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David Millhauser (1950-1987) Muir Woods

Lost Landscapes and the Spatial Contextualization of Queerness

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for Alex Wilson 1953-1993

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual¹ habitation of outdoor and indoor environments has become a major topic in queer² theory and spatial issues³ have come to represent new frontiers in the politics of our various communities. Homophobia, violence, and isolation in outdoor spaces are coming to be framed as environmental problems. A host of possibilities for new alliances around queer space is emerging. But it is first necessary to ask a number of questions before specific interventions in the condition of outdoor areas can better define and strengthen our communities and improve our lives.

Is homophobia partially an “environmental” problem? Do lesbians and gay communities and well-used queer sites represent particular resources that are vulnerable to “environmental degradation”? Has the ongoing loss of freedom of queer expression in outdoor areas, and comfortable and safe access to respective “resources,” been a central experience for most lesbians and gay men? Can the building of our communities and queer placemaking be viewed as a kind of social environmentalism the way, for example, are the expanding efforts to confront and counter “environmental racism”?

In order to determine what we

have lost, as a basis for a new kind of environmental activism, we need to know where we are. Spatial contextualization of queerness is about better defining where we are as a basis for more concerted action—including reappropriating “space” and territory. An additional purpose of this discussion is to reconsider the concept of the gay ghetto and to explore “deghettoization”⁴ as both central to “queer theory” and as providing a basis of an authentic architecture of “queerscapes”.⁵

This essay explores these questions in terms of the concept of “lost landscapes”: the experience of denied access to or assault, intimidation, or perceived risk in relation to particular sites because of our identities, interactions, and behaviour. The notion of lost landscapes is complex and directly related to the broader concept of spatial apportionment along lines of race and gender.⁶ A framework for considering apportionment of outdoor space for lesbians and gay men reflects the reality that the majority of our communities experience a compounding of these losses of access, safety, comfort, and freedom of expression in fashions related to women and people of colour—or in the developing world to indigenous groups and cultural minorities. The major reason for why a precise understanding of lesbian and gay male life, sexuality, and space, has been so long in coming is that it only makes sense as part of more extensive explorations of communities of ‘difference’.⁷ For most lesbians and gay men, queerness compounds personal situations as double and triple jeopardies.

An understanding of the intensifying juncture of environmentalism, radical ecology, ecofeminism,⁸ and queer theory is becoming crucial for the expansion of political activism in the coming decade. But why has environmentalism been so weak, so far, in recognizing “body space” along with outdoor sexual violence and homophobia as environmental problems? An over-emphasis on the experience

of straight white men and persistent homophobia in environmental groups are only partial explanations.

In addition, the regional scale of many environmental problems can obscure more site-specific problems such as:

1. the lack of recognition of the widespread nature and statistics on anti-lesbian and anti-gay male violence;
2. the difficulty of separating violence related to sexual orientation from that directed at women and people of colour;
3. the lack of acceptance of subject-oriented information on violence, threats, abuse, and discomfort.

This third gap is the most intriguing and is now being filled with newly structured descriptions of experiences of place called ‘cognitive mapping’.⁹ These mental maps allow people to define their experience, including their fears, more on their own terms and with their own vocabularies. The dam is now breaking on the “evidence” of queer space—and the lack of it.

If we ask a few hundred residents of a neighbourhood to map-out their public open space and to talk about it in situations where they feel comfortable and where their perspectives will have an impact on decision-making, different experiences would emerge along lines of gender, race, culture, age, mobility, and sexuality. The mental maps of most gay men and some lesbians show secret and hidden spaces, some which might be relatively segregated at certain times. These secret queer spaces were a major part of the lives of gay men before gay liberation. Indeed they have been central to our communities, especially when there was repression against bars and other gay-owned businesses.¹⁰ As well as outlining these fleeting islands of pleasure and meeting, such mental maps pick up our various terrors in terms of violence, which are especially acute for women in terms of sense of risk and comfort in exploration.

Considerations of the organization of social spaces pushes us to consider how a range of lesbian and gay male communities are marginalized. Maps of queer space beyond the boundaries of “decency” and “good taste” may be quite different than sites of homosexuality in relatively tolerant environments. Sometimes queer spaces are isolated, dangerous, or trashed places that no other group much wants—at least at certain times of the day or night. There is the marginalization of being pushed to places that few other social groups use or want but there is also the desire to live on the edge—to live perpetually away from the centre of acceptable lifestyles and sexuality. These kind of ‘decentred’ “queer” landscapes are not necessarily supposed to be very functional or pretty. Unfortunately, we don’t have a very rich vocabulary or understanding for the types of environments associated with different kinds of marginalization, homophobia by design, and conscious choices against standard morals.

Homophobia, violence, and loss of access to landscapes

Is a central part of queer experience about being denied the potential access to certain spaces and certain levels of freedom of expression, comfort, and security? What are these actual losses and how are they enforced? How much of these losses have been internalized and will persist in our lives indefinitely? The following is a list of some of the most important processes working against queer open space: homophobic and misogynist violence, police re-

pression, *de facto* privatization of public open space, site design and management to discourage contact and queer placemaking, the lack of relevant representation, and cumulative discouragement to engage openly out-of-doors.

One of the most effective ways to be denied access, security, comfort, or freedom of expression is through the threat of violence. It does not matter much of the particular source of the threat. The dynamic geography of dyke and gay bashing has had a tremendous impact on our mental maps, where we choose to go and where to live, and the subsequent formation of our communities and neighbourhoods. Police repression has a similar effect.

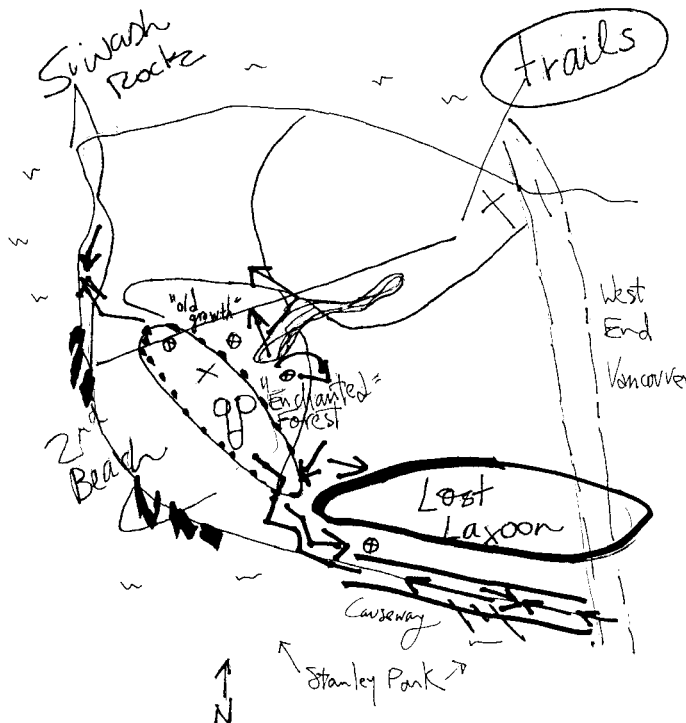
The *de facto* privatization of public open space,¹¹ which increased in the 1980s in much of the developed world, pushes a whole range of local populations out of strategic sites. Police and violence have been factors as have design and management decisions which make certain sites inaccessible or uncomfortable. For

some sites and some groups there has been a particular form of homophobia by design which functions to discourage contact as perpetrated through homophobic landscape design and park management decisions.

Most public open space has little representation of queer experience and imagery. There are scant depictions, billboards, statues, memorials, and outdoor art by and explicitly about aspects of our lives—even in neighbourhoods with large gay communities. There are and have been constraints in terms of “morality” but there has often been acrimony when public art has been proposed for important sites. Most queer sites, especially for racial and cultural minorities, are relatively unmarked to the point where only some members of those communities know how to find them. All of this can lead to a cumulative discouragement to engage openly out-of-doors.

‘Deghettoization’ as “ghetto” environmentalism

The word *ghetto*,¹² especially for lesbian and gay communities, is increasingly seen as contentious. For one thing, most lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals do not live in classic ghettos. For more invisible minorities, the term does not have the same meaning as it has for visible minorities. Some of us may feel pushed into a certain neighbourhood but then these “ghettos” can get expensive and exclusive and just as many people will choose new edges and margins. The project of deghettoization, which some have argued as being central to new queer politics, is about



consciously moving presence, placemaking, and representation out to the more homophobic and higher risk zones.

Sexually assertive gay men and lesbians, since the Victorian period, have essentially been outlaws. But the nature of this constant “reconstruction of the ‘legend’ of the homosexual outlaw,”¹³ and how we play it out in the landscape varies with the nature of broader communities and configurations of sites. One issue is the line between what is acceptable as public and what is acceptable as private. The boundaries and demarcations between public and private, throughout spheres of gay male and lesbian life, have been particularly provisional and temporary in response to fashion, prosperity, and repression.

The Stonewall Riots transformed our notions of queers sites forever: boundaries were set and lines were drawn and that information was represented and replicated. The riots marked a new cohesion, perhaps even a kind of militarization that has been about aggressively contesting and reappropriating public sites if only for short periods. The ritual quality, and indeed the power, of these episodes, these demonstrations, to groups so culturally and emotionally “ghettoized” and marginalized should not be underestimated. But there has been more than just the temporary assertion of control over points and territories. The experiences, the rules, and the vocabularies that have been asserted transform how we view ourselves, our communities, and our inherent rights.

Sites of sexuality, conspiracy and remembrance have been particularly contentious both within our communities and within broader society. By now in virtually every neighbourhood in North America and Europe, with sizable lesbian and gay male communities, there has been at least one major controversy about safety, another about sexuality, and yet another about the conception, symbolism, interpretation, and delivery of sculptural and

pictorial information for strategic public sites. Art that explicitly explores queer sensibilities and outdoor space has begun to emerge over the last decade.¹⁴

Queer environmentalism from body to political corps to biosphere

If the notions of “homosexual” and “lesbian” were largely constructed in the nineteenth century¹⁵, a time of intensifying exploitation of natural resources and indeed of space, there are bound to be some relationships between patriarchy, homophobia, and assaults on and impoverishment of ecosystems and localized cultures. There is an argument that queer space has been associated with the extremes of the allocation of space and resources. As the pace of ecological destruction quickens, amenities, habitable space, and life support become more scarce and expensive. Niches for lesbians and gay men may become increasingly temporary, embodying intensified forms of *delocalization*.¹⁶ Unfortunately, such promising movements as ecofeminism have barely considered spatial issues.

A theory of queer and nonqueer space could lay the basis for description of risks to our continued presence, security, and comfort in terms of scope and scale, on one hand, and opportunities for collective expression on the other. Within this continuum, queer sites can be identified as clustered across various extremes. While this is perhaps too reductionist a framework for considering the linkages between collective behaviour, gender and sexuality dimensions of culture, and ecological relationships, it is important to recognize that one of the most exciting developments in queer culture has been the new and increasingly creative uses of space, both outdoor and indoor, for meeting, for resistance, for ceremony, and for redefinition and strengthening of alliances. The 1990s are about the *spatial articula-*

tion of collective experiences. What then are some strategies for reappropriating and creating queer space?

There are increasingly organized efforts to counter homophobic and misogynist violence, including the presence of community groups, education of police, and design for more secure sites. There have been some modest gains at countering police repression through pressure from various groups. But more comprehensive strategies to counter violence and assert presence are still needed.

The middle class strategies of the 1960s and 1970s, that emphasized the acquisition of private space by individuals, groups and separatist land trusts have not been every effective in creating new queer space. Countering the effective privatization of public open space must first involve the identification of areas that could and should support a range of activities and then the assertion of the legitimacy of the queer presence. “Kiss-ins” and “die-ins” in suburban shopping malls have had a mild impact. Design and site management decisions that can be shown to be homophobic must be documented and confronted. More importantly, strategies for permanent queer placemaking of more sites must be explored. Again, the goal is not to create any kind of segregation or exclusion of heterosexuals but rather to make these sites more than just “gay friendly.”

Part of some of these placemaking strategies can be the addition of markers. Asserting queer imagery in public space is an expanding project in organizations like Queer Nation and more specific projects like those of DAM! (Dyke Action Machine!) who playfully reworked and subverted the ambiguous male imagery of Calvin Klein and Marky-Mark.¹⁷ To counter internalized forms of ghettoization, a range of efforts to highlight queer presence, at times ceremonial,¹⁸ and to make symbolic efforts to show a long-term involvement need to be fashioned.

Questions in theory and activism for queer space

One of the factors that have held back queer environmental activism around space, is a lot of unresolved questions. The following are some speculative questions for an activist and experiential theory of queers in space.

1. What constitutes “queer space” and how is the concept useful (or obstructive) for different groups—particularly lesbians and lesbians and gay men of colour?
2. Are queer neighbourhoods really refuges from homophobia or is it just places where there are a lot of lesbians and gay men?
3. What are the points of similarity and divergence between lesbian and gay male experience and use of outdoor space?
4. What are the potential uses of a theory of queers in outdoor space in terms of identity, community, safety, communication, and pleasure?
5. How have the uses of historic (queer) sites changed over time and what are the trends in claiming and remaking these places?
6. Are there major differences in queer spaces between the South and North and the “developing” and the “developed” worlds and, in particular, between areas and groups with shortages of sufficient housing.

Conclusions: Design and construction of queerscapes

There is not much point in worrying about queer space if we think that we will be unsuccessful with protecting the planet, biodiversity, and life support. But to grasp our queer positions in the landscape, within this broader crisis, provides powerful opportunities. Clearly identified lesbians and gay men will continue to have a difficult time contributing to and

taking leadership roles in alliances over broader environmental issues until we have better determined our own situations in the landscape—until we each have better senses of the spatial context of our own communities.

More differences become apparent in our communities when we have a clearer sense of where we really are, what we have access to, and what we have lost. Most of us will have to confront both a backlog of fear, frustration, and even complacency, and the reality of “open” spaces where queer presence and expression have been carefully controlled when not removed. Collective kinds of experiences, such as political and cultural demonstrations, will continue to play a key role in the intensifying reappropriation of what should be queer sites.

As well as more authentic bases for working in coalitions with heterosexuals around broader environmental issues, there is a longer term agenda for an architecture of queerscapes. Programming for the full range of queer experience and consensual expression is the new project in queerscape architecture that few of us, so far, have explored. For now, it is important to explore our own lost landscapes. Until we have conceived of more room to make contact, nurture, and “play”, on our own terms, in the places that we love, we will not be able to garnish our full energies and creativity to also work to stop the destruction of the many places, living things, and broader human communities that are now at risk.

Notes

¹ It may be that the only commonality between lesbian, gay male, and bisexual use of space is from homophobia and some vaguely similar desires. The implications of transgender individuals and other sexual minorities to a theory of queers in space have not been fully considered in this discussion.

² “Queer” is used as a shorter synonym of

“lesbian/gay male/bisexual woman or man” and suggests a departure from earlier lesbian and gay male movements in its implicit and indefinite construction of a “de-centered” ‘community of difference,’ the positing of a “new stance for opposition” see Duggan 1991.

³ The most relevant analytical frameworks and surveys for consideration of queer outdoor space have been provided in S. Adler, and J. Brenner. “Gender and space: Lesbians and gays in the city,” *International Journal for Urban and Regional Research* 16 (1992), pp. 24-34, L. Knopp, “Sexuality and the spatial dynamics of capitalism,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 10 (1992), pp. 651-669, and B. Weightman, “Commentary: Towards a geography of the gay community,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 1 (1981), pp. 106-112.

⁴ To explore this project of “de-ghettoization,” see L. Duggan, “Making it perfectly queer,” *Socialist Review* 22:1 (1991), pp. 11-31.

⁵ A “queerscape” is not only a landscape, as based on the Flemish root *schap*, with queers but also one that is *decentred*, in terms of “supporting” sexual minorities though not necessarily marginalized or ghettoized.

⁶ L. K. Weisman, *Discrimination by Design: A feminist critique of the man-made environment*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), which on page 2 notes that “Space, like language, is socially constructed; and like the syntax of language, the spatial arrangements of our buildings and communities reflect and reinforce the nature of gender, race, and class relations in society. The uses of both language and space contribute to the power of the some groups over others and the maintenance of human inequality.”

⁷ To further explore this framework of social “difference” and space see G. C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in cultural politics*, (New York, Routledge, 1987); J. Terry, “Theorizing deviant historiography,” *differences: A journal of feminist cultural studies* 3:2 (1991), pp. 54-74, and C. Owens, “Outlaws: Gay men in feminism,” in *Be-*

yond Recognition: Representation, power, and culture, S. Bryson, B. Kruger, L. Tillman and J. Weinstock (editors), pp. 218-235, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

⁸ S. Griffin, "Split culture," pp. 7-17 and Y. King, "The ecology of feminism and the feminism of ecology," pp. 18-28 in *Healing the Wounds: The promise of ecofeminism*, J. Plant (editor), (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1989).

⁹ Eric Estuar Reyes, "Queer Spaces, The Space of Lesbians and Gay Men of Color in Los Angeles," pp. 91-112, a thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Urban Planning, University of California, Los Angeles, 1993.

¹⁰ One discussion of the role of open space in periods of homophobic repression is made by John Grube of pre-Stonewall Toronto where the sites were as crucial for making

friends and exchanging information as for sex. See J. Grube in "Queens and flaming virgins: Towards a sense of gay community," *Rites* (Toronto) 2:9 (1986), pp. 14-17.

¹¹ Mike Davis, "Fortress L.A.", in *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, (New York, Vintage Books), pp. 221-264.

¹² Carl Wittman noted in the early 1970s that "San Francisco is a refugee camp for homosexuals. We had fled to here from every part of the nation, and like refugees elsewhere, we came not because it is so great here, but because it was so bad there...we have formed a ghetto, out of self-protection. It is a ghetto rather than a free territory because it is still theirs..." from *A Gay Manifesto*, reprinted in *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, K. Jay and A. Young (editors), (New York: Douglas Book/World Publishing/Times Mirror, 1972) pp. 330-345.

¹³ See Craig Owens, 1992, pp. 218.

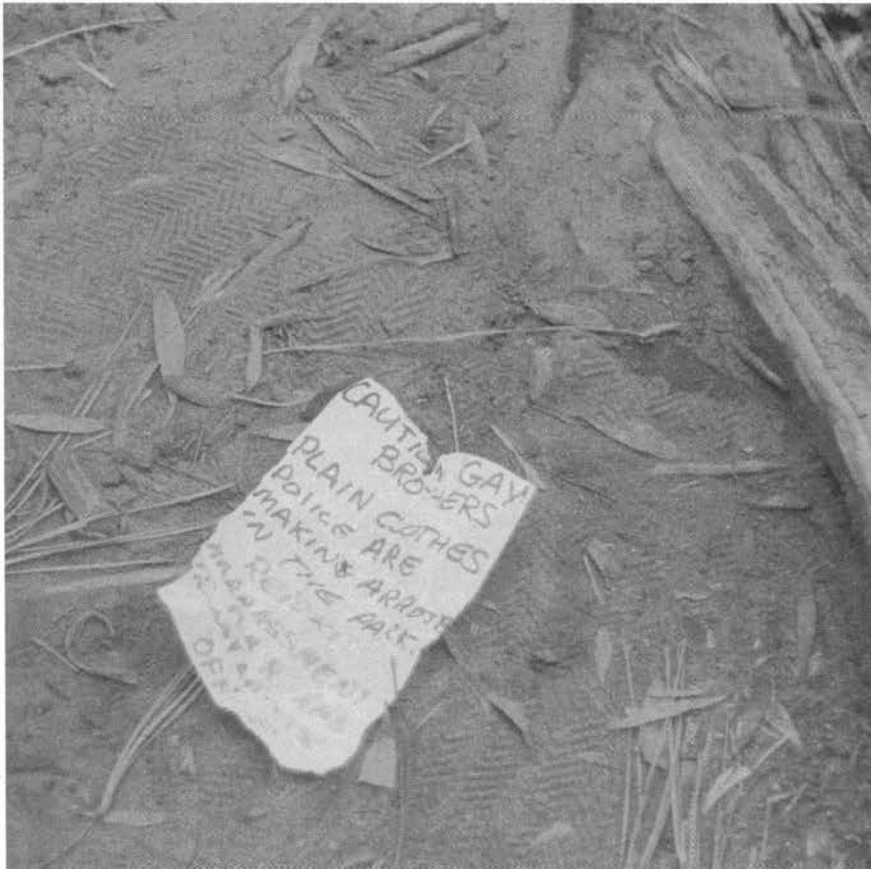
¹⁴ For an example of queer environmental art, see the piece "Utopian Prospects" by Mark Robbins in *Angles of Incidence* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 38-41.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol :1 An Introduction*. (New York: Random House, 1978).

¹⁶ Paul Virilio, (translated by M. Polizzotti), *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*, (New York: Columbia University, 1986).

¹⁷ See the posters with "do you love the dyke in your life?" by "dyke action machine" in the streets of New York City in 1993.

¹⁸ One of the best documented examples of queer (spatial) ceremony was the laying of the AIDS Quilt amidst sites of U.S. power and remembrance at the 1993 March on Washington.



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Photo: Brent Ingram

Buena Vista Park, San Francisco, 1980