

Homosexuality and the Star Hotel: Exploring the traces of Queer Space in Newcastle in the 1970s

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the 1970s the Star Hotel linking Hunter and King Streets in the notorious west-end of Newcastle gained a reputation internationally for its flamboyant nightlife and heterogenous mix of masculine cultures. Divided into three distinct bars, The Star Hotel became the centre for sailors, bikers and queers all celebrating counter-culture in a conservative and introverted Australian city. The three bars were divided by makeshift lattice walls separating the three bars, which, over time, eroded to allow the three demographics to merge with each other in an environment of tolerance and mutual acceptance. The late 1970s saw not only the eviction of the homosexual crowd from the hotel through the notorious “Pub with No Queers” campaign but also, soon after, the closure of the hotel itself by authorities resulting in the famous Star Hotel Riot which made international news and is still heavily associated with the city. The cultural conditions connecting the riot and the notorious venue are complex and heavily associated with themes of sexual identity, authority and spatial demarcation. They provide an interesting starting point for exploring the evolution of queer space in Newcastle. This paper will look at the relationship between the Star Hotel and broader themes of queer space in the city. By focussing on the Star as an icon both of and against homosexuality in Newcastle in the 1970s the paper will look at the historical evolution of spatially located and demarcated zones for homosexual activity in Newcastle, their relationship to authority and, in particular, their role in the infamous riot. The broader themes of queer space at the Star Hotel will be explored through an unbuilt architectural project that commemorates the heroes of the Star Hotel riot and explores the notion of queer space by activating the memories embodied in the now ailing institution.

HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE STAR HOTEL: EXPLORING THE TRACES OF QUEER SPACE IN NEWCASTLE IN THE 1970S GENERAL LAYOUT AND INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE

Here lies a local culture
Most nights were good, some were bad
Between school and a shifting future
It was most of all we had
— Cold Chisel, Star Hotel (1983).ⁱ

A famous photo taken by Newcastle photographer Ron Bell appeared in newspapers nationally on the morning of September 20, 1979—just hours after the infamous Star Hotel riot (see figure 1). The image depicts a drunken reveller dressed in jeans and a flannelette shirt, straddling the ornamental parapet of the hotel with his fist held defiantly in the air. Set against the night sky, the posture of the youth is emancipatory, shedding the burdens of the everyday and assuming a position of liberation and empowerment. Underneath the renegade hangs a sign draped over the front of the pub announcing the musical line-up for the night. At the side of the hotel (out of view) is the famous banner of the band The Heroes, who played earlier in the evening. The banner reads “Tonite Heroes—Tomorrow Forgotten”.ⁱⁱ



The image of the lonely reveller determined to defend the troubled building and the coincidental tribute to the “forgotten heroes” provides a starting point for understanding the unusual events that had taken place earlier.ⁱⁱⁱ Only a week before the owners of the Star Hotel (Tooth Brewery) had abruptly decided to close the venue giving seven days notice to the tenant to cease operation. Whilst this directive was necessitated by the desire to refurbish the hotel to meet licensing requirements, many in the community, (especially those who were regulars of the venue) saw it as an underhanded action by the authority aimed at closing the popular nightclub which had a reputation for underage drinking, illegal drugs, homosexuality and many other illegitimate activities.^{iv} In a city dominated by clubs the hotel, despite the stigma, was one of the only places in Newcastle at the time where young people could escape and enjoy themselves autonomously. The popularity of the hotel was confirmed when the closure was announced with a flood of letters to the editor in the week leading up to the closure^v and a petition signed by more than ten-thousand people from diverse groups.

Closing time

On the afternoon of September 19, 1979 the hotel management held a celebration to mark the closure of the nightclub with local band The Heroes playing in the King Street bar. Locals started gathering at the hotel at 4pm and the publican offered free beer to patrons for an hour from 5 pm. By 8 pm there was already a large crowd in attendance (estimated to have been between 5000 and 8000 people with approximately 75% being male). When the crowd began to overflow onto the streets and disrupt traffic along King Street angry motorists called police to disperse the throng. At 10 pm the police moved into the King Street bar and ordered the band to stop playing, urging patrons to disperse quietly. As the police attempted to clear the road a riot erupted between police and patrons culminating in a brawl after which the police withdrew. The angry mob moved west towards the nearby Waterboard building shattering its windows with stones and overturning a police patrol car that was trying to block a nearby intersection. The car was set alight and, as the petrol spilt onto the road, drunken revellers danced in front of it providing another iconic image of the riot.^{vi}

The lone rioter, perched atop the walls of the hotel with his fist raised in the air, embodies a primitive desire to defend the architectural monument and the values it stood for. It also highlights key themes of masculine identity that had accumulated at the Star Hotel and exploded violently on the evening of the riot. As a result the image provides a point of departure for exploring the discursive history of the Star Hotel as a centre of subversive power relationships which, set within the within the contested zone of “queer space”, galvanised the broader themes of both connection and division which are embodied in the sexual demarcation of space.

Three bars

In the decade leading up to the riot, when the Star became famous as the centre of Newcastle’s counter culture, the Hotel was divided into three distinct bars, each attracting its own unique and idiosyncratic clientele. Each of these bars became zones where masculine identity was both constructed and dissolved. The King Street bar was inhabited by bikers and music fans who came to see the various local bands who performed there. The middle bar and beer garden was a notorious and popular gay and lesbian nightclub, managed by an extroverted drag queen who performed frequently on a tiny stage. The front bar, located on Hunter Street, was popular with sailors, due to its proximity to the waterfront. The three distinct bars became representative of the complex counter-culture that emerged in Newcastle through the simultaneous confluence of these diverse and anti-institutional elements. The Star in the 1970s became the institution, in space and time, where three distinct but dynamic cultural influences collected themselves and carved out a spatial and social identity: a local, music and drug-oriented youth culture (fuelled by the emergence in the late 60s of anti-establishment rock music and transcendental drugs) who gathered in the parochial front bar; an emancipated and extroverted queer culture, which, in the aftermath of Richard Altman’s groundbreaking work *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1971)^{vii}, used the city as a place of celebration as well as political opposition and defiance; and, in the front bar, through the introduction of a global and highly-sexualised culture of transient sailors seeking to unearth the pleasures of the city in ex-

plorative and unglamorous forays into alcohol abuse and sexual gratification. These three bars, each identifying with a distinct model of masculine culture operated independently but also symbiotically and provided, within an otherwise conservative city, a space of tolerance and acceptance towards the varying demographics that collected there. The three bars were separated by lattice walls, allowing a visual link but preventing direct access between the bars and ensuring their relative autonomy. This segregation effectively divided the building into three distinct cells with their own individual entry points and facilities.

In the early 1970s these identities were however, recast as the lattice walls dividing the three bars and preserving their independence eroded, enabling the three bars to merge fluidly into one. Jim Wafer, the author who has charted the homosexual history of Newcastle, provides an account of this process describing how

the lattice finally rotted away and they had to pull it down and that's when everyone mixed. And we joined, you know, the gays actually mixed into the jazz bar and out into the bikers bar and the bikers came out into the seamen's bar, and everybody was together. It was the most accepted thing I've ever known anywhere.^{viii}

The utopian vision of the three bars merged into one has been pervasive providing an architectural and spatial model whereby the otherwise stratified identities of isolated male culture become engaged in complex social, cultural and sexual transactions. However the Star also represented the antithesis of this model of spatial congruence where, just a year before the riot the previously tolerant managers of the venue were evicted and, with them, the homosexual clientele. The new management launched a distasteful "pub with no queers" campaign which involved full page ads in the Newcastle Herald to inform the Gay community that they were no longer welcome at the Star hotel. The management sacked all of the gay employees soon after, and the queer culture of Newcastle rebuilt itself, almost instantaneously on an alternate site suburban site—the Barracks—which remains, three decades on, the centre of queer culture in Newcastle.

Queer culture in Newcastle

As a symbol of both unconditional tolerance and brutal division, the Star galvanises spatially the complex relationship that exists between homosexuality and the hegemony of mainstream masculine culture in Newcastle. Even after the eviction of the gay community, the bar retained its heterogeneous reputation. While the gay community had departed by the time of the closure, (and played little if no role in the actual riot) they had been instrumental in establishing the reputation of the pub for cultural and sexual diversity. The violence that followed attempted to preserve the building and the idyllic social microcosm it embodied. As Wafer concludes, "the Star riot has the appearance of a protest *against* segregation"^{ix}

As the centre of both extremes of masculine identity the Star Hotel provides a cultural archaeology of the uneasy relationships that exist between the two—and their innate tendencies towards both connection and segregation. In this way it contains important insights into "mirroring" and its relationship not only to queer space and masculine identity, but a broader understand-

ing of urban space and the political programmes which underpin it.

Studies of masculinity in architecture have been typically concerned with fixed perspectives through which space is interpreted, gravitating towards the extremes of homosexuality and chauvinism as the models through which spatial systems are dissected. The evolution of masculinity as a topic of study emerged out of the gender discipline which, whilst attributing to men a central (albeit subconscious) role in the gendering of the built environment, also developed an appreciation for masculine space as a valid architectural oeuvre. Feminist concerns with female space triggered a search for the bastions of male space within our culture, accepting in a non-judgemental way the fact that gender was a categorisation of difference, rather than opposition. While the domestic kitchen was the quintessential domain of the 1960s housewife, the modernistic bachelor pad became the celebrated model for masculine space.

However deeper cultural readings of masculinity can be understood not within the confines of domestic space but the contested spaces of public life where masculine identity is most tacitly constructed. As a centre of these social transactions the nightclub, or hotel, becomes a space whereby juvenile notions of masculinity, dominated by alcoholism, sexual conquest and male bravado, become manifest. Representative of these broadly chauvinistic fascinations, the nightclub has equally strong spatial connections with homosexuality. As a result it has been established as the archetypal model of queer space in the work of a number of authors, most notably Aaron Betsky and Nigel Coates. As the Australian equivalent of the "nightclub" the pub or hotel is representative broadly of the emerging model of sexual identity that both Betsky and Coates attribute to the nightclub, as well as more traditional and conventional forms of masculine identity which underpin working class cities like Newcastle.

In the early eighties Nigel Coates, then a member of the design group NATO, wrote an essay for AA Files entitled "New Clubs at Large"^x where he advocated a new role for the nightclub within urban culture. His theory for "Ecstasy", in many ways reminiscent of Betsky's queer space, celebrated the nightclub as the Twentieth Century equivalent of the Nineteenth century theatre, a space where individuals are transformed through Dionysian orgy. Coates stressed an architecture of diversity, contradiction and sensuality which had a highly eroticised attitude towards the body. When, in 1986 he was invited to undertake designs for several nightclubs in Tokyo, many of these ideas were translated into built form, with designs for camp, eclectic and spatially saturated interiors.

The homoerotic overtones of Coates work were replicated by Aaron Betsky in his influential (though contested) 1994 work *Queer Space* which positioned homosexuality within the broader context of architectural history and theory. For Betsky the gay bar was an epicentre of homosexual space, an interiorised and erotic formulation that challenged the more orthodox constructions of the city. The mirror was an important symbol of homoeroticism for Betsky, embodying spatially the reflection of gender embodied in same-sex desire as well as a metaphor for the subtle reconstitution of urban places that he attributed to queer space.

For Betsky the essence of queer space is orgasm. Queer space is a sexually charged spatial paradigm, with the sole objective being sexual climax. According to Betsky

There is a space of orgasm. It is the space in which your body dissolves into the world and your senses smooth all reality into continuous waves of pleasure. It only lasts for a moment, but during that moment you give yourself over to pure pleasure made flesh. Orgasmic space leaves you vulnerable and happy in that vulnerability, because you are at the center of your experiences. It is an unreal space with no endurance, and yet is very real.^{xi}

Betsky's reading of queer space whilst deliberately polemical is controversial and widely contested. Even with Betsky's considerable qualifications, the construction of queer space seems somewhat idealistic and tends towards establishing the kind of intellectual orthodoxy's that the notion of queer space is supposed to challenge. As Adrian Dannatt writes in his article "Queering the Architect"

[t]o define a gay architecture is perhaps futile and reductionist, confining a plethora of possibilities back to an old-fashioned canon [...]. As if straight architects make real buildings, concentrating upon plans, whereas homosexuals design surface effects and embellishments, make pictures for the eyes rather than spatial experiences for the whole body.^{xii}

Despite its critical limitations, Betsky's idealised notion of queer space has important resonances with themes that are manifest in the peculiar history of the Star Hotel. Betsky's notion of the mirror has direct correlations with the heterotopic dimensions of the Star Hotel where the lattice walls become the interface between these artificial and constructed models of sexual identity. As these walls dissolve so do the certainties associated with these constructed masculine identities. The politicised walls of the Star Hotel, which, when penetrated by the police, caused the riot equally retain this model of the "mirror" reflected inwardly a self-styled model of identity constructed in the individual bars as well as outwardly to the city, reflecting the shallow stereotypes that accompany conservative attitudes towards counter-culture. This mirroring reflects, in each case, the positive and negative attributes of sexual identity that were being developed in the city at this time.

Equally the notion of orgasm, as a metaphor for space is equally provocative in the context of the Star Hotel where the simmering forces and tensions at play bubbled over in a violent and eruptive moment of individual gratification that occurred in the riot. Equally the dissolution of the lattice walls is representative of Betsky's orgasmic space, where physical boundaries, and the political overtones that accompany them, dissolve in space. The queer culture itself, in a short amount of time, was forced to dissolve and resurrect itself, politically, culturally and spatially on an alternate site.

This raises deeper questions which are related not to the sexual dissolution of space but the invisible power structures that permeate and condition those spaces. Here sexual identity becomes a tactic for challenging the conservative hegemony of space and the political structures which underpin it. Homosexuality, as a practice, becomes the model of creating spatial environments in this context rather than the stylistic and metaphorically derived interior fantasies embodied in Betsky's poetic but inflated account of orgasm. George Chauncey is one writer who has advanced these ideas in his historicised account of queer space

maintaining that it is only through homosexual activity that space becomes "queer" and this is only a transient state—it is never intrinsic in the architecture. This repeats an argument made by French theorist Michel Foucault, one of the earliest exponents of queer theory^{xiii}, who sees power as conditioned by its operation rather than its spatial configuration. Before the queer liberation movement of the 1970s, the relationship between homosexuality and architectural space was governed by the overwriting power structures of conventional society, representing a discursive act confined to certain highly secretive and illegitimate locations within the city. Chauncey's reading is based much more on social and cultural typologies such as the bathhouse and public toilet which, by association, became important centres for the gay community as it began to exert itself as a political force within the city.

The expulsion of homosexuality from not only the Star but the urban centre of Newcastle is paradigmatic of the hegemony of heterosexual masculinity as well as spatial intolerance of incursions against it. The eviction of the homosexual population delimited not the "space" of queer culture but the practice of "homosexuality" in that space. Queer culture, and the space which accompanied it merely resurrected itself on a different site and under a different spatial condition. As a result the Star Hotel is paradigmatic not only of the spatial, orgasmic dimensions of queer space that fascinate Betsky, but the more pragmatic political dimensions articulated by Chauncey that control or tolerate its existence. The riot, as the overflowing of the political and spatial ambiguities that had accumulated on the site, is the moment where these contested notions of masculine identity are both celebrated and violently destroyed.

A monument to the Star Hotel riot

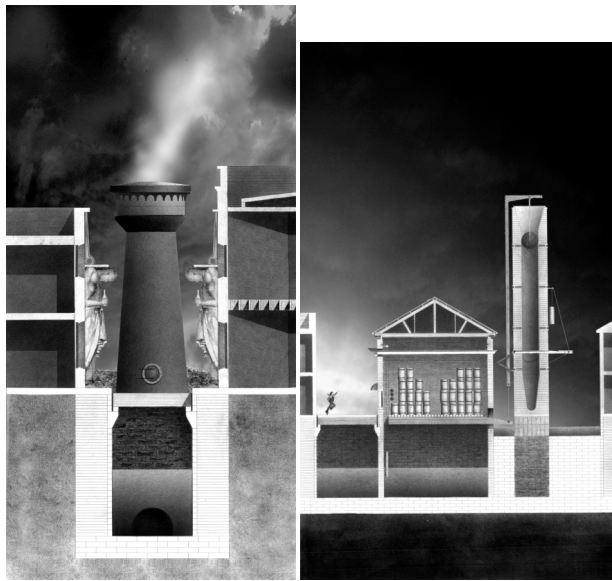
The themes of queer space articulated in the writings of Chauncey, Betsky and Coates became the starting point for a collaborative design project undertaken to commemorate the events of the Star Hotel Riot. Coinciding with proposals to develop the site as well as the 25th anniversary of the Riot, the project was undertaken as a means of preserving the rich cultural heritage of the site and resurrecting the themes of autonomy, sexual identity and heterogeneity that had defined the site historically.

The riot, as well as marking a very real animosity between youth culture and authority, also embodies much broader notions of identity which are enacted in a violent and territorial display of primeval masculine aggression. Equally the riot is representative of the confluence of identities against social conventions and stereotypes recalling the heterotopic associations which were originally embodied in the three bars. Marking the extremes of these conflicting models of masculine identity, the riot is representative of this tension, symbolised by the eroding lattice walls, between division and connection. This is at the centre of the complex and violent upheavals that are to be commemorated.

The elements of fire and water provide the allegorical foundation for the project. On the traffic island in the middle of King Street a large chimney is established. This is the island where much of the fiercest fighting took place and the tower forms a symbolic gateway to the city. At the base is a flame that burns all year round (see figure 2). The flame is fuelled by spirits,

abstractly embodying the raging energy of the former Star. The tapering form of the tower subtly assumes the proportions of a bottle smouldering away at the entrance to the city. It also establishes the tower as a counterpoint to Fredrick Romberg's circular Council Headquarters located further along the street presenting a thinly veiled challenge to its hegemony.

Three more towers, this time filled with ice, are installed in the beer garden, at the rear of the middle bar. These towers, at the junction of the three original bars, symbolically mark the three spaces and the respective masculinities which inhabited them. The ice in the three towers is formed by pressure, in part exerted by a suspended floor in the adjacent middle bar. The floor of the middle bar is periodically loaded with beer kegs which, via a system of pulleys, transfer the load to a metal weight at the top of the tower (see figure 3). Once a year, in September the accumulated weight of the beer triggers a spring-loaded needle at the base of the tower. The needle is hollow and it allows air to enter the structure, slowly melting the ice. As the ice turns to liquid the structure commemorates architecturally the moment when the lattice walls of the three bars disintegrated, allowing the three distinct communities to flow harmoniously into one. It also evokes the various managements, which cyclically evicted different demographics from the establishment. The three, distinctly phallic forms, slowly collapse and become hollow, empty structures, until they are once more filled with water.



The three ice towers are linked to the chimney by an underground aqueduct that runs along the existing alley beside the hotel. The water from the melted ice is carried through the middle bar cascading out into the aqueduct below. As the ice in the tower starts to collapse it releases a torrent into the underground channel. The suspended floor also collapses releasing a flood of beer kegs into the underground river. The rising level of the water floods the aqueduct, engulfing the alley and dramatically extinguishing the flame at the base of the chimney. The volume of water pours onto the streets disrupting traffic and neighbouring businesses before slowly receding back into the aqueduct where it is once again turns into ice.

Notions of queer space are central to the operation of the monument. As pressure builds in the phallic towers, and the ice hardens it reaches a breaking point where it is relieved into the

chasms below the alley merging into a single liquid and flowing outwards into space. This coincides with Betsky's notion of orgasm where the forces that have accumulated are released in a transient expulsion, flowing into a limitless and expanding space of gratification and release. Embodied in this spatial orgasm is also the politics of identity and the moment where the traditionally sacrosanct demarcations of space and bodies that had occurred at the Star merged through the decay of the lattice walls into a single space.

To mark the passage of the water along the alley, a bank of six-metre tall caryatids flank the two sides of the alley. The caryatids, like the drunken renegade immortalised in Bell's famous photograph, protect the walls of the hotel, at the same time monumentalising the heroes of the riot. The caryatids wear jeans, a singlet and have a flannelette shirt draped around their waste. In their hands is a beer bottle. Their heads looks down through the empty bottle towards the rising water in the aqueduct below.

This model of reflection re-enacts Betsky's notion of the mirror where identities are constructed and traversed. Reflecting the constructed identities of the individual the water also reflects the attitudes of the city and the stereotypical allocation of concretised models of masculine identity. The interchange between the macho caryatids and the simmering ice below marks, metaphorically the confluence that took place between the underground queer culture, forcibly submerged and the mainstream paradigmatic masculine drinking culture which remains central to the identity of Newcastle. Existing, at various times in harmony and conflict, the moment of the riot embodies their transitory and volatile reunion.

Like the banner which adorned the hotel—"Tonite Heroes-Tomorrow Forgotten"—the turbulent uprising has been unfairly marginalised within the social history of the city. Currently the riot, which made international headlines, bears no physical reminder and is invariably excluded from written histories of the region. The memorial serves to not only preserve an important historical building, but also legitimise the events of September 19, 1979 and re-claim for them a place within the history of this city. The project thus both preserves, through its operation, the event and the architectural monument that inspired it. More importantly it begins to acknowledge the forgotten heroes who perpetrated the riot in the defence of a different kind of monument—a monument that represents the rights of its inhabitants to be different.

ⁱ The song was written by Don Walker and originally appeared on the East album. The lyrics are taken from the official Cold Chisel webpage (www.coldchisel.com.au/lyrics).

ⁱⁱ This title was also used in a 1980 musical produced by the Hunter Valley Theatre Company that was performed at the Civic Theatre. The soundtrack of the play was recorded on a twelve-inch L.P with a photo of the Heroes banner on the cover. See Jim Wafer, "Uncle Doreen's Family Drag Album", in Jim Wafer, Erica Southgate, Lyndall

Coan, eds., *Out in the Valley: Hunter Gay and Lesbian Histories* (Newcastle: Newcastle Regional Library, 2000), p.102, p. 186 [note 272].

iii The following account is taken primarily from a report commissioned by Newcastle City Council after the riot which sought to ascertain the causes and precipitating factors which led to the riot. The report was compiled by a committee who interviewed patrons at the bar on the night of the riot, the management and members of the community to gauge the events and relative impact of the riot. See Paul Dunn, *Findings of Investigation into the Causes of the Star Hotel Riot* (Newcastle City Council Report, 1980), up.

iv Paul Dunn's report on the incident describes how patrons were not informed openly of the situation regarding the licensing of the hotel and therefore concluded that some collusion with the police force was involved. According to Dunn "[r]egular patrons were annoyed at what appeared to them to be a high-handed action by the owners of the hotel." Paul Dunn, *Findings of Investigation into the Causes of the Star Hotel Riot* (Newcastle City Council Report, 1980), up.

v On the morning of the riot the Newcastle Herald published a letter from a young reader who referred to the Star as our pub—the very hub of entertainment in the city. It is to here that we flock in our hundreds to listen to the best of bands, enjoy good company and just simply relax from the daily rat race. To us it is part of Newcastle and an essential part of "our town" that has a very real place in our daily lives.

Quoted in Jim Wafer, "Uncle Doreen's Family Drag Album", in Jim Wafer, Erica Southgate, Lyndall Coan, eds., *Out in the Valley: Hunter Gay and Lesbian Histories* (Newcastle: Newcastle Regional Library, 2000), p. 102.

vi While the crowd gradually dispersed thereafter, the riot resulted in almost thirty arrests and twenty hospitalisations including police and civilians. The violent evening made international news the following day. The then premier Neville Wran described the riot as "hooliganism of the highest order" and a "shocking, disgraceful episode". However, in the wake of the incident scrutiny turned away from the individuals who took part in the violence and more towards the social conditions that had given rise to widespread discontent amongst the city's younger populace. See: Anonymous, "A Star Fell with Riotous Effect", *Newcastle Herald* (December 28, 1999), p. 24 (supplement).

vii Richard Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1971).

viii Original account quoted in Jim Wafer, "Uncle Doreen's Family Drag Album", in Jim Wafer, Erica Southgate, Lyndall Coan, eds., *Out in the Valley: Hunter Gay and Lesbian Histories* (Newcastle: Newcastle Regional Library, 2000), p. 98.

ix Jim Wafer, "Uncle Doreen's Family Drag Album", in Jim Wafer, Erica Southgate, Lyndall Coan, eds., *Out in the Valley: Hunter Gay and Lesbian Histories* (Newcastle: Newcastle Regional Library, 2000), p. 109.

x Nigel Coates, "New Clubs at Large" in *AA Files* vol. 1, no. 1 (Winter 1981/1982): 4-8.

xi Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1997), p. 19.

xii Adrian Dannatt, "Queering the Architect", *Building Design*, No. 1197, Vol 4 (1994), p. 16.

xiii Documented in his three volume *History of Sexuality*. See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1979); Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality II*, trans. Robert Hurley (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1987); Foucault, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality III*, tr. Robert Hurley (Hammondsworth, Penguin, 1987).