

# Knocking Walls Down: Queer Architecture and Creative Cities

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**Abstract:** Based on bibliographic research, the article analyzes how queer architecture challenged gentrification, real estate speculation, and segregation of minorities in creative cities. The results show that the architecture of queer spaces can be understood as a practice of gender and sexual resistance and biopolitical disobedience, as the capitalist architecture worked as a biopolitical technology for producing gender and sexuality and shaping political and sexual identities through techniques of surveillance and the construction of the public/private divide for controlling gender and sexual reproduction.

**Key words:** Queer spaces, queer architecture, queer people, creative cities, gentrification.

## 1. Introduction

Queerness—a term used to describe a broad spectrum of non-normative sexual and gender identities and politics [1]—is not constituted in space but in the body of the individual. However, queer traces mark certain places for others to question how difference may be accommodated if it is kept out of sight. The queer spaces reject LGBT assimilationist areas and claim territory [2].

Monuments, neighborhoods, and buildings may bring institutional and symbolic signs of queer spaces, such as lesbian archives, gay bars, rainbow flags, and Amazon bumper stickers. No single sign creates a queer space, but their accumulation, an index of the impulses of many individuals, marks certain places as queer spaces. Other signs are subtler and respond to the specific social forms of queer culture. Queer spaces may be marked by a high density of storefront and housefront display, responding to the presence of pedestrian traffic even in cities that are otherwise automobile-based and at times when other areas are deserted. Student groups, social service, political

organizations, potluck clubs, and other noncommercial venues are also spaces where many queers came to conceive their gender and sexuality as the basis of community. Queer spaces in the public realm also reveal the diasporic ethnic neighborhoods under capitalism, and offer analogous symbolic markers (bumper stickers, graffiti, banners, official and unofficial monuments) and institutional amenities (specialty shops, meeting places, and places to post announcements) [3].

Another element of many queer spaces is their engagement with the past. Previously industrial zones [4] or traditional neighborhoods [5], some queer spaces are renovated more than simply because of style, but as a process of taking place, by opening smaller spaces into larger ones, whether on the scale of the room, the pocket park, or the plaza and knocking down barriers, such as the conversion of commercial lofts to domestic use, with no interior doors at all. Some queer spaces are fundamental as spaces of resistance of differences in creative cities, which are urban spaces where the articulation between social and artistic activities, cultural industries, and government supposedly creates a cultural effervescence that develops and attracts talents, promotes social diversity, and increases the creative

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potential of companies and institutions [6].

In most creative cities in developed and developing countries—which had expressive economic growth in the previous decades [7]—the contemporary global capitalism stimulated gentrification, real estate speculation, segregation of minorities, and their political and economic control. The aim of this article is to analyze how queer architecture faced these challenges. I argue that it is possible to think of the architecture of queer spaces as a practice of gender and sexual resistance and biopolitical disobedience, as the capitalist architecture in creative cities worked as a biopolitical technology for producing gender and sexuality and shaping political and sexual identities through techniques of surveillance and the construction of the public/private divide for controlling gender and sexual reproduction, as well as the post-Fordist capitalist modes of production [8].

## 2. Method and Materials

This article was organized following a logical and reflective structure [9], emphasizing interpretation and argumentation [10]. After exposing the current situation of the capitalist architecture in creative cities, the methodology addresses the analysis of recent texts on the architecture of queer spaces as places of resistance. Items identified as corresponding—directly or indirectly—to the queer architecture are examined in bibliographic research carried out in recent works. The analysis allowed a reflection through an approach in which aspects present in the context are linked to the actions of the actors in the contemporary global order, particularly their differences regarding the interventions in the urban space.

## 3. Results and Discussions

It is believed that creative cities have some characteristics that differentiate them for the traditional areas where creativity is relevant in the innovation process. In these places, creativity supposedly implies the generation of ideas, and

innovation involves the application of these concepts in a practical way. Some elements are fundamental for achieving this type of innovation in creative cities, such as strategy, effective implementation mechanisms, supportive organizational context, and effective external relationships. Multidisciplinary creative professionals are essential to generate ideas since success seems to lie in communication and information exchange and collaboration [11]. However, the literature usually ignores the fact that creative cities are also increasing inequality, deepening segregation, and stimulating real estate speculation and gentrification [12].

LGBT people have established a visible presence in many creative cities, but gentrification has put pressure on LGBT neighborhoods, because rising housing values have dispersed the LGBT population. Former LGBT neighborhoods have become less tolerant of LGBT people and the businesses that anchor them. Many LGBT people have idealized gay and lesbian areas as queer friendly spaces for a liberatory politics in creative cities, but many of these quasi-utopian spaces fall short of their claimed inclusivity. Many exclude bisexuals, transgendered people, and gender nonconformists, for example. The highly capitalized gentrification in some areas—which became more attractive to non-LGBT individuals in search of in-town living because of their urban renovation—brought new residents and the dispersal of existing LGBT communities, which changed the character of the neighborhood. Higher demand for property has resulted in rises in rents, conversion of rental properties to condominiums, and competition for commercial space, which make it difficult for less affluent LGBT people and businesses to remain in the neighborhoods. Officials and planners in many creative cities, eager to capitalize on urban redevelopment, have promoted urban revitalization to attract large-scale real estate firms, further exacerbating the rise in property value. The new cosmopolitanism of creative cities has resulted in

changes to once primarily queer shopping and nightlife spaces, for example. Although planning is often portrayed as progressive and reformist, it functions as a heterosexist project to generate zoning and land use regimes that reinforce heterosexuality and serve the powerful by controlling or oppressing minority groups [13].

The creation of queer spaces brings the possibility of resistance against the gentrification and segregation process and questions heteronormative rules in the organization of society and space. For example, the relationship between renovation—which is a common aspect of creative cities [14]—and queerness transforms what the dominant culture has abandoned so that old and new are in explicit juxtaposition, such as the aesthetic of a renovated space where track-lights and parquet floors meet exposed bricks and steel girders. Architecture is an expensive business, and queer organizations tend to be encamped in facilities designed for previous users. Designed-to-be-queer space—appropriately enough for an identity rooted in the private sphere of sexuality—is the domestic space, which has been neglected by the dominant culture’s unwillingness to recognize queer domesticity, as seen in the opposition to same-sex marriage or domestic partnership rights and manifested visually in the erasure of same-sex relationships in interior design journals. The image of contemporary queer domesticity with spectacle and extravagant interior decor usually reflects stereotypes of homosexuality as artificial and unsuitable for children, for example [15].

Regarding the public spaces, the relationship between these places and immediate locales reveals the ideology of the neighborhood as a powerfully exclusionary form of communitarian politics. Some of these public spaces engender a discourse of urban design as bourgeois spectacle, and socially mixed streets surrounding them become progressively gentrified so that potential impacts on property values have become more closely imbricated with local

planning discourse. These places can be considered heteronormative because they reflect the hierarchies of property in wider society. The association between crime, danger, and the sexual use of public spaces is also more complex than moral discourses of urban regeneration suggest: the question of safety raises issues of technical surveillance of people to render public spaces safer. However, sex in public spaces also exposes social inequality and cultural repression: for many people, it is a means of escape from social mores. It includes those who are excluded from participation in the commercial entertainment scene on the grounds of age, appearance, ethnicity, poverty, or other factors. The queer space is differentiated through the heterogeneity of its users but is also connected with multiple structures of power that transcend binary or simplistic classifications of sexual identity or the privileging of sexual identities over other categories of difference. Unruly spaces such as ruderal sites, the sides of railway lines, roadside verges, parks, gardens, alleys, rooftops, and other partially obscured or neglected fragments of the urban landscape can be defined as those that do not play a defined role, or which are characterized by ill-defined use or ownership, or that have been appropriated for uses other than those for which they were originally intended. These uses may be a form of site-specific spatial insurgency because they represent arenas within which human creativity and the sexual imagination are radically combined. The site’s specific aspects of sexual subcultures, the challenge to heteronormative readings of nature, and the queering of environmental history and landscape ecology are combined in these queer spaces and their architecture [16].

#### 4. Analysis

Social codings of power, gender, and sexuality are inherent in all architecture, but are unconsciously accepted. The queer architecture exists outside the traditional male/female dichotomy and the rigid

notions of gender and sexuality. Queer spaces function as a counter architecture, which appropriates, mirrors, and choreographs the orders of everyday life in new and liberating ways and subverts the traditionally constructed identities. Queer spaces create tensions between the opposing meanings associated with spaces in constant flux. The signs of queer spaces are sometimes subtle and can be read by those who know what is signified. For example, if the toilet paper holder has been removed from the wall to create a hole between the cubicles in a public bathroom, most would understand this as an attack by vandals, but this may be in fact a glory hole to the next cubicle. In this sense, boundaries between the public and private are dissolved. For example, cruising routes and beats are places where people meet strangers for sex. They exist parallel to public space and on the edges of the urban environment. They become queer spaces in the moment of the act, which may shock many people and challenge the way they understand the space [17]. Nevertheless, these queer spaces came about as meeting places not only because of the desire to have sex in public, but the urban plan provided no legitimate space where queer people could meet others. They had to create their own spaces by subverting dominant institutions [18].

The practice of renewal as part of a set of parodic and ironic interventions brings the memory traces of abandoned set of futures for some places. The creation of queer spaces can reimagine the place as a defamiliarizing challenge to heterosexism and the perversion of a once-ruling order. The status of a queer space troubles notions of linear time and brings back worn-out dreams as part of the immaterial architecture of new worlds fashioned out of the leavings of mainstream modernization of the contemporary global capitalism in creative cities. Queers occupy spaces meant for something or someone else, such as public toilets, parks in the dead of night, untrafficked alleyways, and rundown districts. These areas have provided refuge to those

who embody non-normative genders and sexualities, and queers have been able to produce their own time and place and craft new worlds out of what is present [19].

## 5. Conclusions

The complex and intersectional nature of queer marginalization in creative cities is situated within various forms of social and spatial oppression, which overlap and exacerbate the marginalization of LGBT people and generate unjust geographies that intertwine race, class, gender, and sexuality [20]. In homonormative spaces, for example, the exclusionary tendencies of gay urban spaces, particularly in terms of class, were explicit in models of neighborhood redevelopment that took the forms of urban homo-entrepreneurialism and global city branding and appeals to cosmopolitanism in creative cities of the capitalist world order. Although gay cosmopolitanism and commodification driven by white cisgender high-income gay men can be exclusionary, they might offer spaces of fluidity and inclusion for queers of marginalized ethnic groups and lesbians, who can become actors in the process of queer space development and elaborate strategies to make concrete and physical claims on space [21].

Queer spaces are far from being limited to gay- and lesbian-oriented architecture but suggest that lessons learned from queer occupation of space could be of use to rethink how our environments are designed and used. In the first moment, it was necessary to understand how space is gendered and sexualized to suggest new ways of inhabiting it. Many queer architects addressed issues of normative domesticity through an emphasis on the tensions between private and public, and traditional and non-traditional family units. More recently, queer architects have been trying to offer a communitarian ideal that blurs the traditional public and private divisions, a futurity tainted with political idealism which can inspire architecture to emulate a queer collectivity. Designing

for queer users means designing for any user in a way that eschews the normative systems of traditional organizations to permit subdivisions, zoning, separate circulations, and non-exposed spaces. The new queer spaces can refrain from relying on the normative “here and now” to ring a potential for a performative provocation, which allows everyone to experience spaces fully and safely, both collectively and individually [22].

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