the Met [Metropolitan Police] and LCC [London County Council].”⁷⁰ Groups that meet with discrimination in mainstream public spaces suffer emotionally—even physically—and benefit from alternative spaces. Maximum health benefits can be obtained when a place allows people to feel comfortable and is perceived as being pleasant.⁷¹

Homophobia remains an issue today. MacSweeney reflected on some instances when it affected Gay’s the Word:

I’m thinking of, in the London riots two years ago ... we were the only bookshop in London to have our windows smashed, a homophobic thing. You know, when

I'm cleaning spit off the windows, when I get stuff on the windows or comments outside, you're aware there is an irritant, visibility, you know, so you're aware of the homophobia that's outside. People uncomfortable walking around. So, while we've won ... huge levels of acceptance in some ways, in others ... many people are hugely disturbed, and the struggle still goes on.

Despite continuing homophobia and even direct attacks to the shop, MacSweeney remains confident in Gay's the Word as a safe meeting space (further discussed in section 7.1), clarifying his statements about hate incidents with, "Most of the time it's fine. I don't even think about it."⁷²