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Viewpoint

Rainbow diaspora: the emerging renaissance of gay neighbourhoods

The impact of shifting societal attitudes and opinions toward LGBT individuals has called into question the need for gay neighbourhoods and noticeably changed the composition of some gay neighbourhoods. These changes are often unique to each place and must be investigated thoughtfully and carefully. The evolution of gay neighbourhoods represents a largely unwritten chapter in LGBT history and the broader history of cities and provides an opportunity for researchers to accurately capture the reasons for change, before time has elapsed and the contextual history of these places has evaporated. Reflecting on Hess's Viewpoint recently offered here in *Town Planning Review*, I acknowledge that gay neighbourhoods are in a 'transitional stage toward a post-gay, post-binary-identity era' (2019, 230) and attempt to examine some possible reasons for the disorderly academic examination of the gay neighbourhood over the last few decades.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) individuals have resided in cities around the world since ancient times (Ackroyd, 2018). However, the emergence of gay districts in cities – neighbourhoods or 'gaybourhoods' – occurred slowly in the early to mid-twentieth century. Typologically distinct gay districts first appeared in the 1930s, followed by gay ghettos and neighbourhoods that increased in substance and importance in the ensuing decades. By the 1980s and 1990s, gay neighbourhoods seemed to plateau in popularity and subsequently appeared to decline through the 2000s. This evolution of gay neighbourhoods was fuelled in part by post-Second World War suburban mobility and expansion. LGBT residents especially began to appropriate marginal and leftover spaces within cities as a refuge and means to form supportive and accepting communities rooted in self-preservation and protection during the mid-twentieth century.

The period leading up to what came to a head in the Stonewall riots in 1969 underscored the impact of persecution on members of the LGBT community, and the need for protection was experienced in every North American city. The 1969 Stonewall riots, though isolated to a small geographic area of Greenwich Village in New York City, marked the post-Second World War beginning of the slow integration of gay subculture into the mainstream. The effects of Stonewall reverberated across nearly every major American city (Abraham, 2011), spawning a countercultural

evolution in placemaking. This sea change was truly a fight among LGBT individuals against persecution and for dignity and survival. The violent events at Stonewall resulted in a sort of self-selected cocooning of lesbian women and especially gay men, the by-product of which was the emergence of distinct gay districts within most North American cities (Nash, 2006; Aldrich, 2004; Knopp, 1990). Like many other neighbourhoods dominated by affinity groups, gay neighbourhoods were born of a desire for familiarity and security (Knopp, 1990), especially as LGBT individuals were harassed and intermittently persecuted for offenses such as 'loitering'. A newfound strength and vitality in numbers affirmed the development of gay ghettos in many major cities.

Gay ghettos later evolved into bohemian neighbourhoods attracting oppressed and marginalised individuals regardless of sexual orientation or gender expression, but especially LGBT individuals, and especially from less accepting locales. The resulting population dynamics further diversified the populations of these neighbourhoods. Gay neighbourhoods, as a result, became diverse centres of community that welcomed 'the other'. Known for vibrant nightlife and creativity, gay neighbourhoods challenged and eventually changed broader societal norms and culture.

The prevalence of gay neighbourhoods in and around urban centres suggests a degree of perceived positive and supportive attributes associated with these districts (Neville and Henrickson, 2010). Compared to some other mainstream, racial or ethnic neighbourhoods over the past seventy years, gay neighbourhoods as a whole have seemingly changed and transformed more noticeably and more quickly. These changes are marked by a sharp increase in property values, rapid gentrification and an apparent decrease in the number of LGBT residents and businesses that cater to LGBT consumers. Changes within gay neighbourhoods are occasionally attributed to an overall increase in civil rights for LGBT individuals (Ackroyd, 2018). However, the cause for these changes likely stems from a more complex confluence of factors in addition to more universal civil rights. Other contributing factors include a still-growing mainstream acceptance of LGBT individuals and a decrease in persecution, harassment and violence toward LGBT individuals which mirrors a lower tolerance for these types of behaviour in mainstream society. In addition, technology, economics (housing affordability, specifically), changing tastes and preferences of LGBT individuals, and easier access to amenities and specialised services that appeal to LGBT individuals undoubtedly also influence housing choice and overall neighbourhood choice for LGBT residents just as for non-LGBT residents.

The emergence and success (or even diminishment) of any gay neighbourhood is difficult to attribute to any single factor. Despite this difficulty in explaining the trajectory of gay neighbourhoods, a predilection persists among researchers to oversimplify the explanation of broader trends that shape LGBT neighbourhoods.

Richard Florida (2002) identified a unique, vibrant, creative energy as a hallmark of neighbourhoods and attempted to quantify a 'gay index' as an indicator of the diversity of neighbourhoods. This 'creativity', Florida argued, often sparked broader neighbourhood change and, as a result, could act as a harbinger of gentrification. Florida's implication was that creativity emanated from gay neighbourhoods to the mainstream avant-garde supported by 'creatives' and techno-savvy professionals and that other cities could benefit by nurturing similar populations. I argue, however, that his assertion seems now to have been – perhaps – superficial and based on an isolated snapshot of the evolution of gay neighbourhoods near the turn of the twenty-first century rather than a detailed longitudinal study of trends or changes in these cities over decades.

Moreover, Florida's hypothesis did not completely account for the multifaceted attributes of residents or of social or economic factors in gay neighbourhoods. Instead the 'gay index' appeared to identify higher-than-average proportions of LGBT residents in specific neighbourhoods against other neighbourhoods with a less prominent LGBT presence. The principal issue with Florida's 'gay index' is that the number of gay residents concentrated in any one area does not alone signal creativity or desirability. While a connection between LGBT and creativity may exist, this oversimplification cannot be explained as the *only* connection without significantly more study. The composition, and reasons for persistence, of a gay neighbourhood are likely much more nuanced and complex. Despite its limitations, Florida's theory gained attention and became part of the overall discourse for the better part of the last two decades.

The false notion that LGBT residents alone are the vanguard of neighbourhood improvement was further magnified and propagated by a general real-estate boom and hyper-gentrification of major cities over the past two decades in which gay neighbourhoods (like the South End in Boston, the Castro in San Francisco, West Hollywood in Los Angeles, and Chelsea in New York) became the most sought-after residential locations in cities for affluent and upwardly mobile people (Bitterman and Hess, 2016b).

Gone before it began? Gay neighbourhood as an urban typology

While gay neighbourhoods have been well established for about seventy-five years, 'gay neighbourhood' as an urban typology and a subject of academic study and investigation is quite recent. About the same time Florida argued the benefits of the 'gay index', the study of gay neighbourhoods both as typology and as phenomenon was beginning its academic adolescence. Pioneering articles gave way to canonical texts including Ghaziani's (2015) *There Goes the Gayborhood?*, which questions the *raison*

d'être and future of gay neighbourhoods. Especially over the past decade a swell of research on gay neighbourhoods has emerged, likely fuelled by the slow march toward a post-binary gender-identity era (as noted by Hess (2019) in his *Town Planning Review* Viewpoint). This shift in research landscape warrants a cautious approach toward quantifying, assessing and tracking changes in gay neighbourhoods. Just as promoting especially positive attributes of gay neighbourhoods proved shortsighted, decrying the decline or death of gay neighbourhoods may be substantially premature.

Gay neighbourhoods share social and economic commonalities with other neighbourhood types in which populations disenfranchised from the mainstream band together out of familiarity or necessity for protection and support, unified by a desire for dignity, equality and opportunity. Undoubtedly, some of the very same patterns of change that have been well researched and documented with regard to ethnic neighbourhoods can cast important light on the evolution of gay neighbourhoods. Ethnic neighbourhoods formed and succeeded because of propinquity to family and friends who shared common language, heritage and culture, much in the same manner gay neighbourhoods have persevered over the past seventy years. Therefore, just as the introduction and proliferation of the telephone did not erase Chinatown or Little Italy, the introduction and proliferation of Grindr, Scissr and other LGBT dating apps or future technological changes likely will not wipe out gay neighbourhoods as a typology any more than any other type of neighbourhood typology. Change in ethnic and racially segregated neighbourhoods provides one potential template for typological and longitudinal comparison studies of gay neighbourhoods with other urban typologies.

Evolution and change over time does not equal diminishment

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, as LGBT individuals in the United States and Canada gained greater and more uniform civil and human rights (Mayers, 2018), selective persecution and harassment decreased and the need to 'band together' for safety in numbers also diminished. These changes prompted some gay neighbourhood residents to move to other locales, and LGBT residents from places without gay neighbourhoods to live proudly in place (Bitterman and Hess, 2016b). Also, a ripple effect resulting from broader societal change caused population shifts and vacancies in gay neighbourhoods, making them more desirable for real-estate developers and deep-pocketed buyers. As a result, LGBT residents have sometimes been evicted, priced out or pestered by new residents who do not understand the needs of LGBT residents (Moss, 2017). These changes – chronicled in newspaper articles, magazines and even television and film – have sometimes occurred swiftly and have substantially changed the character and socio-economic make-up of some well-established gay neighbourhoods. This, in turn, has sometimes been misinterpreted as the wholesale death of gay neighbourhoods, or

as proof that gay neighbourhoods are no longer relevant or necessary. These rash assessments are doubtful.

However, while some established gay neighbourhoods may seemingly diminish as they are sold piecemeal to affluent bidders (Moss, 2017) and dismantled by real-estate speculators, other existing gay neighbourhoods are strengthened and new enclaves and communities are established which provide a fertile ground to give rise to other, new gay neighbourhoods.

The apparent mainstreaming of some established gay neighbourhoods may indicate greater mainstream social acceptance of LGBT residents and a decreased need for 'protection in numbers' (Hess, 2019), and may also support the notion of a broader diaspora of LGBT residents as the pioneers of leading-edge or yet-to-fully-emerge gay neighbourhoods, communities and other urban typologies. Changes in gay neighbourhoods have too often been tied to singular changes in LGBT and mainstream culture and do not take into account the complexities of broader forces of economic and social evolution (Bitterman and Hess, 2016a). Just as other ethnic or socio-economic neighbourhoods have not completely disappeared, neither have gay neighbourhoods. Instead, gay neighbourhoods – like all neighbourhoods – are in a state of constant change (Ghaziani, 2015).

Energy, vitality and diversity help to create an illusion that gay neighbourhoods often appear to be at the forefront of change, evolution and adaptation. In several cities, long-established gay neighbourhoods have been gentrified or hyper-gentrified, which has squeezed out LGBT residents, citizens and visitors, but, paradoxically, resulted in the establishment of several new smaller gay enclaves elsewhere within the same city. These 'seed communities' – formative pockets that are too small yet to be considered proper neighbourhoods – are the potential genesis of the next generation of gay neighbourhoods. One such example of this diaspora is evident in Boston. As the well-established gay neighbourhood in the South End gentrified, smaller pockets of LGBT-friendly businesses, organisations, clubs and other amenities cropped up in Cambridge, the North End, Back Bay and Jamaica Plain. The LGBT presence in these areas is not as large, nor are these areas as widely recognised as LGBT-friendly as the original South End gay neighbourhood, but some (or all) of these areas may prove fertile grounds to establish future gay neighbourhoods around greater Boston. Similar examples are evident in other cities with established gay neighborhoods, including Toronto, New York and San Francisco, as well as across smaller cities including Buffalo, New York; Cleveland, Ohio; Miami, Florida and Portland, Oregon. This emerging phenomenon indicates a broader and more universal shift toward an urban and suburban LGBT diaspora of sorts.

Emerging gay neighbourhoods have been scarcely documented or researched, but some will likely serve present and future generations of LGBT residents, citizens, families and visitors for years to come. Moreover, as the needs of LGBT citizens and families change, so too will types and examples of gay neighbourhoods.



Figure 1
Rainbow
crosswalks in
Cambridge,
Massachusetts
convey LGBT
acceptance and
inclusion in a
diverse community
Source: Author



Figure 2
Rainbow
crosswalks in San
Francisco mark
the boundaries
of the Castro,
a well-established
gay
neighbourhood
Source: Author

Empirical analysis: not all rainbows and unicorns

Gay neighbourhoods are likely neither dying nor flourishing, but simply existing, just like any neighbourhood typology. Gay neighbourhoods are subject to complex changes and processes over these early years of evolution. Given the newness of this typology

and the inconsistent manner by which gay neighbourhoods have been considered, little reliable evidence or comparative data exists that definitively establish meaningful shifts in demand for gay neighbourhoods. Moreover, as generational demographics shift and as LGBT preferences change over time (Hess, 2019), the desirability of established gay neighbourhoods will likely cycle through periods of excited growth and waning popularity. The factors fueling this cyclical change encompass four very broad categories.

Economic and demographic

Some established gay neighbourhoods are being sold to non-LGBT buyers, LGBT residents have moved on to new locations and to new urban and suburban typologies. The first generation of out-and-proud LGBT residents are starting to age in unprecedented numbers and new neighbourhoods and types of living communities, such as naturally occurring LGBT retirement communities (NOLGBTRC), are beginning to emerge (Bitterman and Hess, 2016a), such as the Birds of a Feather mobile home park near Santa Fe, New Mexico, and LGBT senior housing developments such as Seashore Point in Provincetown, Rhode Island and A Place for Us near Cleveland, Ohio. Established gay neighbourhoods that hope to remain LGBT-friendly should endeavour to create amenities that support ageing in place for ageing residents. Similarly, as LGBT-headed families become increasingly common and gain greater acceptance, the demands on LGBT neighbourhoods and the types of amenities required change from places featuring boisterous nightlife, specialised pharmacies and underwear boutiques to neighbourhoods that also include LGBT-friendly day care facilities, playgrounds, libraries and access to inclusive and high-quality schools.

Technological

Technological changes like social media, augmented reality and the ability to communicate virtually will connect LGBT individuals across time and space, and will likely provide conduits for establishing gay neighbourhoods or seed communities in areas where LGBT communities would have been unimaginable a generation – or even a decade – ago. A geospatially decentralised community is a community nonetheless. Technology can increase exposure to dissimilar people and encourage dialogue, which could, over time, impact broader societal acceptance in areas traditionally thought to be less LGBT-friendly.

Safety

Greater mainstream acceptance diminishes targeted persecution and the need for ‘safety in numbers’. Though violence, harassment and persecution of LGBT individuals have not disappeared (Valencia et al., 2019), and each subgroup that identifies as part of the LGBT acronym encounters specific challenges, the overall trend toward harassment-based crimes of LGBT individuals in North America appears to be decreasing (Mattson, 2018).

Mobility

Neighbourhoods in cities like Miami, Palm Springs, Provincetown, Key West and Harper’s Ferry have long been welcoming to LGBT vacationers. However, as mainstream acceptance of LGBT individuals and families increases, the demand for LGBT-themed vacations will likely continue to increase. LGBT-themed or seasonal leisure destinations may provide additional future models of gay neighbourhoods, resorts and communities.

LGBT history is happening now

The emergence of gay neighbourhoods as an urban typology is a remarkable urban transformation. The context of gay neighbourhoods continues to change along with broader trends that impact cities, like gentrification, affordability and transition. Like most urban neighbourhoods, gay neighbourhoods increasingly seem more similar to mainstream neighbourhoods than different. Some gay neighbourhoods have grown, some have changed significantly, and some new gay neighbourhoods have begun to emerge. These are all markers of a healthy evolution and underscore positive changes in social acceptance of LGBT individuals. Gay neighbourhoods, like other urban typologies, are subject to the same forces of external change and the same drivers – technological, societal, social and economic – that impact other neighbourhoods. These forces impact all neighbourhoods, albeit differently. Gay neighbourhoods are no exception.

The overly simplistic equation perpetuated over the past twenty years that LGBT residents ensure eventual economic prosperity and improve the general perception of a specific neighbourhood has perhaps harmed the productive study of gay neighbourhoods by creating a false understanding of the factors contributing to the success and evolution of gay neighbourhoods. This questionable proposition hampered academic examination of gay neighbourhoods and helped to perpetuate the imprecise supposition that demand for gay neighbourhoods is diminishing. Instead, the research charge of sociologists, economists and scholars of the built environment is not to discover an element which makes gay neighbourhoods unique, but rather to investigate the

elements that make gay neighbourhoods unremarkable within the border urban typology of 'neighbourhood'.

Through unglamorous scholarly inquiry, the true account of the evolution and trajectories of gay neighbourhoods will be revealed. To better understand the longitudinal progression of gay neighbourhoods, researchers should endeavour to differentiate between well-established gay neighbourhoods and emerging gaybourhoods, carefully studying the trends and demographics that lead to shifting LGBT populations and changes in gay neighbourhoods. This evolution, occurring in plain sight but largely undocumented, is LGBT history in the making and the opportunity to chronicle these unique and important changes is ours to lose.

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