

Queer space and the city: What Adelaide's queer community said

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ABSTRACT

Sydney is often internationally recognised as the only place in Australia that has a gay population that is out and proud. Although much maligned by the eastern states as simply a place to retire, Adelaide has a vibrant, out and proud queer community of all ages, celebrating queer space and culture in its own unique way. In July 2006, Adelaide's Annual Lesbian and Gay Cultural Festival – Feast, held their inaugural winter forums weekend. One of the most popular and enthusiastic forums was on queer spaces in Adelaide. These forums engaged in multiple conversations around the queer happenings in our 'City of Churches'. We looked at Adelaide's past and the venues and spaces that used to exist; what spaces are currently being used and how; as well as what we want in the future. This paper reflects on each group's longings and desires about places that once were, currently are and could be. It will also compare and contrast similarities and difference between the designation and usages of male and female same sex attracted queer spaces.

FORUMS

Over two rainy days in July, several members of Adelaide's queer community came together to discuss 'Queer Spaces and Venue'. Due to timetabling of guest speakers, same sex attracted males (SSAM) met on Saturday July 15th whilst same sex attracted women (SSAW) met on Sunday 16th. Although advertised as same sex attracted event, they welcomed anyone who could contribute to the discussion.

The forums were developed by three committees - Feast Forums Committee, the Gay Men's Advisory Committee and the Lesbian Advisory Committee. This allowed the different groups and sub-groups within our community to discuss and explore what they want and need.

The discussions ranged from talking only about existing queer space and the creating of queer spaces to what was a queer space. Although some said that any public space could be queer

depending on its use, most groups focussed on the exclusiveness to the queer community whilst still being inclusive.

SAME SEX ATTRACTED MEN

The Saturday forum started with a panel of eight men from current organisations such as Gay Men's Health and Community Centre, SHineSA, Second Story Youth Health Service and active members of the gay men's community including community health workers, educators, social workers and artists. They all spoke for a few minutes on their perspectives and either what they thought was currently missing in Adelaide or what could happen in the future.

The audience then split into several smaller groups with a panel member acting as a facilitator. These groups spoke for 30 minutes then presented their discussion points back to the main group. Many of the groups' conversations started with current venues which include the Edinburgh Castle (The Ed) Hotel, bar

and beer garden; Pultney 431 Sauna with spas, sauna, pool, private rooms, billiard tables, snack bar and even a maze area; Mars Bar, nightclub and a variety of gay friend pubs and cafes.

These small groups were in themselves motivated by a diversity of desires including;

- Virtual connections – internet / film/ video/ arts and creativity,
- Family and community connections, and
- Physical and interpersonal interaction (the largest group).

Virtual Connections¹

This group acknowledged that there was a sense by some that Adelaide was a conservative environment and that it does not readily welcome a permanent designated gay space. A question posed by this group was whether this due to the increasing conservatism throughout Australia and the world, or was this just an Adelaide problem?

Adelaide and South Australia had gone from the leader in gay reform under the social visionary Don Dunstan in the 1970s, to the last state to recognise same-sex relationships. In November 2005, the 'Same Sex Bill' or 'Relationships Bill' had not passed through parliament due to several delaying sessions of filibustering by both the Upper and Lower Houses of State Government. This frustration was very a sensitive topic within the general queer community at this time and during the forums.

Many in this group thought that current virtual space was more geared towards hooking up for sex as opposed to being a potential for intimacy and friendship. The stereotypes of gay men only wanting sex was a major conversation point with many saying that it was not necessarily what gay men wanted or were looking for.

There was also discussion regarding the catch-22 situation around the operating of venues only at night and whether this was sustainable in a city the size of Adelaide. Several nightclubs had come and gone due to insufficient patronage. There was the suggestion of a daytime space which could be a multipurpose space, a gallery, or café.

Family and community connections²

The creation of inclusive spaces that are not age prohibitive or focused on alcohol was a major desire from this group. Current places and spaces that are friendly need to be identified to encourage men to come together with a sense of fellowship and community as opposed to those focussed on sex and alcohol.

Communication was an issue discussed as a way of building support and creating queer space. This included email/text/phone trees which inform people of a gathering to encourage attendance. The question of advertising spaces and places so people know what is happening and where raised issues about which group to market towards. If widely advertised, then it became inclusive but what of those who wanted exclusiveness? Communication was once again a key issue.

They wanted a place for conversation and the ability to belong to larger group as the existing 'ghettos' or special interest groups were hard to break into if new to the city or if you didn't know people from within. This also extends to addressing the needs of people with chemical sensitivities to allow for inclusion not exclusion.

Physical and interpersonal interaction³

As stated previously, this was the largest group and as such came up with almost double the suggestions of the other groups. Although there were several different desires, some were consistent with the other smaller groups. These included a place where conversations could occur with less noise. Suggestions of a café style bookshop or gallery were consistent with previous groups. Confirmation of friendliness and friendship within spaces was again an issue.

Some men wanted male specific venues where men could be with one another and that they could be completely gay male or inclusive and gay friendly depending on the desires of the different users. The sense of belonging and togetherness without sexual pressure and the concept of men's own space that is not predatory or sexual, but allows for communion with other gay men that is not necessarily identified with any specific event, was important within this group.

The issue of safety from violence, especially upon leaving a venue was enthusiastically discussed. There was an expressed need to have a haven from violence or interpersonal threat in queer spaces or venues. It was felt this need could be partly met by a better standard of care from and provided by the venues themselves. Many venues have no sense of responsibility when patrons who have spent their money are leaving.

Some suggested subtle signs like pink triangle on the doors to inform members of the queer community that places were safe and gay friendly. This was particularly an issue for those coming out or addressing their sexuality. Knowing that a place is safe and friendly removes some of the uncertainty and feelings of dread when entering a place for the first time.

However, there is the tension between those who are visible within the community and those who do not want to be or cannot be out and proud. Places that identify as gay friendly but not necessarily gay only is also needed.

The lack of scope for entrepreneurs to run successful venues was lamented, together with the lack of well-financed business people wanting to enter this market. This has resulted in some individuals trying to fill the gap at considerable cost and financial risk to themselves, again contributing to instability in this type of business.

Providing spaces for different ages was important, both to be inclusive and exclusive. Current nightclubs provide for the young whilst those over 30-40 who are not interested in the club or pub scene have no gathering places except private homes within existing social circles. Since the population is constantly changing within separate age brackets, spaces need to adapt as well which posed the question of 'How committed are we to venues once it has been established? [sic]'⁴

SAME SEX ATTRACTED WOMEN

On the following day, three forums also occurred. It started with 'Who is a woman?', then 'What is a Lesbian?' and followed by 'Queer Spaces, What do we want?' This also started with a panel of five women including an owner of a past women's bar, community organisers, private event organisers and private function instigators. These women spoke about their experiences of not only the Adelaide scene, but also southern and outer suburbs.

After these speakers, small groups were again formed and feedback was presented to the larger group. Unlike the men the previous day, the groups were not motivated by distinct themes. The main speakers in themselves posed several questions to the group and highlighted both issues from the past and suggestions for the future.

There were several themes which were threaded through all the speakers and the feedback from the smaller groups. These included⁵:

- Safe spaces and venues to relax and talk,
- SSAW patronage different to SSAM,
- City versus suburbs, night-time versus daytime
- More acceptance today,
- Allowing exclusive gatherings,
- Effective communication.

Safe spaces and venues to relax and talk

Several of the speakers and the smaller feedback groups commented on their desire for a space where they could sit and chat without being either harassed or bombarded by loud music. This included venues that would provide food, allow stimulating conversation, areas of quietness for reading and both alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, encouraging a mixture of ages.

Many places that were started in previous decades were inclusive of all women and although known as gay venues, had a large percentage of straight women as patrons due to this same safe and non-threatening atmosphere.

Some people talked about making public spaces queer and safe for talking and meeting other women such as the "Women of the Bush"⁶ a bush walking group that caters for both lesbian and lesbian friendly women.

Others spoke about creating spaces in restaurants and cafes like the regular 'Soup Nights'⁷ or 'Out to Tea'⁸ which has spread to various areas including western, eastern, northern and southern suburbs.

SSAW patronage different to SSAM

There was general consensus that SSAW socialise in different patterns to SSAM for a variety of reasons including relationships, commitments, family and children and financial. Many venues that try to cater for women everyday of the week often do not last. The successful events and spaces cater for gather-

ings either once a fortnight or once a month. These include dances, quiz night, dinners, walks and 'girl nights' at pubs.

A desire was expressed for places which are not places for sex like the men's sauna, but somewhere to be massaged, pampered and revitalised like the Ginseng Baths in Sydney,.

City versus suburbs, night-time versus daytime

Adelaide has a wide expanse of suburbs with many several kilometres from the city centre. Satellite communities have carried forth the torch with the southern, northern and hills community gatherings being very successful and consistent.

Different groups from these outer suburbs include 'Sea Sponges' from the south, 'Lemons on the Loose' and 'Northern Rainbow Grrlz' from the north.

Many of the speakers and the larger group spoke of the differing needs of night-time venues and daytime spaces. Again, the idea of cafes and quiet gathering areas with places to sit or lounge was very popular amongst all ages. Some wanted a night-time club similar to those in the 70s which had chill out rooms and lounges to sit on.

Another important factor for many was the need for childcare. Women with children found it difficult to go out at nights but wanted a place to go during the day that catered for both them and their children. The desire to have the same for their dogs was only talked about in some of the smaller groups and not presented during the feedback to the larger group as a whole.

One representative of the under 25s mentioned that she did not always want clubs with loud music but spaces to talk and relax without alcohol⁹. However, it was difficult to find out about what was happening around town due to a lack of communication or due to people being within their own 'cliques'.

Breakfast spaces were suggested by several of the groups as this allowed those who could not get out at night to socialise. Even after work events and places to go were also suggested for many people did not want to go home then come back, especially since many clubs did not start until late.

More acceptance today

Interesting conversations were held around whether there is more acceptance today for same-sex couple to socialise without prejudice and if this altered the need for their own space. Age inclusiveness and exclusiveness was an issue, ensuring 'that there were not always oldies in one end of Adelaide and youngies in another'¹⁰.

Cross-fertilization of groups such as or including younger employed women to interact with older employed women to network and possibly mentor was one suggestion. It was stated that being more open to younger employed women by possibly holding events such as GrrlFest and promoting gathering similar to 'Fruits in Suits' in Sydney was also important.

One of the successful programmes in Adelaide that helps with acceptance is Bfriend, who provide confidential support for people of any age who are either questioning or newly identifying their sexuality.

Allowing exclusive gatherings,

Being able to embrace the need to meet as separate and exclusive groups was a popular and at time controversial topic. There was a need by some to continue to meet as distinct groups to maintain their identities whilst still belonging to the larger community as whole. They wanted the opportunity to be exclusive at times without being forced to be inclusive thus establishing definitive sub-cultural spaces through social interaction that can be recognised in specific ways¹¹.

Many wanted both inclusive and exclusive spaces depending on the group. The use of language in defining people and who defines other was important. Some were happy to have people define themselves and interact as such, whilst others had definitive ideas about how they defined people and with whom they wanted to interact. Some groups specify women born women whilst others over a certain age only.

The importance to ensure that people knew what type of space it was and whether you would be welcome or not, was highlighted by many people.

Effective communication,

During the forum, it was obvious that there were many things happening in Adelaide that people did not know about unless they knew people involved. Some thought that Adelaide's queer community was more integrated within the general population which resulted in smaller, established group organising their own events.

Suggestion were made about advertising spaces and events in the classified on Pink Sofa for those with internet access, and having more women centred contributions for Blaze, the fortnightly gay paper. Finding out what is happening around Adelaide be it SSAW, SSAM or mixed can be difficult.

FUTURE UTOPIAS

Suggestions from both forums were very similar which surprised some people. They were initiated as a commencement of dialogue within the different groups for the possible creation of new queer spaces in Adelaide that Adelaidians wanted. These forums will be repeated in the future in both formal and informal settings.

The desires of the organising committees were that by opening the conversation and allowing a public airing of views, that different groups could see how close or how far away from each other they were with their desires about queer spaces.

Interestingly, the majority of people who attended wanted similar spaces but also spaces that were multi-functional. Some wanted the creation of new queer spaces whilst other wanted to use existing public spaces and make them queer.

The need for quiet places for talking and reading and that were safe, free from harassment was almost universal. These spaces to chat did not necessarily include only alcohol but a selection of food and refreshments. Also wanted by most groups, the creation of spaces to include young people's space, for those in

their teens, early 20's and under 30 with venues where business people can go for a drink and not be harassed after work.

Claiming of public spaces as queer has actually started to occur. During the Feast Festival in November, a group of artists displayed photographs of people in an exhibition entitled 'Living Queer in Adelaide- Beyond the stereotypes' in the City Town hall for a month. This was very popular and dealt with issues of censorship both before and after hanging.

The rhetoric of these forums included the longings and experiences of the past, the current climate and desires for utopias of the future. Throughout the diverse rainbow of conversations that took place, there was consistent belief that these '*rhetorical locations are not simply spatial [but] they are also temporal*'¹², with the desire to feel safe a major issue. Due to the ever-changing world and people within our community, '*the idea of a concrete queer space is an oxymoron*'¹³, as it needs to change with us and our desires to maintain existence.

It is interesting to note, that whilst people were telling their stories during these forums, many people were heard to say 'I didn't know that!' at some stage. There are places currently being utilized by members of our queer community but often only by a select few.

Adelaide has a vibrant queer scene, and like many young queer people around the country, Sydney is often seen as 'The Gay Place to be'. It is frequently thought by people living in bigger cities that '*only larger cities can host viable gayness*'¹⁴, but viable gayness is spread more widely to any place where people want it to be. Scratch the surface of our fair city and you would be surprised at what is happening. Granted it does not have the population to support seven day a week events but the support and attendance of the recent Feast Festival in November indicates that although we may not be big we are still out and proud!

N.B. In the first week of December 2006, SA parliament FINALLY passed a bill that acknowledges same-sex couples. Although not perfect equal rights, it is a start.

¹ Robert K, *Notes from Forum Session*, Feast, Saturday, 15th July, 2006, p 1-4

² Robert K, *Notes from Forum Session*, p 2

³ Robert K, *Notes from Forum Session*, p 2-3

⁴ Ralph B, *What do Gay Men Want? Forum Notes* Feast, Saturday, 15th July, 2006, p 1

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- ⁵ Liz McNeill, *Transcript Feast Forum Session*, Sunday 16th July, 2006, p 1-21
- ⁶ Liz McNeill, Transcript, p10
- ⁷ Liz McNeill, Transcript, p11
- ⁸ Liz McNeill, Transcript, p12
- ⁹ Liz McNeill, Transcript, p5
- ¹⁰ Liz McNeill, Transcript, p14
- ¹¹ Alison Eves, *Queer Theory, Butch/Femme Identities and Lesbian Space*, *Sexualities*, Vol 7, No 4, 2004, p 480-496
- ¹² Steven Mailloux, *Places in Time: The Inns and Outhouses of Rhetoric*, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol 92, No 1, Feb 2006, p 53-68
- ¹³ Christopher Reed, *Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment*, *Art Journal*, Vol 55, 1996
- ¹⁴ Murray Pratt, *Intrusion or Where to from Queer?*, *Intercultural Studies* Vol 4, 2004 p 1 reprinted in *Australian Humanities Review*, Issue 38, April 2006