AMONGST THE RUINS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore the affect that urban ruins had on gay male experience and identity in the late 20th and early 21st century city. In the over-regulated city of the late 20th century, dominant strategies normatively ordered the majority of spaces, yet the late 20th century city was never a seamlessly regulated realm for it continued to be haunted by the neglected, the disposed of, and the repressed. Along with other places on the margins of regulated space, urban ruins operated as points of transition, passages from reason to myth, moments of magic that exist at the interslices of ordered space. In this paper, I suggest that the affective and sensual feelings and memories conjoured up by ruins acted as a catalyst for the creation of alternative ways of being for gay men that constrasted with the constrained ways of being that prevailed across the majority of the ordered everyday spaces of the late 20th century western city. The paper explores these relations through the experiences of men in three cities—Sydney, Montreal and New York.

This paper is an extract form a larger paper that I'm currently writing that explores the affect that urban ruins had on gay male experience and identity in the late 20th and early 21st century western city. Within the larger project I provide three case studies from three different cities—New York, Sydney and Montreal. The case study presented in this conference paper explores ways in which gay men utilised real decaying urban ruins as a means of enabling and affirming identities and sexual practices. I begin by offering a framework for understanding the sexualised city, and its various material terrains; my focus being the contrast between lived every day spaces, and ruins. I then provide some methodological notes, and present my case study.

Over the last few decades a broad literature has emerged which explores how heterosexual identification is normative in contemporary western societies, while gay sexualities are non-normative.[1] This literatures also explains how this binary has been mapped onto material urban spaces, creating normative ways to imagine and experience everyday spaces in the city.[2] These critical insights argue that heteronormativity as part of a complex social totality and fundamental frame of reference for western culture has helped to structure the large Western populations that emerged in the 19th century city. Increasingly throughout the 20th century and more strongly through the 1960s and 1970's, sexuality (like other realms of experience) have become increasingly disconnected from their groundings in the social and spatial structure of the nineteenth century and early to mid-twentieth century industrialism.

In carrying out this research, scholars have drawn attention to the way in which sexuality has been intricately interwoven into the processes of urbanization. What is apparent about this plethora of scholarly work, is that the majority focuses on what might be called the every day lived space of the city, generally well ordered, clean spaces that support particular purposes and usages, ranging from the home, the office, the factory, the bar, to the restaurant among others: spaces which create a certain spatial homogeneity within the city which are maintained through regular daily activity. The chief characteristic of everyday life is recurrence,[3] a recurrence that is supported by both bureaucratic systems (planning and policing) and economic systems. One technique of ordering and maintaining these every day lived spaces that is utilized by both individuals and bureaucracies, is by making and enforcing decisions about what objects and buildings are obsolete.[4] As parts of the city, buildings or places fall into ruination they become sites of occupation and colonisation which *avoid* many, but not all, of the objective processes of ordered territorialisation that occurs within everyday lived spaces.

Some decried these spaces in ruination for the disorder they represent in the city. Within this paper I argue that for others—gay men—these spaces in the process of ruination, offer a counterpoint to the way everyday order and consumption hold sway over the lived spaces of the city. Urban ruins are one part of the modern city that give light to the fact that it can never be a seamlessly regulated realm. As Nielsen remarks:

> The superfluous landscapes have been left over by planning and building because they are situated outside what the planning institutions traditionally have been able to include and understand as their field of action. ... The concrete matter of the city will always exceed the ambitions and attempts to control and shape it, and it will always have features that cannot be exposed in the representations that planning has to work with..[5]

These spaces reveal the limitations of the commodified, planned city, for, as Tagg [6]observes, spectacular urban regimes "are never coherent, exhaustive or closed in the ways they are fantasised as being."

I begin with a case study that explores the way in which gay men appropriated and made use of the realm of urban ruins, marginal sites which litter the post industrial late 20th century cities of the west, which had fallen into ruin as they were increasingly bypassed by the flow of money, energy, people, and traffic within which they were once enfolded. The case study focuses on experiences of gay men within derelict neighbourhoods and rotting piers in the lower west and east side of Manhattan during the 1970s and 1980s. The experiences are drawn from a range of data including an autobiographical narrative, and a series of nine in-depth interviews.

The case study commences with a brief look at the broader planning and regulatory zoning framework of the city, and makes reference to broader economic and social processes which lead to the emergence of these derelict neighbourhoods. This is followed by a discussion of how these ruins temporarily provided opportunities for a form of gay being in the latter 20th century, a part of gay being ever haunted by the prospects of gentrification.

In 1927, the president of the New York Stock exchange noted how New York to newcomers "arriving by ocean liner " must have appeared as one of the most impressive sights that had "ever been created solely by the industry and imagination of man," which gave the observer from a distance "the impression of possessing some inner unity and consistency." "Yet when the vessel docks" he noted, and they came to "tread the crowded streets of the metropolis, this unity of New York City constantly eluded [them]."[7] New York was the first US city to zone itself all together, in 1916.[8] The 1916 zoning ushered in the city's great building boom of the 1920s and established the psychical characteristics of most neighbourhoods including the familiar uniform streetscape of Broadway, central Park West, Park Avenue, Ocean Parkways, and the grand Concourse and anticipated a future city of 55 million.[9] At the same time that planners and urbanists "looked down on their 'objects' [the city with its block plans of] ... buildings and neighbourhoods from far above,"[10] the city centre—Manhattan—began to lose residents,[11] a process that would continue throughout the 20th century[12] spurred on by the processes of suburbanisation and the emergence of the post–industrial city.

By the 1970s and 1980s the population of Manhattan had dramatically declined, leaving vast residential parts of the city derelict These vast residential waste lands were accompanied by abandoned industrial buildings and deserted docks in the lower west side that lay waste after the ongoing removal of industry throughout the later half of the 20th century.[13] In contrast to the more gentrified parts of the city, these decaying neighbourhoods were noted for the way in which they attracted the attention of a board range of people who were considered to be marginal to the more economically prosperous and mainstream society at that time. As many of the men that I interviewed pointed out, these ruined and decaying neighbourhoods accepted young homeless Chicanos or Puerto Ricans; the poor; recently arrived Hispanics, and gay men[14] and seemed a country away from other neighborhoods those "arrondissments of gentility" such as Madison Avenues, Fifth Avenue and Park Avenue which were filled with "Nannies pushing strollers filled with fortunate heirs; adolescents in blazers, slacks, and topsiders, young men in rugby shirts passed by."[15]

Whilst many new immigrants were attracted to these decaying neighbourhoods because of their financial status, all of the gay men interviewed noted that the attraction of these geographically marginal parts of the city to gay men was a reflection more of a choice rather than their financial status.

Several of the gay men interviewed noted how these derelict neighbourhoods provided their sexuality, which was oppressed within other parts of the city, with a degree of freedom that they were unable to comprehend or act on within other part of the city.[16] To paraphrase their ruminations on the origin of this freedom,[17] the interviews explained that when these neighbourhoods fell derelict and industrial buildings were closed down and left to become ruins, they were dropped from the stabilizing networks which maintained the more everyday social order through the predicable and regular distribution of usage in space That is, they fell from the consistent maintenance, social, spatial and material order that limited the potential for other usage, freeing them from their previously obvious meaning, and utility begins to evaporate with the disappearance of the stabilizing network which secured them. At the same time they were abandoned by the regulatory bodies (local governments and so forth) as sites of disorderly waste, as these organisations refocused their attention to maintaining the more gentrified parts of the city. This refocusing left these areas with weak surveillance allowing all types of marginal communities to emerge and take root. This sense of freedom brought about through the reduction in functional determinacy and surveillance was accentuated by the fact that the built forms themselves began to break down and fall into ruin as they destabilized and entered into a state of under determination, freeing them from their previous system of predicable and regular usage, and over time opening their materiality up to a rich potential for interpretation, reinterpretation and reuse. As one interviewee noted: "these ruins, these slums, whilst not free of oppression, provided an escape, a strange sense of freedom the moment I entered them, and provided me with something that is not possible in other parts of the city." [18]

NOSTALGIE DE LA BOUE / NOSTALGIA FOR THE MUD

Moving beyond the notion of freedom, the interviewees who used these ruins during the 1970s and 1980s also recalled how these ruins provided them with a "weird magic,"[19] and contained a particular "romantic significant"[20] which manifested itself in a desire for a more "wild and uncontrolled sexuality."[21] As these neighbourhoods fell into ruins, opened up to marginal groups, and were freed from much of the regulatory processes common to the more gentrified parts of the city, they created as one of my interviewees recalled, an urban resurgence of the wild at the confluence of deindustrialisation and deurbanisation. As Andrew Hollerin points out, this urban wilderness brought forth what the French term "*Nostalgie de la boue*" (Nostalgia for the Mud)[22] the romanticization and desire for the primal being, in this case the desire for the unfettered and uncontrolled primal pleasure. As Freud argues in *Civilization and its Discontents*, the civilized have always longed to be uncivilized and he attributed great virtues to them.[23]

This urban "wildernesses"[24] afforded the interviewees with a raw environment that could embody a "particular type of sexuality between men"[25] that many interviewees believed was not possible in the gentrified spaces of the city As Andrew Holleran noted: "one can hardly suck cock on Madison Avenue."[26] Another man who travelled regularly from the upper east side to ruined neighbourhoods in the lower west side of Manhattan for sex recalled:

> Whilst the sex was alluring in that it was adventurous and thrilling, its was primitive, violent, aggressive, brutal and such uncontrolled sensuality. I was not able to have sex like this in the more gentrified past of the city … these gentrified urban environments did afford this, they tended to repress or mask it.[27]

These ruins constituted for urban gay men a part of an axis between the extremely aesthetic and the extremely sleazy, seedy and seamy that made up their very being and permeated through the culture.[28] An axis that balanced a desire for gentrified pleasures with a desire for primal pleasure: '*nostalgie de la boule.*' An axis which none of the gay men I interviewed found easy to explain, but gave meaning to through a range of references to ruins and also to the boarder culture.[29] Recalling their experience in urban ruins, the interviewees explained it is why they "… couldn't wait to wallow in the murky world of the ruins"[30] following a day in the "office" or a "night out at the theatre;"[31] why

> … in the same day [they] wear ripped clothes and congregate in ruins for sex and also sit in a Wall Street office wearing Armani drinking a latte;[32]

why they

> … work day and night on their bodies in the gym, and then go looking for the most uncultured of bodies amongst the ruins, trade .. bodies which haven't seen the inside of a gym;[33]

and

> … found such relief when [they] had sex that had none of the sensitivity, and assured [them] of none of the safety which [they were] accustomed [beyond the ruins.][34]

Or, as the interviewees more broadly explained, it was why:

> … authors such as Genet compare a group of boys spitting into another boys open mouth with a shower of roses…[35]

and why

> … the gay culture often seems split between, but made up of, both the refined and the sleazy; why in cities like Sydney the gentrified public display of the gay and lesbian Mardi Gras parade with its order, public recognition is counterposed to the leaser known Sleaze Ball dance party which represents our hidden excess, ….[36]

Given the centrality of this axis of pleasure to the very being of many of the gay men that I interviewed, it is not surprising that they felt a sense of personal loss as this urban wilderness was gradually absorbed through gentrification back into the everyday life of the city towards the later decades of the 20th century. Whilst for these gay men these spaces were an opportunity to experience a more primal spectrum of pleasures,[37] for the city planners these spaces were only interstitial spaces—areas of blight that awaited urban regeneration. It was in the later 1970s and early 1980s that the local government, speared by a resurgence in city life, began to rezone. Manufacturing areas too were now rezoned to a mixed, residential/ industrial use classification,[38] a program that was assisted by a vast array of illegal transformations of industrial buildings into residential by gay men amongst others. Whilst the ruins were absorbed back into the city, the desire to find environments that will afford and satisfy the spectrum of pleasure that made up their being did not, as Andrew Holleran recalled:

> If Westway is ever built … and the shoreline made pretty by city planners when the city is totally renovated, when gays have restored all the tenements, garden restaurants have sprouted on the lower East Side, and the meat packing district is given over entirely to boutiques and card shops—then we'll build an island in New York Harbour composed entirely of rotten piers, blocks of collapsed walls, and litter-strewn lots. Ruins become decor, nostalgia for the mud. All gay men want to escape[39]

For gay men ruined neighbourhoods and derelict piers in New York, with their lack of intensive performative and aesthetic regulation, afforded men with an opportunity to develop their sexual identities and experiences in ways that were not possible in the more gentrified spaces of the city in which they also lived. They allowed them to expand their sexuality across a broader spectrum of experience, evocatively drawing them into a world in which their sexuality was amplified through its passage into sleaze, a passage which men themselves were drawn to, sought to reconcile and integrate into their selves, and also sought to perpetuate in the face of gentrification.

[1] Gail Hawkes and John Scott, 'Sex and Society,' in Gail Hawkes and John Scott (eds.), *Perspectives in Human Sexuality*, South Melbourne: Oxford University press, 2005, pp. 3-20; Anna Marie Jagose, *Queer Theory*, Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 1997; Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004; Mark McLelland, 'Out on the world stage: queer cultures and globalisation,' in Hawkes and Scott, *Perspectives in Human Sexuality*, pp. 142-152.

[2] Gill Valentine, '(Hetero)sexing space: lesbian perceptions and experiences of everyday spaces,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 11 (1993), pp. 395-413; David Bell and Gill Valentine (eds.), *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 99-113.

[3] Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, (trans.) Sacha Rbinovitch, London: Allen, 1971, p. 18.

[4] See, for example Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, 'Introduction: Cultural Economies of Waste,' in Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke (eds.) *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value* Lanham, MD: Rowen and Littlefield, 2003. A broad range of theorists have argued that the discarding of superfluous things is both a personal maintenance fundamental to ordering the self and also central to the management of personal and communal space within the modern city. Decisions about those everyday lived spaces that are no longer needed within the city, or are due to be replaced by more 'modern' buildings that are more appropriate to modern ways of life emerge out of the planning processes and marketing strategies endemic to modern western cities. When these formal processes identify urban forms as waste, they are declared irrelevant; they are often abandoned and enter into the process of ruination, and eventually subjected over time to renovation or replacement.

[5] Tony Nielsen, 'The return of the excessive: superfluous landscapes' *Space and Culture 5/1*, (2002), pp. 53-62 at p. 54. Also see Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL*, New York: The Monacelli Press, 1995.

[6] John Tagg, 'The City which is not One,' in Anthony D. King (ed) *Representing the City: Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the 21st Century Metropolis*, London: Macmillian, 1996, pp. 179-182 at p. 181.

[7] Edward H. H. Simmons , President of the New York Stock Exchange , 1927, cited in *Building Gotham: Civic Culture and Public Policy in New York City, 1898-1938*, by Keith D. Revell, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003, p. 1.

[8] See Zoning *New York City: A proposal For A Zoning Resolution for the City of New York*, Submitted to the City Planning Department, by Voorhes Walker Smith and Smith, August, 1958. Within this code the use regulations were pyramid-like. The top of the pyramid was the exclusive part. Picture this a three dimensional pyramid of uses. The *single family house sits atop* the zoning pyramid, and then as you take the elevator going down the pyramid you're allowed more and more uses, always including the use on the level above. At the bottom of the pyramid use was unrestricted. So today's city is built very much on a *mixed use foundation.*

[9] Robert Murry Haig, 'Towards an Understanding of the Metropolis, I,' *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 40, (February 1926), p.182.

[10] Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 182. Also see Tagg 'The City which is not One,' pp. 179-182.

[11] Robert Murry Haig and Roswell C. McCrea, *Major Economic factors in Metropolitan Growth and Arrangement*, New York: Regional Planning of New York and its Environs, 1927.

[12] See United States Census Bureau population estimates. Popluation within Manhahtan peaked in 1910 at approximately 2,331,542 million, Manhattans population then decreased until the 1940s when their was a post war influx of new residents. come the end of the 1950s there was a dramatically decline in the popualtion which hit a low of approx 1,428, 285 in the 1980s following which time it began to rebound through the later decade of the 20th century.

[13] Arthur Ellen Kettler Paseltiner and Deborah Tyler, *Zoning and Historical Preservation: A Survey of current zoning techniques in US Cities to encourage historical preservation*, (Landmark Preservation Council of Illinios, 407S. Dearborn, Chicago, 60605, 1983 including, 1984 update), p. 1.

[14] *Interview with Kevin Valentine* (Pseudo.) (New York: 10 November, 2006); *Interview with Daan Bian (*Pseudo.) (New York: 15 November, 2006); *Interview with Todd Neal* (Pseudo.) (New York: 10 November, 2006); *Interview with Ronald O'Byrne* (Pseudo.) (New York: 12 November, 2006); *Interview with Paul Ralston* (Pseudo.) (New York: 21 November, 2006); *Interview with Kelly Teesdale* (Pseudo.) (New York: 22 November, 2006); *Interview with Jacob Moore* (Pseudo.) (New York: 24 November, 2006); *Interview with Daniel Martinez* (Pseudo.) (New York: 23 November, 2006); *Interview with Ethan Walker* (Pseudo.) (New York: 14 November, 2006); *Interview with Ragna Kau* (Pseudo.) (New York: 12 November, 2006); *Interview with Brian Perez* (Pseudo.) (New York: 12 November, 2006).

[15] Andrew Holleran, 'Nostalgia For The Mud,' in Michael Denney, Charles Ortleb and Thomas Steele (eds.), *The Christopher Street Reader* New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1983, pp. 67–74, at p. 69. Also see *Interview with Neal* (10 November, 2006); *Interview with O'Byrne* (12 November, 2006); *Interview withRalston* (21 November, 2006); *Interview with Teesdale* (22 November, 2006).

[16] *Interview with Valentine* (10 November, 2006); *Interview with Perez* (12 November, 2006).

[17] *Interview with Daan Bian (*15 November, 2006); *Interview with Neal* (10 November, 2006); *Interview with O'Byrne* (12 November, 2006); *Interview with Ralston* (21 November, 2006); *Interview with Teesdale* (22 November, 2006); *Interview with Moore* (24 November, 2006); *Interview with Martinez* (23 November, 2006); *Interview with Walker* (14 November, 2006); *Interview with Kau* (12 November, 2006).

[18] *Interview with Neal* (10 November, 2006).

[19] *Interview with O'Byrne* (12 November, 2006).

[20] Holleran, 'Nostalgia For The Mud,' p. 68.

[21] *Interview with Moore* (24 November, 2006).

[22] Holleran, 'Nostalgia For The Mud,' pp. 67–74.

[23] Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, (trans.) David McLintock, London: Penguin Books, 2002.

[24] *Interview with Martinez* (23 November, 2006); *Interview with Walker* (14 November, 2006).

[25] *Interview with Walker* (14 November, 2006).

[26] Holleran, 'Nostalgia For The Mud,' p. 69.

[27] *Interview with O'Byrne* (12 November, 2006).

[28] *Interview with Daan Bian* (Pseudo.) (New York: 15 November, 2006); *Interview with Neal* (10 November, 2006); *Interview with Stephen O'Dougherty* (Pseudo.) (New York: 20 November, 2006); *Interview with Ralston* (21 November, 2006); *Interview with Teesdale* (22 November, 2006); *Interview with Moore* (24 November, 2006); *Interview with Martinez* (23 November, 2006); *Interview with Walker* (14 November, 2006); *Interview with Kau* (12 November, 2006); *Interview with Perez* (12 November, 2006). See also Holleran, 'Nostalgia For The Mud,' p. 70.

[29] *Interview with Daan Bian (*15 November, 2006); *Interview with Neal* (10 November, 2006); *Interview with O'Dougherty* (20 November, 2006); *Interview with Ralston* (21 November, 2006); *Interview with Teesdale* (22 November, 2006); *Interview with Moore* (24 November, 2006); *Interview with Martinez* (23 November, 2006); *Interview with Walker* (14 November, 2006); *Interview with Kau* (12 November, 2006); *Interview with Perez* (12 November, 2006). See also Holleran, 'Nostalgia For The Mud,' p. 70.

[30] *Interview with Walker* (14 November, 2006).

[31] *Interview with Teesdale* (22 November, 2006).

[32] *Interview with Martinez* (23 November, 2006).

[33] *Interview with Martinez* (23 November, 2006).

[34] *Interview with Teesdale* (22 November, 2006) and *Interview with O'Dougherty* (20 November, 2006).

[35] *Interview with Ralston* (21 November, 2006).
[36] *Interview with Teesdale* (22 November, 2006).
[37] *Interview with Valentine* (10 November, 2006); *Interview with Daan Bian* (15 November, 2006); *Interview with Neal* (10 November, 2006); *Interview with O'Dougherty* (20 November, 2006); *Interview with Ralston* (21 November, 2006); *Interview with Teesdale* (22 November, 2006); *Interview with Martinez* (23 November, 2006); *Interview with Walker* (14 November, 2006); *Interview with Perez* (12 November, 2006).
[38] Paseltiner and Tyler, *Zoning and Historical Preservation: A Survey of current zoning techniques in US Cities to encourage historical preservation*, pp. 9-10.
[39] See also Holleran, 'Nostalgia For The Mud,' p. 69.