City Space Architecture

REPORT FROM 'PAST PRESENT AND FUTURE OF PUBLIC SPACE'

Cruising Place.
The Placemaking Practices of Men who Have Sex with Men

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Abstract
There is a fundamental belief in placemaking practice that place is a reflection of people - their memories, values, culture, and socio-spatial traditions – and that successful placemaking is the manifestation of these traditions in public policy, public space, and ultimately public life. As placemaking professionals, we work to advocate for, facilitate, and operationalize placemaking practices of the people and communities we work with. An essential part of this effort is recognition that effective placemaking involves collaboration between specialists and community stakeholders and this sentiment is expressed by institutions on the forefront of our professional and academic discourse. Placemaking professionals also place an emphasis on activating space through programmatic intervention, guided by the belief that the most effective way to generate value in public space is to create a reason or excuse for people to be there by encouraging activity, particularly economic, but also communal, political, and cultural activity.
The ongoing operationalization, sanitization, and commoditization of place inevitably results in the undermining of marginal placemaking practices, especially if they subvert our definition of a "good place." Placemaking professionals have the ability – the obligation - to cultivate a broader, more inclusive concept of place. This paper is an analysis of the social, spatial, and historical forces that have given rise to one particular form of unsanctioned placemaking practice - the activity of "cruising for sex" in public parks by men who have sex with men (MSM).

Keywords: placemaking, public parks, cruising

There is a fundamental belief in placemaking practice that place is a reflection of people - their memories, values, culture, and socio-spatial traditions – and that successful placemaking is the manifestation of these traditions in public policy, public space, and ultimately public life. As placemaking professionals, we work to advocate for, facilitate, and operationalize placemaking practices of the people and communities we work with. An essential part of this effort is recognition that effective placemaking involves collaboration between specialists and community stakeholders and this sentiment is expressed by institutions on the forefront of our professional and academic discourse. Let us look at one example from Project for Public Spaces (PPS). On their website, PPS's definition of placemaking appears inclusive and altruistic - a rejection of the myopic elitism of top down urban planning, "when people of all ages, abilities, and socio-economic backgrounds can not only access and enjoy a place, but also play a key role in its identity, creation, and maintenance that is when we see genuine Placemaking in action." (PPS, 2009) However, beneath a veneer of magnanimity in our discourse lies an implicit indifference to placemaking practices that subvert traditional norms.

What we see emerging in current placemaking practice are methods and approaches that reinforce existing power structures and that operate under the guise of public safety, cleanliness, and economic development with definitions of community that are abstract and idealistic. (Delany, 1999) Additionally, the language used in our professional discourse to evaluate placemaking efficacy has the potential to undermine marginal social practices. PPS defines a "great place" through the lens of four categories: sociability, access & linkages, comfort & image, and usage & activities. These categories are subsequently broken down into "intangibles." These intangibles, "safe", "green", "active", "useful," "welcoming", "real", etc. have embedded in them a critical morality. Words that are vague and relative like "real," "safe," "clean," and "welcoming" become qualifiers for desirable activities in public space. This language prioritizes activities that fit into a narrow, moral, and normative interpretation of place while ignoring more subversive and marginal placemaking practices, working against the creation of places that are equitable, inclusive, and just.

Placemaking professionals also place an emphasis on activating space through programmatic intervention, guided by the belief that the most effective way to generate value in public space is to create a reason or excuse for people to be there by encouraging activity, particularly economic, but also communal, political, and cultural activity. In *Place, an Introduction* Tim Creswell uses Yi-Fu Tuan's analysis of a Wallace Stevens poem to illustrate this same idea, "…the mere act of putting a jar on a hill produces a place which constructs the space around it. Wilderness becomes place." (Creswell, 2014) In Life Between Buildings, as part of a critique of the desolate and inactive public spaces created by modernist architects and planners, Jan Gehl writes that activity in public space has the effect of perpetuating itself, "Something happens, because something happens, because something happens." (Gehl, 1971) PPS calls this the power of ten, "places thrive when users have a range of reasons (10+) to be there. These might include a place to sit, playgrounds to enjoy, art to touch, music to hear, food to eat, history to experience, and people to meet." (PPS, n.d.) The assumption made in these three examples is that activity is a catalyst for more activity and that an increase in activity results in a more robust public space. Much like Wallace's jar, placemaking professionals use food trucks, movie nights, pop-up libraries, and markets to create a sense of place. However, these programmatic interventions are a symptom of a

colonialist mentality within the placemaking profession that treats presumably dysfunctional, underutilized, or awkward public space as a clean slate, ready to be activated by a sublime collaboration between engaged communities and selfless professionals. What these interventions do indeed create is a reason for people to enter and stay in a place by encouraging a type of conspicuous consumption that leads to the commodification of place and trades genuine, organic placemaking for cheap marketing gimmicks.

The ongoing operationalization, sanitization, and commoditization of place inevitably results in the undermining of marginal placemaking practices, especially if they subvert our definition of a "good place." Placemaking professionals have the ability – the obligation - to cultivate a broader, more inclusive concept of place. This paper, *Cruising Place: The Placemaking Practices of Men who Have Sex with Men,* is an analysis of the social, spatial, and historical forces that have given rise to one particular form of unsanctioned placemaking practice - the activity of "cruising for sex" in public parks by men who have sex with men (MSM). The architect Kathy Pool calls these places "recycling territories" that house those without property, shelter homeless people displaced by more restrictive politics, provide cover for socially shunned citizens, accommodate diverse populations not as actively fostered elsewhere, and that rarely disallows or diminishes more codified activities and populations that are accepted everywhere. The flexibility of natural landscapes afforded by urban public parks provide space for marginalized populations to inhabit, manipulate, and make place with minimal interference, unlike more formalized, programmed urban spaces. (Pool, 2000) Incorporating other, more obscure, subversive, and marginal placemaking practices - practices that push, challenge, and negotiate the boundaries of our social norms - will allow us to develop a more comprehensive understanding of what it means to make place. These places are the frontier of marginal placemaking - the hidden spaces of subversive placemaking practice. In order to open one door to this new discourse, I chose four places where MSM cruise as the central focus of this study. These sites were The Back Bay Fens and Belle Isle Reservation in Boston, Massachusetts, USA and Cunningham Park and Forest Park in Queens, New York, USA.

Because cruising for sex is in a grey area legally (Queally, 2016), the realities of studying it as a placemaking practice requires a different set of research tools than those typically used by placemaking professionals. Tracking and counts, for instance, provide useful quantitative data, but in the context of cruising, provide little practical information. The very nature of cruising requires one to be invisible to the uninitiated, making it nearly impossible to distinguish MSM cruising for sex from everybody else. To find a way to objectively differentiate cruisers from non-cruisers, I analyzed cruising places through four lenses – historical, sociological, anthropological, and theoretical. Historical and sociological research of the behavioral patterns exhibited by MSM was crucial at the beginning stage of analysis. Laud Humphries' work on "tea rooms" (public bathrooms used for cruising) from the 1960's was helpful in identifying patterns from an empirical perspective. (Humphreys, 1970) Hal Fischer's "Gay Semiotics" and Michel Foucault's essay on heterotopias provided additional anthropological and theoretical backing. (Fischer, 1977) (Foucault, 1967).

Figure 1. Belle Isle Reservation in Boston, Massachusetts,. Illustration by the author.
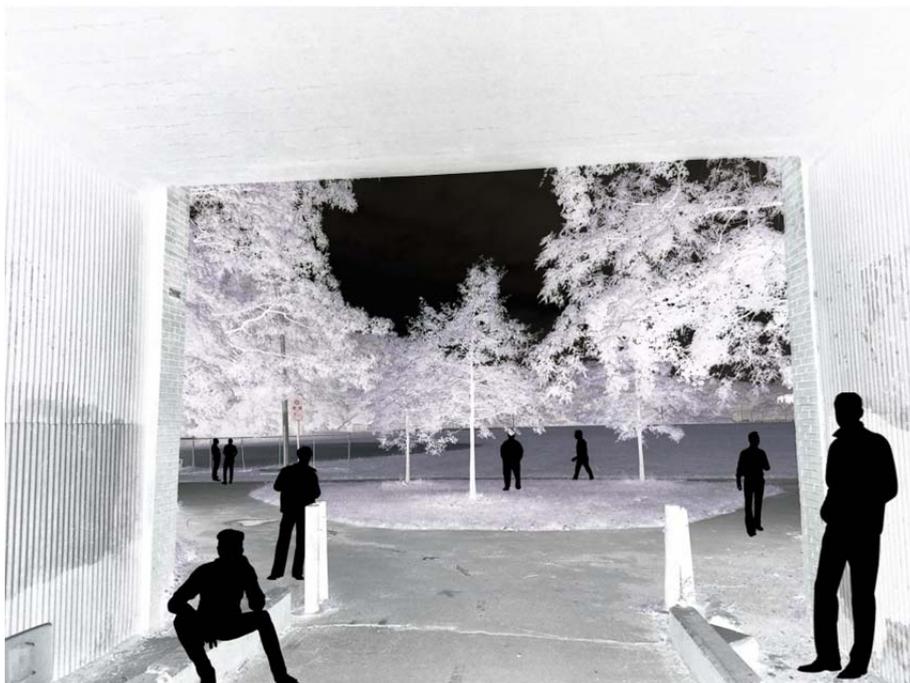

Figure 1. Cunningham Park and Forest Park in Queens, New York. Illustration by the author.

At each site, through diagrammatic spatial analysis coupled with photo documentation, along with formal and informal interviews with MSM, it was possible to gain a more complete understanding of how MSM make and maintain place through cruising for sex. Respondents displayed a sentimental conception of place when interviewed both

formally and informally. One man referred to Forest Park as a, "gay backyard," and further emphasized this in response to a formal survey about other MSM in the park, "I would feel like I'm losing a place to escape to for relaxation and community/hanging out…It's a place to get away and enjoy themselves because they can't in the outside." Beyond the experiential understandings gained through personal interaction, a comprehensive spatial analysis of these sites demonstrated how public parks have the spatial capacity to accommodate the placemaking practices of MSM and other marginalized groups - practices that have been side-lined by other, more codified and restrictive built landscapes.
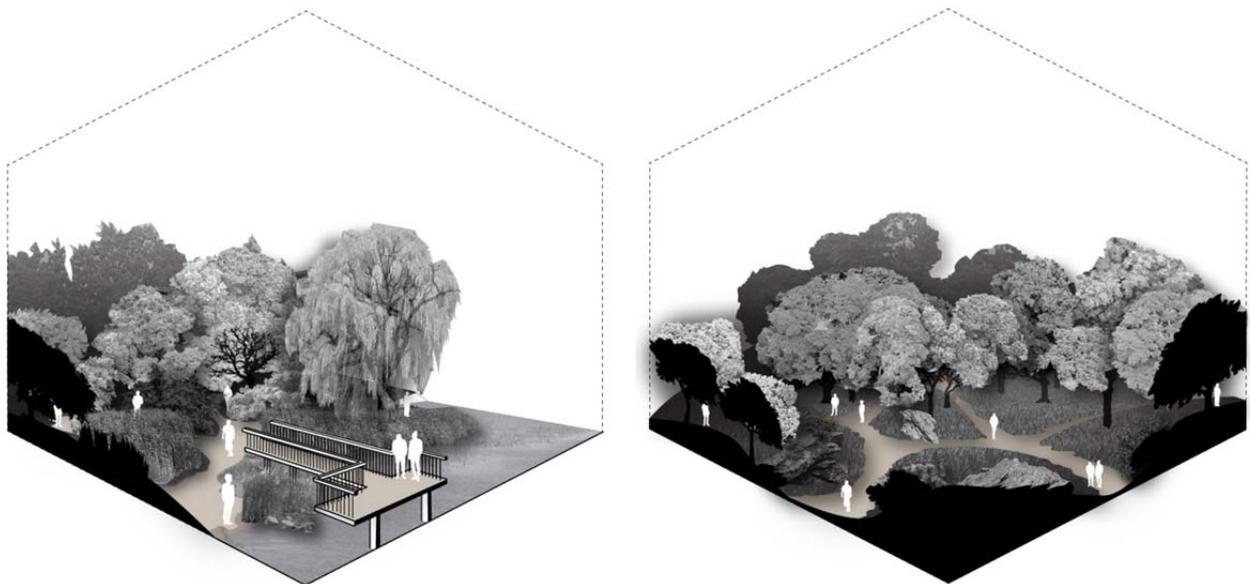

Figure 3 and 4. Formal typology: (left) cul de sac, (right) ramble. Illustrations by the author.

At all four cruising places, the distribution and types of sex-specific litter, the way pathways are carved into vegetation, how private areas connect to larger paths, and the way weather and seasonal changes affect usage patterns share spatial parallels. Distilling and categorizing these similarities through a spatial typology revealed six discrete spatial configurations – runway, ramble, cul-de-sac, maze, shelter, and field. These spatial configurations are ubiquitous among urban public parks and can be observed at several other outdoor cruising places not included in the four case studies. While each configuration manifests in unique ways at each site, their overall spatial qualities are nearly identical. Each of the six spatial types explored accommodate at least one of five contact relationships – mixing, viewing, colliding, connecting, and concealing. When separate spatial types are combined to form a larger configuration, cruising will inevitably occur in these places, given that there are MSM in close proximity to one another and interested in sexual contact. To illustrate this, let's look at a Yelp review from of one of the case study sites, Bell Isle Reservation,

> *"… as you enter the parking lot there tend to be a lot of idling vehicles with middle aged men peering at your every move especially if you are a guy which is a little creepy. As I*

walked into the paved foot path to the bridge and lookout tower I noticed a lot of dirt foot paths leading into the brush. My dog went nuts barking and got off his leash. I chased him in there and caught him pretty quickly. As I put his leash back there were sounds of moaning. Not more than 20 feet away from me down through the brush were two naked men obviously engaging in a sexual activity. You can figure out that this is obviously a gay sex playground." – "Ron W.", Yelp"

By the end of the study, from the research, in particular from the formal and informal interviews with other MSM. Sex-related refuse appears to be an integral part of the functioning of cruising places, creating a type of informal wayfinding for MSM. One interview respondent said when asked why they first started cruising in Forest Park, "Started young 14 found out about it from school trip. Saw condoms, that's how I knew." The refuse was an indicator of very specific past actions and was a crucial sign of placemaking specific to MSM. Additionally, cruising places appear to transcend cultures, borders, government systems, and can appear anywhere as long as spatial and infrastructural conditions support it. In fact since its inception, the gay cruising website cruisinggays.com has catalogued over 43,000 cruising places worldwide. Most of the cruising places listed are in North America and Europe, however, presumably because the website is based in the U.S. and is in English. It is safe to assume that there are many more cruising places outside of the US and Europe that aren't listed on the website. By 1997 the site was receiving over 130,000 hits per day and had established itself as a bridge between online and real-world cruising (Blum, 2016).

Figure 5. Man cruising in Forest Park. Picture by the author.

MSM use cruising to carve out places of belonging and liberation that are crucial for homosocialization and these cruising places are oftentimes threatened by the privatization and over-programming of adjacent public space. (Isay, 1989) (Delany, 1999) Finally, marginal places (the leftovers) provide the necessary space for marginalized placemaking practices (Rogers, 2012) (Blum, 2016).
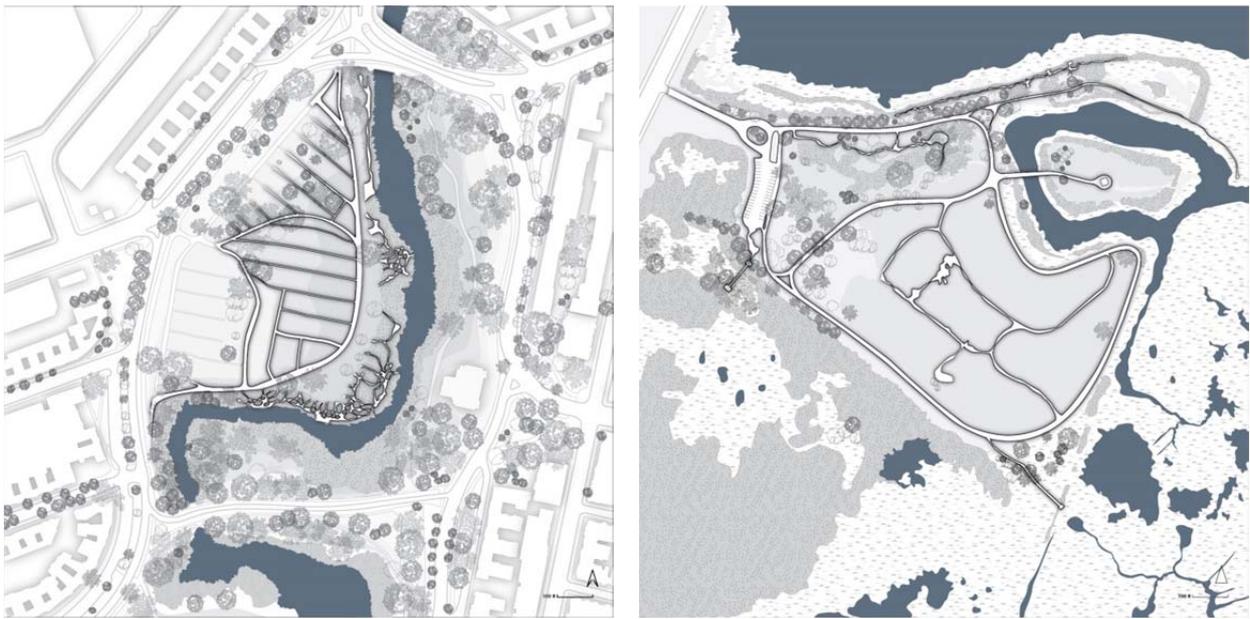
Figure 6 and 7. (left) Back Bay Fens, (right) Belle Isle. Illustrations by the author.
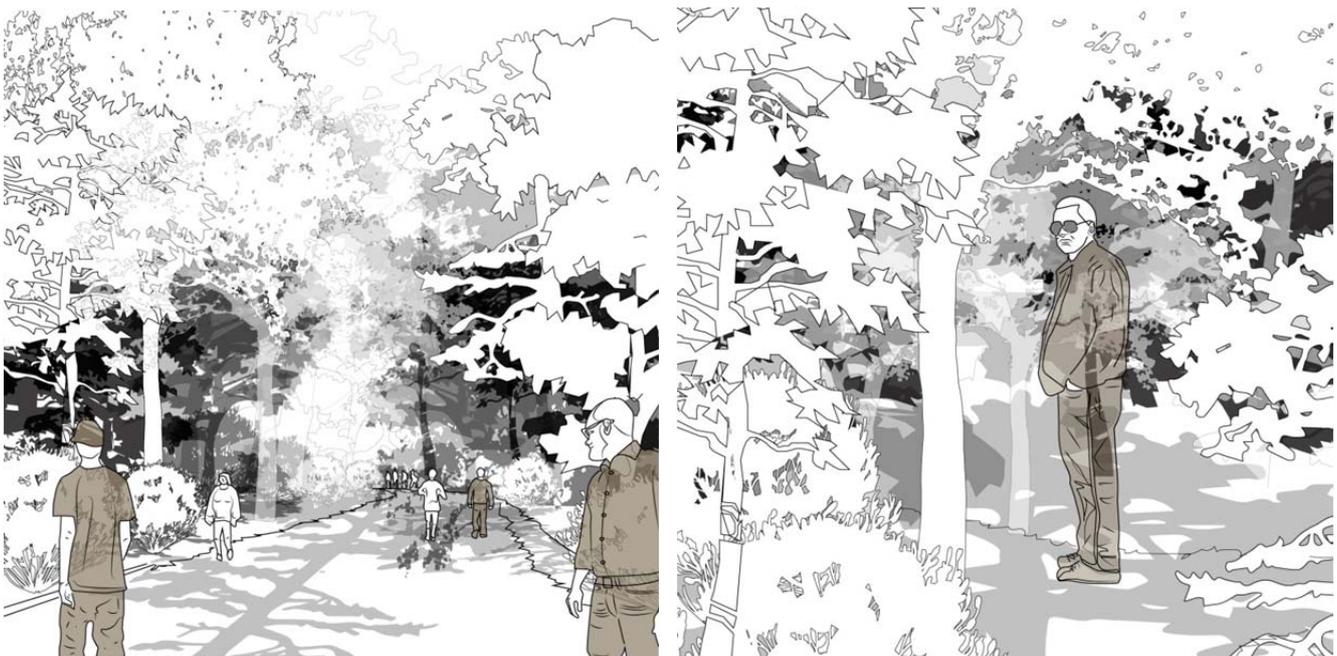
Figure 8 and 9. Public left in the park. Illustrations by the author.

These conclusions about the placemaking practices of MSM eventually led to five core recommendations. First, we need to regard leftover, marginal spaces as more than just places that are dysfunctional, unused, or in need of occupation by current placemaking interventions. Second, we must recognize the placemaking value of fringe spaces to marginalized groups. Third, it's imperative that we push to adjust public policy and design approaches that allow for more private areas in public space. This includes an end to entrapment and policing of people engaged in discreet public sex. Fourth, we

should encourage more unplanned contact in public space rather than networking-oriented, hyperprogrammed events. Finally, it's our obligation to encourage members of marginalized communities to become professional placemakers, planners, and designers in order to be more effective at addressing the placemaking needs of marginalized people and places. These strategies could help foster a deeper understanding of the placemaking needs of marginalized people. Our efficacy as placemakers is dependent upon broadening our perception of what it means to make place. By encouraging diversity of perspective in our professional practice and academic discourse, we will increase our capability to make public space more open, inclusive, and equitable.

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