

Prior (2004) sydney gay saunas 1967- 2000 book analysis



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Article name: *Sydney Gay Saunas 1967-2000: Fight for Civic Acceptance and Experiences Beyond the Threshold*

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Introduction and Research Questions

Jason Prior is an established researcher particularly in the field of spatial governance and its relation to sexuality, religion, and health and wellbeing. In his PhD thesis titled 'Sydney Gay Saunas 1967-2000: Fight for Civic Acceptance and Experiences Beyond the Threshold' (year), he attempts to shed light on Sydney's gay saunas through two key questions. The first relates to how the gay sauna transitioned from a clandestine operation to a legally recognized and accepted institution considered important within particular environs of the city. The second concerns how the dynamic public domain of the gay sauna contributed to the development of gay culture in the city by fostering the opportunity of collective and individual homosexual expression.

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Part 1 of Study – Methodology and Results

In the first part of the study, utilizing his background in urban sociology, planning, and legal geography, Prior draws heavily upon the works of Knopp (1995, 1998) and Castells (1983) as a conceptual framework. He uses empirical examination and analysis of documents (including development applications, archival documents, legal records, civic authority records, government gazettes, law reports, records of police raids, government acts, newspaper and magazine articles, and twenty-nine in-depth interviews) as a research methodology, to understand the process of acceptance of gay saunas in Sydney's civic society. Using these data, he traces the history of these establishments from 1967 to 2000. The first gay saunas existed through subterfuge and public charades by disguising themselves from the largely homophobic society as gyms and fitness centres. Through the years that followed, change in legislation which led to the decriminalisation of homosexuality set the stage for the emergence of the gay sauna into public view and their partial acceptance by civic authorities. Although the emergence of AIDS added a layer of complexity to the process, it led to new alliances between the gay community, medicine and the state government. These alliances played a major role in the eventual acceptance of the gay sauna by civic authorities, judiciary, and citizens as not just social but also sexual institutions. Prior argues that this transformation was possible through the conjunction of greater understanding and acceptance of homosexuality by the general community, the mobilisation of gay activists and the broader radicalism of the 1960s and 70s, and the emergence of enlightened processes by council bureaucracies and the judiciary.

Part 2 of Study – Methodology and Results

Prior's background in architecture comes into use in the second part of the study where he examines through an empirical analysis (analysis of the material features of the built form, and twenty-nine in-depth interviews), how the evolving social spaces of Sydney's gay saunas allowed men to develop and experience individual and collective sexual identities and practices. In describing the dynamic nature of these spaces Prior identifies three stages of evolution. The first and most basic/rudimentary stage started with the establishment of the the Bondi Junction Steam Bath, Sydney's first gay sauna. Here the aim was to providing a safe space where men could temporarily escape from the city outside, with a focus on the 'threshold' to protect patrons from the largely homophobic world outside. The second involved the shift of focus from the 'threshold' to the development of the domain, into the creation of a space that was more socially, sexually, and psychology enabling for the expression of homosexuality. This 'golden age' of the saunas aligned with the gay liberation movement. The last stage focuses on the redesign of the domain into a safe sex venue to cope with the new experience of sexuality that AIDS awareness evoked. These stages involved changes to the physical realm of the saunas, which in turn affected the type of sexual activity that took place.

Critical Review/ Contextualization within other works

Prior's well-structured and comprehensive study fills a gap in the existing literature by adding to the largely unexplored realm of gay bathhouses in the Australian context. In describing the history of these establishments, he

continually draws parallels between the United States and Australia which provides readers with a broader perspective, and highlights the uniqueness of this particular context.

The first part of the study which deals with the sexualisation of urban space is contextualized within the body of works of Foucault (1990), Castells, and Knopp, while the second part of the study which concerns how designed sexual environments affect sexual practises fits within the works of Brodsky (1993), Rubin (1991), and Tattelman (1999). Prior's work also contributes to the broader topic of studies specifically on gay saunas. The latter includes ethnographies particularly in the american context (Weinberg & Williams, 1975; Styles, 1979; Chauncey, 1994), the study of saunas from a more architectural perspective where alternate design possibilities and concepts of ' queer space' are explored (Tattelman, 2000; Betsky, 1997), and more recently, studies on AIDS prevention research (Bolton, Vincke, & Mak, 1994; Binson & Woods, 2003; Lyons, Smith, Grierson, & Doussa, 2010).

Link to my Research

The inter-relation between sexual culture, the built-form, and the social/sexual relations that forms the core of Prior's work, is a theme that I want to carry forward and build onto in my research. Specifically, I am interested in looking at how social and sexual relations have changed in the bathhouse due to technologies in the 21st century such as PrEP, internet, and dating apps and how this in turn has affected the physical and social environs of the baths.

The main aim of the author's research was to examine the social and political forces which contributed to the acceptance of gay saunas by Sydney's civic society. To answer this research question, he provides an in-depth description of the material (and immaterial) aspects of gay saunas in Sydney from the first gay sauna in 1967 to the year 2000, outlining distinct stages of evolution in the form/use of these structure. This data will form an important benchmark for my research which will explore the possible formation of a new architectural typology in the 21st century. The fact that this study, along with the work of Richters (2007), is one of the few literary works offering a detailed description of Sydney's baths, including floor plans and advertisements in the gay press, makes it the single most important source for my research.

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