

Is the Golden Mile tarnishing? Urban and social change on Oxford Street, Sydney

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ABSTRACT

Oxford Street is Sydney, Australia's 'gay street,' a visible and famous agglomeration of gay culture, retail, entertainment and people. This paper seeks to explore the role Oxford Street plays in Sydney's urban geography, regarding the formation and sustainability of visibly gay male spaces. Theories of gay geography are briefly discussed along with a description of Sydney's mainstream gay male 'scene.' Recent evidence suggests that gay residents and commerce are gradually abandoning the area around gay Sydney's most visible and central streetscape, resulting in its gradual 'de-gayng.' Growing acceptance of homosexuality in the wider community alongside increased resistance to mainstream gay culture within openly gay populations has contributed to the 'tarnishing' of Oxford Street's 'Golden Mile.' Many openly gay men are resisting the 'gay' community, choosing to embrace alternative identities, live elsewhere and adopt new forms of community organisation and integration.

INTRODUCTION

Distinctive and concentrated gay spaces experienced marked growth in many Western cities during the 20th century. Economic, political and social forces interacted to create these unique places, with important implications for politics, commerce, migration and tourism. In inner Sydney, visibly gay territory has formed around Oxford Street, which stretches from Hyde Park in the central city, through Darlinghurst and Paddington and towards Bondi. Gay men have formed a distinctly gay enclave around the 'Golden Mile' at the western (Darlinghurst) end of Oxford Street, socially constructing it as the centre of Australian gay society and politics, and establishing its international reputation as "a gay street."¹

This paper examines the Oxford Street area's formation and role within Sydney's visibly gay population. Many gay men, especially of the "creative classes,"² have migrated to the area in

search of housing, employment, entertainment and community. However, emerging evidence suggests that Oxford Street's commerce and once vibrant gay culture are diminishing as Sydney's openly gay population diversifies and disperses. The 'centre' of gay Sydney is losing its appeal to many gay men as it becomes gentrified, commoditised and heterosexualised. Wider social acceptance of homosexuality has also permitted gays to adopt multiple identities and live comfortably in 'peripheral' areas away from the city centre. In many regards, broad urban and social changes have made Oxford Street a victim of its own success, eroding its gay vibrancy and politics, with implications for gay spaces worldwide.

METHODOLOGY

This paper analyses books, academic journals, newspaper reports and other secondary sources, combined with the author's

observations, to examine the nature of gay space around Oxford Street and its recent 'decline.' Contemporary commentary and statistics suggest that this locality is in a social state of flux. The focus here is on gay men, which generally have a more visible spatial distribution than gay women, and are more widely associated with Oxford Street than other social groups. Similar processes may, of course, be relevant for analyses of lesbians,³ but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

GAYS AND THE CITY

Gay territories within Western cities have grown in prominence since the 1960s.⁴ Despite representing only the "most politicised and vocal fraction" of gay men,⁵ gay enclaves have challenged the "heteronormative" nature of urban space⁶ and heterosexual values that underlie wider society.⁷ In many Western cities, visibility, community activity and political organisation have been widely used to defend gay rights and claim distinctly 'gay' urban space,⁸ reinforced by sexualised social practices and lifestyles. For example, gay men occupied urban space in San Francisco to express sexual identity and collectively challenge homosexual repression.⁹ Gay communities developed to be "at the same time a sexual orientation, a cultural lifestyle, and a political 'party.'"¹⁰

Urban gay spaces have unique spatial forms,¹¹ yet share similar socio-political backgrounds across Western cities. They generally emerge in inner-city localities with high population densities and cheap house prices.¹² Gay space usually arises out of cultural processes, locating away from "property, family and the high class: the old triad of social conservatism,"¹³ although in some instances high urban amenity and lower child-related rental premiums may make certain places attractive to gay residents.¹⁴ Gay bars and gay-owned business then emerge, triggering further gay settlement¹⁵ and a "domino effect"¹⁶ as more gay residents and businesses locate nearby. Gay territories have often been labelled "ghettoes"¹⁷ as they involuntarily segregate gay men from mainstream society,¹⁸ whilst providing social opportunities and protection from homophobia. However, this term has been contested as such places are usually deliberately constructed for politics or socialisation.¹⁹

SYDNEY'S VISIBLE GAY GEOGRAPHY

Although Sydney is widely perceived as a 'gay' city and the "heart of gay and lesbian Australia,"²⁰ little demographic analysis²¹ has been undertaken to identify the spatial distribution of its openly gay population. Historically, this population has centred on the Oxford Street area in the suburbs of Darlinghurst, Surry Hills and Paddington, in proximity to other gays, gay-friendly businesses and entertainment, and health and social services. Indeed, inner Sydney has been estimated to have a proportion of same-sex couples 14.4 times the Australian average²² (see Figure 1).

However, nearby suburbs also have high concentrations of visibly gay residents, including Newtown, Erskineville and Glebe in the inner-west; Kings Cross, Moore Park and Bondi in the inner east; and Alexandria and Redfern in the inner south.²³

Although the true distribution of homosexuality across metropolitan Sydney is undoubtedly more complex,²⁴ and focusing solely on such localities risks creating "inner city homo" versus "everywhere else hetero"²⁵ divisions, it is these visibly gay suburbs which have been the location and focus of much of Sydney's mainstream gay culture, politics, commerce and entertainment. Notably, Oxford Street is near their geographic centre.

Region	Percentage of total population	Percentage of all persons in couples
Inner Sydney	1.59	6.66
Eastern Suburbs	0.42	1.68
Inner Western Sydney	0.20	1.01
Lower Northern Sydney	0.21	0.73
Remainder of Sydney	0.07	0.32
<i>Sydney Metropolitan Region</i>	0.21	0.81

Source: (Birrel and Rapson, 'How gay is Australia?', 2001)

Figure 1. Number of men in same-sex couples.

OXFORD STREET

The Oxford Street area²⁶ (see Figure 2) comprises numerous gay shops, entertainment venues, health services and community organisations. The street's gay identity emerged from the 1960s, when many gay venues migrated there from nearby Kings Cross.²⁷ Cheap housing, a relatively tolerant local community and proximity to employment in the city centre increased the inflow of gay residents. Processes of gentrification were then largely instigated by the gay population (see below). By the 1980s, many gay-owned cafés, bars, nightclubs, clothing and specialty shops had emerged, enhancing the street's appeal to gays. Oxford Street also became the centrepiece of the annual Mardi Gras gay rights parade (see below). Gay migration and gentrification continued substantially in the 1980s, with the 'Paddinghurst' Chamber of Commerce (now the Darlinghurst Business Partnership) consolidating gay-oriented business activity in the area.²⁸ By the late 1990s, Oxford Street had emerged as visibly gay space, with gay bars and shops attracting residents, visitors and tourists.²⁹

Oxford Street became the centre of the gay 'scene' in Sydney, with the emergence of social norms and expectations characterising gay men in the area. This imagined community and its leisure spaces (eg, nightclubs) were instrumental in Sydney's gay history, having been created by the gay population as its own space and, thus, community. It attracted young gay men and gay 'migrants,' allowing them to 'come out' on Oxford Street to seek individual expression, partners, respite from anti-homosexual discrimination and lifestyles premised on sexuality.³⁰ It also facilitated spatial and political solidarity during the AIDS crisis. During the 1980s, 'clones' (young gay men characterised by tight jeans, white shirts and a love of nightclubbing³¹) emerged as the predominant stereotype within gay 'scene' culture.

Although the 'scene' facilitated sexual liberation and transgressions of heterosexual social norms, its 'clones' were "almost invariably young, white, Anglo-Celtic, masculinist and in many

ways narrowly conformist.³² This ‘scene’ has been criticised as favouring conservative social interests and protecting capital and heterosexual masculinity within wider society.³³ It has also been claimed to increase risks of illicit drug use, unsafe sex and homophobic violence for its participants.³⁴ Nevertheless, it provided avenues for organised political activism and the consolidation of gay society and space.



Source: (Google Maps)

Figure 2. A map of Oxford Street’s western end, the ‘Golden Mile.’

URBAN AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Fear of the loss of identity through assimilation and integration, rather than through repression, is a common preoccupation in gay establishments along Oxford Street³⁵

Recently, a number of empirical, anecdotal and media sources have indicated a decline in Oxford Street’s gay vibrancy. Some gay bars have closed and many gay-themed shops have been replaced with ‘mainstream’ retail outlets.³⁶ Gay migration to the area is reportedly falling, and the number of gay couples living in Darlinghurst fell 25% between 1996 and 2001.³⁷ Sydney’s gay territory appears to be losing some of its visibility and attractiveness to gay men. Is the ‘Golden Mile’ tarnishing?

Gentrification

In recent decades, much of inner Sydney has undergone urban renewal. Gentrification first occurred in 1960s Paddington as cheap, run down properties close to the city centre were purchased and then renovated, mostly by gay men.³⁸ It has been argued that many inner-city gay territories generate an “urban renaissance”³⁹ of gradual architectural improvements, thereby raising property prices and rents. This has attracted many wealthier gay men and young middle-class heterosexuals to the Oxford Street area.

Arguably, such ‘gay gentrification’ processes exploit the class and gender positions of wealthier gays within society, facilitating gay community survival⁴⁰ but ‘pricing out’ poorer gays from such areas.⁴¹ Additionally, the concomitant commoditisation of gay urban space and perceptions of ‘diversity’ have appealed to heterosexual property-buyers and gay tourists.⁴² However, gentrification and higher housing prices have thus acted to drive-out “the very people that lends parts of cities their ‘boho-ness’ or edginess”⁴³ that was initially attractive, pricing-out some aspects of gay culture. Oxford Street’s gay territory is thus

partly the ‘survival of the richest,’ and is captive to growing processes of urban renewal and uniformity across Sydney.

Commerce

As success lead to consumerism, Oxford Street snow-cloned itself under avalanching boutique and chain-store cliches. Rents skyrocketed and adventure went west, to Newtown⁴⁴

Since the 1980s, Oxford Street has experienced a ‘pricing out’ of independent gay shop owners⁴⁵ and an influx of more ‘mainstream’ forms of commerce. The street was “one of Australia’s premier shopping avenues”⁴⁶ until recently, with its location, reputation and wealthy local population sustaining high rents and low vacancies. Rents were rising in 2003,⁴⁷ partly due to wider property-market strength. However, the convergence towards mainstream retail rendered many gay shops and bars commercially unviable. Since the late 1990s more gay bars have closed than opened,⁴⁸ and the Albury Hotel has been converted into a brand-name clothing shop.⁴⁹ Multiple retail chain outlets have emerged, including fashion, coffee and travel agencies, in a shift away from the “commerce of queer”⁵⁰ along Oxford Street.

However, retail growth on Oxford Street has slowed markedly since Westfield Bondi Junction, a large shopping centre, opened nearby.⁵¹ In August 2006, the vacancy rate on council properties was approximately 20%,⁵² with competition from the Westfield, inadequate parking space, problems with street crime and an atmosphere of desertion reducing profitability.⁵³ Footpath improvement activities in 2005 may have hindered retail growth, impeding shop access and reducing visual appeal. Nevertheless, in late 2006 City of Sydney Council (the largest retail property owner) lowered its rents by up to 50% to boost retail growth.⁵⁴ The Always Oxford Street festival, held in March 2006 and the recent opening of some gay bars⁵⁵ have also had positive impacts. However, despite recent sales growth and declining vacancies, the long-term commercial viability of Oxford Street (and other Sydney shopping strips) is unclear.

Wider social acceptance

Arguably the most significant social transformation affecting Sydney’s gay space has been increasing tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality. Many gay political struggles of previous decades have been victorious (including legalised gay sex, stronger anti-discrimination protections and local council support), and the harassment of openly gay men in many places has generally declined in the past 30 years. Gay matters have received increasing attention in the mainstream media, with the “hegemony of liberal values and the normalisation of homosexuals”⁵⁶ moving wider public opinion towards acceptance of gays. One effect of this has been a gradual dispersion of visibly gay men away from Oxford Street.

Changing attitudes are reflected in popular culture. Many television programs and films (including the recent *Brokeback Mountain*) have incorporated gay characters and themes.⁵⁷ “Popular culture now embraces gay”⁵⁸ and a generation of youth have grown up with “homosexuality no longer [being] a taboo subject.”⁵⁹ With a many public figures (including sportspeople and

actors) having 'come out' and adopted diverse identities, younger generations have become more accepting of homosexual people and, indeed, of their own sexualities. Although Sydney's gay territory has been instrumental in achieving political goals previously, arguably the visibility of Oxford Street and Mardi Gras (see below) has been superseded by the media normalisation of homosexuality as the main determinant of public opinion on gay matters.

However, greater social acceptance of homosexuality has been paralleled by the commoditisation of elements of gay urban culture, resulting in some desexualisation of gay space and the treatment of its inhabitants as spectacles.⁶⁰ As gay spaces, including Oxford Street, have become increasingly profitable destinations for entertainment, investment and tourism, a number of 'straight' bars and clubs have recently emerged.⁶¹ Oxford Street's sub-cultural spectacle has attracted wider audiences, and concerns have arisen over heterosexual women patronising gay bars,⁶² resulting in the gradual exclusion and alienation of 'undesirable' gays from gay space itself as it becomes profitable to target wider markets. Sydney's entertainment geographies are being further blurred by greater acceptance of visibly gay men in 'straight' venues.

The influx of clientele from more diverse places and social backgrounds to Oxford Street has, however, increased tensions between 'straight' visitors and the gay community. Despite growing acceptance of homosexuality in society, homophobia is still prevalent, with 43% of Australian men believing homosexuality to be immoral.⁶³ Recently, anti-gay violence has reportedly increased around Oxford Street,⁶⁴ with visibly gay men estimated to be four times more likely than straight-looking men to be assaulted in Sydney.⁶⁵ Most assaults occur around Oxford Street, with nearby 'straight' clubs⁶⁶ and the visibility of gays around Oxford Street⁶⁷ often blamed for attracting arbitrary physical and verbal homophobic attacks to the area. As a result, many gay men are abandoning Oxford Street as a place of lifestyle and entertainment, or visiting the area less often.

Diversity and resistance

Despite improved social attitudes towards homosexuality, segments of openly gay populations across Western societies are increasingly resisting mainstream gay culture in place of other personal identities. Some have decreed the "end of gay,"⁶⁸ and the need for gay enclaves like Oxford Street has diminished. Earlier generations of gay activists have aged or died⁶⁹ and are not being replaced: "gay is passé."⁷⁰ Arguably, the onset of AIDS in the 1980s acted to delay the disintegration of the gay 'community' by posing an existential challenge to sexualised, hedonistic gay culture that meant homosexuality could be deadly, and made many gay men reliant on wider society for medicine and assistance. Gay territories were thus reinforced as places of community support and health services, whilst deaths from AIDS "established homosexuality as a legitimate topic more swiftly than any political manifesto could possibly have done."⁷¹ By the late 1990s, when improved medications and awareness had reduced the AIDS threat, gay territories became less unified as a major binding force eroded. Claiming territory through everyday gay lives was no longer "still profoundly radical."⁷²

Just as the 'camp' gay stereotype of the 1970s became replaced with that of the 'clones' who were more interested in nightclubbing and gyms than gay politics,⁷³ gay culture has further evolved. 'Clones' have become less defensive about their masculinity,⁷⁴ with the stereotype merging into one of young-looking, thin, stylish men. However, many gays are rejecting the continued standardisation of gay culture and an 'overcommercialisation' of gay life.⁷⁵ Mainstream gay culture often privileges affluent white men, reducing its claim to represent all self-identifying homosexuals and resulting in a corresponding rejection of that culture by some gay men.⁷⁶ Further, the presence of illicit drugs (such as crystal amphetamine⁷⁷) in gay culture and a growing perception of Oxford Street as a dirty, sleazy and dangerous rather than vibrant, hedonistic and enticing place have reinforced this rejection of Sydney's gay culture. Perhaps gays are still migrating to the city in big numbers, but towards lifestyles other than 'gay,' and not necessarily to the Oxford Street area.

Many gays may no longer feel the need to proclaim their sexuality by wearing it on their sleeves and subsuming themselves into lifestyles based almost entirely on socially constructed notions of that sexuality. Individualism is gaining prominence among openly gay men, coinciding with a subsidence of gay political involvement and a growing standardisation of mainstream gay culture in places like Oxford Street. This development parallels the choice of some middle-class gays in San Francisco in the early 1980s to resist gay territory by living elsewhere, "without challenging a system that otherwise was highly favourable to their sex, to their class, and to their race."⁷⁸ In Sydney, mainstream gay culture has been increasingly rejected in the past decade, with gay liberation almost reaching its goal of *individual* freedom. Young gay men are increasingly comfortable about 'coming out'⁷⁹ and are growing up without experiencing widespread homophobia.⁸⁰ Alternative forms of lifestyle and identity are being adopted, based on ethnicity, religion, employment, sub-culture or 'queer-ness' that are simultaneously competing, mutually reinforcing and fluid. Gay culture and 'clones' still exist and are somewhat popular, but are losing ground to other forms of self-identification as the cultural commonalities of Sydney's gay men erode alongside the declining spatial distinctiveness of gay Oxford Street.

Mardi Gras

Many social changes affecting gay Sydney are evident in the history of the Mardi Gras parade,⁸¹ a colourful gay rights march incorporating Oxford Street. First held in 1978, the parade attracts around 800,000 spectators⁸² and injects around \$100 million into Sydney's economy annually.⁸³ Its original aim was greater civil rights for gay men and lesbians and increased acceptance of homosexuality. It has become a political metaphor for tolerance⁸⁴ and attracts substantial media attention. Gay Sydney has claimed public space, Oxford Street, for itself by marching through it,⁸⁵ in an ostentatious carnival of sexuality, politics and protest.

However, the festival's organising body went into receivership in 2002, due to financial difficulties, rising insurance costs and declining international tourism.⁸⁶ Attention has been given to its declining relevance for many gay men.⁸⁷ The parade has been criticised as merely "managing success,"⁸⁸ reducing transgres-

sive behaviour into the “commercialization and commodification of queer”⁸⁹ and relying on “authorized transgressions”⁹⁰ of Sydney streets by gaining prior council permission. It has become largely a spectacle for wider society,⁹¹ captive to commercial and sponsorship pressures. These have arguably eroded and restricted its political power, creativity and ‘shock value,’ concealing remaining inequalities faced by homosexuals and alienating some gays. Mardi Gras has also been criticised for excluding gays who are not white, middle-class or urban, and excluding some important gay issues. As such, many gays no longer feel the need to partake in the parade itself or fight for further civil rights. Although it still has political aims,⁹² retains a central place in Sydney’s gay identity and has become more financially viable recently (becoming part of a month-long arts and social events festival), Mardi Gras appears to present humour more than activism to spectators. For gays, it offers entertainment rather than politics, and is becoming just another event on the ‘gay’ party calendar.

The Internet

The Internet has been popular among gay men, providing opportunities for enhanced social interaction and information gathering from almost any location, further straining Oxford Street’s gay culture. Its “accessible, affordable and anonymous”⁹³ features have enabled gay men to find friends, sex, health information and counselling services online. The Internet allows socially and geographically isolated gays to interact and form ‘cyber’ communities, possibly reducing patronage at gay bars⁹⁴ and dependence on gay territories. Nevertheless, it has also provided opportunities for gay men close to Oxford Street to use gay bars to meet Internet friends.

Forms of gay community organisation have been altered by the Internet, with the emergence of online gay cultures and website profiles.⁹⁵ Gay youth use websites to seek social interaction and discuss their sexuality,⁹⁶ diminishing incentives to join ‘the scene’ or visit Oxford Street. Overall, diversity and participation in the gay community have been enhanced, in an interactive and participatory manner, even though gay urban spaces may be adversely affected.

MOVING ELSEWHERE

Urban and social changes affecting Oxford Street are also altering Sydney’s wider gay geography. Gay men are becoming visible in other inner city and suburban places, raising questions of whether gay Sydney has dispersed, whether more gays have ‘come out’ and are challenging Oxford Street’s central role, or both. A “pink shift”⁹⁷ away from Darlinghurst and towards Inner West suburbs such as Newtown, Erskineville, Glebe and Chippendale has been observed, with relative housing affordability, some gay services and a ‘gay-friendly’ local population being the main drawcards.⁹⁸ King Street, Newtown, is often presented as a ‘gay-friendly’ and ‘alternative’ place with a burgeoning gay community, despite occasional negative comparisons to Oxford Street by some gays.⁹⁹ Other inner-city suburbs, such as Pyrmont and Potts Point, have also been popular with gay men, most likely because of the lifestyle benefits such places offer (for example, cafés, employment, gyms, bars and few children). A number of smaller, localised gay enclaves

appear to be emerging across inner Sydney, challenging Oxford Street’s position at the centre of the mainstream gay ‘universe.’

However, it would be erroneous to conclude that no self-identifying gay men exist in outside inner Sydney, as many (perhaps most) homosexuals do not live in gay territories and often conceal their sexuality. Gay men on Oxford Street reputedly believe there are “no fags out there”¹⁰⁰ in suburbia. However, there are, yet “lacking a space, they lack a visibility.”¹⁰¹

For example, Western Sydney is often imagined as a place of heterosexual masculinity, housing many social groups of low social status.¹⁰² As such, there is “no density to the gayness that exists there.”¹⁰³ Nevertheless, the existence of gay men and social organisations in Western Sydney has been increasingly acknowledged and is growing.¹⁰⁴ Gay ‘westies’ often interpret their identity differently to gays on Oxford Street, rejecting mainstream gay culture in place of an “otherness prestige,”¹⁰⁵ whilst embracing suburban values of friendship and the ‘fair go.’¹⁰⁶ Despite the relative lack of gay-targeted health and social services in Western Sydney, it appears that the geography of gay identity in Sydney is, and always has been, diverse. Diversity within the broader gay ‘community’ (such as of ethnicity, age, religion, employment or location) should not be understated or dismissed, and underlies the increased rejection of Oxford Street as central to visibly gay lifestyles.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the gay geography of Sydney and social processes affecting its most visible space around Oxford Street. Gentrification and the wider social acceptance of homosexuality have increased the number of middle-class heterosexual residents and visitors to Oxford Street, infiltrating the once vibrant gay atmosphere with mainstream shops and ‘straight’ clubs, thereby ‘pricing out’ segments of the gay community. Gay populations are simultaneously resisting Oxford Street’s culture, with many openly gay men rejecting ‘the scene’ and adopting alternative identities, whilst residing in more ‘peripheral’ places. Wider social acceptance and the Internet have reduced the need for gay youth to ‘come out’ onto ‘the scene’ to attain fulfilling lifestyles. The achievement of many gay political goals has also rendered Oxford Street, Mardi Gras and gay politics unappealing to many homosexuals. Indeed, as Oxford Street has converged towards being just another shopping and nightlife locality in Sydney, its underlying appeal has diminished. It may appear to contain a distinctive, vibrant gay culture, yet the gay culture that remains in the area has become progressively commoditised and standardised. As such, many gays may reject it as a ‘fauxhemia’ (as in ‘fake Bohemia’) and seek identities and lifestyles through other means.

While the impacts of Oxford Street’s relatively recent ‘decline’ on gay Sydney are still emerging, it is likely that it will remain a focal point for gay culture, if only because few other places have challenged its status as the “queer heart” of Sydney.¹⁰⁷ Many gays who have rejected Oxford Street nevertheless visit it occasionally, and it is not inconceivable that its gay population may again expand. Future growth is likely in retail and entertainment, albeit targeted towards a less ‘gay’ market. However, the ‘Golden Mile’ may have permanently lost its once strong attraction for many gay men as it ‘de-gays,’ and as alternative socialisation avenues evolve. It appears that individual non-

heterosexual identities are being defined in less geographical terms than previously, aided by wider social acceptance. As sociologist Manuel Castells concluded for San Francisco, "the survival of the gay community is closely tied to the overall process of social change."¹⁰⁸ The significance of coherent homosexual identities and specific gay spaces has declined, perhaps irreversibly, in a process likely to be mirrored in other Western cities. Although more research is desirable, it appears that, for Oxford Street, diversity and acceptance have led to decline.

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