The Thrill of Reinvention: Identity, Community, and Site

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INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the relationship between identity and design. How is identity created and what are its physical manifestations? I concentrate on spaces in which identities are captured and expressed in physical terms, made visible through spatial production. As an example, marginalized people adopt and adapt marginalized sites and then, by directly engaging those sites, imbue them with meaning. When sites are ordinary, problematic or contested, can one transform the complexity of social control and the details of interaction by examining and embracing one's political, religious, sexual, etc. values?

As individuals, we exist at the intersection of many different communities. Through our differences and struggles, we organize together, adjusting to the institutional, cultural and psychological forces that influence decisions. Design actions are a result of these experiences, structures and settings.

The design studio can foster the individual realities of students so that they discover how their political, social and cultural histories inform their questions and desires. If each student designs with her own meanings, gestures and languages, how does she integrate those choices with the value of communal living? In an often divided society, it is important to suggest the possibility of community.

As a gay man, my own research addresses the gay community, their access to city streets and control over building sites. I follow the shifting patterns, movements and revivals that are necessary when establishing an identity in the city. Where groups gather and leave marks affects one's understanding of the urban landscape and the social organization of the group.

I conclude with a design proposal for a closed gay male bathhouse. While they are no longer intense sites of practice, the presence of the emptied buildings, locked and shuttered, remain on the streets, a reminder of their absent community. By inhabiting these decimated sites of gay male desire, I can use the baths and their performance stages to help research the notion of collective living. Identity and its relation to movement are investigated in this structure of encounters, vistas and displacements. The relations between individual and social, discovery and difference, intervention and interaction are explored. My proposal offers a space in which gays and I would hope lesbians can organize socially and participate in the public sphere.

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

This section explores the appropriation and interpretation of public space for collective and private use by gays and lesbians(g/l). My research focuses on how sexual minorities approach the city street for cultural, social and political purposes. By examining the street's reuse and reprogramming during Pride celebrations, I discuss the ways individuals and groups question the urban and architectural traditions which can constrain them.

G/L's are all too familiar with movement and the longing to participate; they have been put in motion by being kicked out, turned away and kept behind doors. It used to be hard to recognize g/l places within the city; they camouflaged their boundaries, trying to remain inconspicuous and discrete. Finding a g/l bar was a major undertaking; they lacked advertising venues, were located off-the-beaten-track, and did not post an identifying sign outside. (Witomoski, p 204.) G/Ls developed what is referred to as "gaydar," the ability to read a building for what goes on behind the facade.

In the 1980s and 90s, as g/ls began to promote themselves as a market force, their spaces began to change. With neon signs and clear glass walls, the sites demand a presence; the outside world gazes in and patrons oversee the street. Naked torsos, rainbow flags, and pink triangles (commercial emblems of g/ls nationwide) mark these sites as "queer" spaces.

As the community comes out and becomes more visible, it is discovering the differences among its people. Activities and interests are increasingly divided along class, racial, gender, political and social lines. As Greg Jackson writes, "In my idealistic youth I believed that all gay men were brothers, but after eight years in the [gay] ghetto I know the only thing I have in common with most of my neighbors is sexual preference."(Jackson, p 90.)

In place of uniformity, the community tries to organize itself through words, symbols and customs. Pride festivities, as an example, are an important ritual to combat an oppressive and sometimes threatening mainstream culture, and to encourage cooperation among "sub-groups" and support for the individual; people enjoy the opportunity to express themselves in public. Unfortunately, they also become the media image for the Right, which uses the theatricality of Pride to promote its own agenda.

The collective activities of Pride transform city streets by turning them into both stage and bleacher. The street, on which sexual minorities are often harassed and attacked, becomes a place of public assembly and walkway. Typical circulation routes usually reserved for cars and blank building facades are redefined and liberated; crowds gather on roofs, fire escapes and windows. People from different architectural worlds, the world on the street and the world behind the walls, establish eye contact. The complicity between the two is a design issue. Without an audience, there is no show; watching is as performative as participating.

At a recent Pride weekend in Boston, for example, a young woman appeared in her window trying to see what changes had affected the alley behind the Public Library. She was taken aback by the crowd below, men dancing with men and women close together with women. As she surveyed the activities and relaxed into laughter, the crowed cheered for this reluctant celebrity, remaking the woman's apartment. Her back window became balcony, the back alley below her kingdom. Through visual and spatial interaction, these events surpassed what are often meager expectations for street life and provoked personal and collective pleasure.

The function and value of public space lies in its ability to locate difference, rather than homogeneity. Elizabeth Grosz writes that "the city provides the order and organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies." (Grosz, pg 243.) Urban sites can be read as constructed textures, layering conflicting identities, crossing paths and altered positions. They can also change, erase and subvert the events that fill them.

While parades, dances and fairs may be temporary, they are permanent in their repetition and remnants. Traces of Pride remain in the streets after the events are over. Homosexually-explicit stickers are visible on cash machines; posters promoting g/l culture are affixed to light poles; and the rainbow flag, used to indicate "This is gay property," becomes a leftover reminder. Clothing acts as billboards; with pins and slogans on jackets and T-shirts, people communicate g/l messages. The community adopts these products to transform the street; the imagery becomes part of everyday language. They also use these representations in order to find one another, to collapse space. The public sphere becomes a visible frontier.

> Any time two or more Black gay men gather together, it is indeed a political act. Their mere willingness to share their mutual secret is a pivotal step toward self-empowerment through group identification. (Harris, p 175.)

While Craig Harris writes about Black gay men, his message is appropriate whenever g/ls get together. Sexual minorities claim the street in order to claim their own self-identity. Land, through permits issued by city officials, is taken, used and given back, imprinted by their experiences. Pride disorients the nonnative structures of negotiation and compromise. "The special characteristic of the homosexual intervention is to make what is private - sexuality's shameful little secret - intervene in public, in social organization." (Hocquenghem, p 136.) By congregating out of doors and organizing collectively, Pride festivals affect the reception, appropriation and intent of public space. By addressing and participating in the city and its infrastructure, marginalized communities suggest an urban landscape that meets the needs of changing social relations.

SEARCHING FOR A GAY PLACE

Many cities have identifiable gay territories where gay men congregate. Sometimes called ghettos, these metropolitan areas include numerous meeting and living spaces. Life in a ghetto can be comfortable and reassuring. As Jackson writes, "In a ghetto we don't have to be invisible. Outside the ghetto we simply don't exist; but in the ghetto nothing could be more natural than being gay." (Jackson, p 90.)

Many gay ghettos emerged from old, forgotten and ill-used spaces. I have noticed that some gays define themselves through this appropriation. It may be because society has not, until recently, sanctioned a homosexual history. Without a space of their own, gays take over someone else's and redefine the borders of that space. As a result, the acquisition of building sites becomes a way to paint a gay history, an identifiable process of becoming.'

As mainstream society increasingly accepts and its press increasingly covers gay issues, the community and its supporters struggle to turn this new visibility into spatial proposals that permeate the public realm. Gays received "a certain amount of respectability, even legitimacy, with the elevation of his kind to what I call 'community' status. The 'gay community' now 'exists', at least within political, academic and liberal discourse." (Forrest, p 98.) What image should this community project and how can people/places/events that differ from that image be treated? How do gays sustain their past?

The legitimization process, establishment of a collective memory, and path toward equality are delicate issues. In order to establish their public selves, groups can deny their diversity. Promoting "acceptability" is often accompanied by a rejection of any alternative that does not meet the "standard" model.[2] The Stonewall Inn, for instance, an important site in the development of the modem gay rights movement, had to be reconfigured, reopened and reinvented in the 1980s to take advantage of its importance as a historic

site. There are no remnants of the drag queens and hustlers that originally inhabited the spaces and started the Stonewall Riots. Indeed, the ***Guide to Lesbian & Gay New York Historical Landmarks,*** published in 1994 for Stonewall 25, names very few sites which are outside mainstream acceptance; most are temporary residences of the famous or organizational and social centers.

As gay designers focus on the sites and memories of gay triumphs and tragedies, they face questions about what will be remembered, how will events be presented and where will projects be placed. What do these projects say about shared experience; do they liberate their users or reiterate the power structures around them? How do monuments and landmarks promote identity and whose identity?'

The public projects which are being proposed retrace in social space gay culture and history; they allow a marginalized group to become part of the physical makeup of a city. They serve the functional life of a community and the healing process which sites of gathering try to foster. Their designs respond to, stabilize and inform the order and meaning of shared experience within the urban environment.

A few completed projects include: George Segal's "Gay Liberation", a commemorative sculpture installed in Christopher Park, Greenwich Village in 1992; Felix Gonzalez-Torres "Untitled", a billboard at the comer of Christopher Street, New York, temporarily installed for the 20th anniversary of Stonewall[4]; and "Homomonument" in Amsterdam, a triangular, terraced park designed by Karin Daan, unveiled in 1987 to honor homosexuals who were persecuted by Nazis.[5]

Some uncompleted proposals confront an often unprepared public by celebrating gay male sexuality. They mark sites of public meeting in urban parks or boldly establish new sex spaces.[6]

The number and variety of proposals indicate the need to publicly declare a history. Communal spaces mark where we are and how to behave. The danger, however, is that as documents of time, function and social status, these projects become frozen, separated from human interaction.

INVOLVING A GAY BATHHOUSE

My design research takes as its site a former gay bathhouse on St. Marks Place in New York City. How do we redesign these kinds of spaces without memorializing or eradicating their pasts? In researching and reinventing the space, I investigate new forms of assembly and new definitions for the collective itself. I am not interested in nostalgia. Rather, I hope to learn from its prior uses, animate the space with a new program, and suggest a flexible and complex alternative.

Joel Brodsky recently commemorated a gay space that centered on same-sex sexual activity. He chose the Mineshaft because it implies the possibility of a non-violent community in a fragmented society.

> The ability of the Mineshaft experience to accommodate the individual homoerotic realities of hundreds, if not thousands of gay men, was its most interesting feature. While each participant performed his own ritual with his own meanings, the Mineshaft functioned somehow to hook up all these performances with a common set of facilities, rules, symbols and emotions. (Brodsky, p 246.)

While baths have always offered spaces for same-sex enjoyment, the height of their popularity came between the Stonewall Riot and the onslaught of media surrounding AIDS. Gay male bathhouses offered the safety and freedom within which to explore a multiple set of inter-relations. Sensual pleasure became the predominant motive, one that relied less on the orgasm and more on the multiplicity of senses, the erotic possibilities of the whole body, and a variety of fetishized behaviors. After a night at the baths where assumptions and beliefs were questioned by the disparate mix one could find and the promise that almost any fantasy could be fulfilled, patrons returned to the all too familiar world of isolation and homophobia.

The baths, at least in New York, are no longer intense sites of practice. When many city governments targeted gay baths in the mid 80s, the bathhouse became disreputable. In the United States, the reaction against multiple sexual encounters and a conservative social agenda prevented clearheaded policy making to focus on safer sex practices. Many found it difficult to think that gay male sexuality and the prevention of HIV transmittal could happen at the same time.

Today, most remaining bathhouse structures are in disuse, disrepair or unoccupied. Their sites, however, are not empty of history or meaning; the place of the bathhouse has not been normalized. Recent battles over their reopening or the creation of new ones are argued in both the gay and mainstream press; the bathhouse remains a threat.'

My project looks to the future of these potent spaces. The general mingling of bodies, diffused eroticism, and leftover environments provide my context. By turning the baths into a multivalent art, social and commercial space, you pass through one on route to another. Through programmatic collage and sited architectural interventions, my proposal offers a place for new relations between individuals. I intend an examination of body phobia, the acceptance of difference, and the manifestation of overlapping identities.

Taking over these spaces will serve gay people in the city as a new meeting place, a space that allows for communication, sensual intercourse and casual encounters between multiple genders. My project tries to bring the variety of the urban street, the increasingly "queer" street, into the bath, reacting against commercial homogenization and exclusivity. My aim is to reassert claims for artistic and sexual freedom, and to design visibility, a requirement for progress. Gay presence and the presence of pleasure is increasingly and more profoundly needed and felt.

PROGRAMMING THE BATHHOUSE

The program for this building includes commerce spaces such as market, cafe, or meeting room, art and body spaces

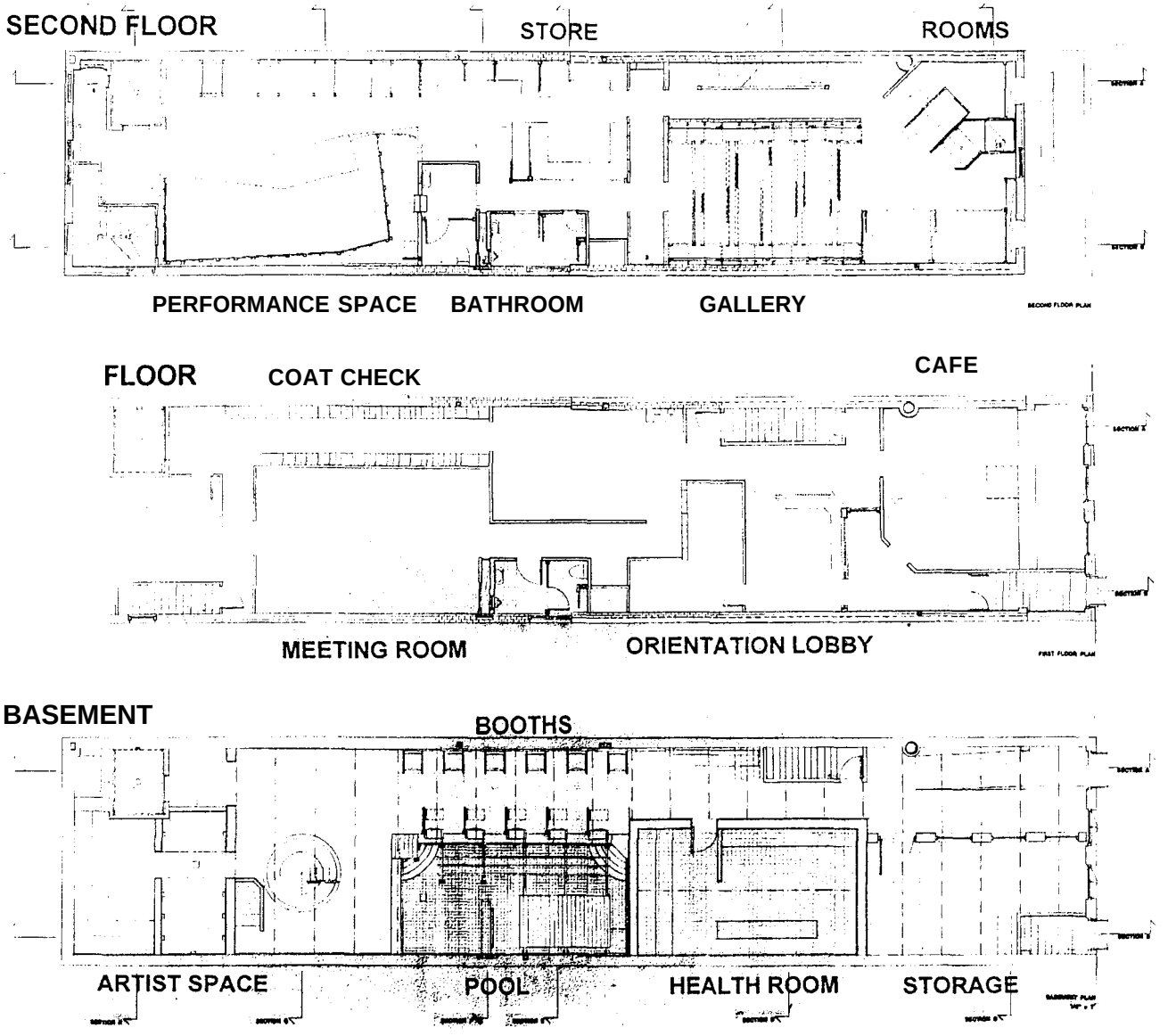

Fig. 1. Floor Plans

for piercing, tattoos or haircuts, and work spaces for health and body workers. Before entering, the existing building facade acts as a mask. I pulled a glass curtain wall just behind the brick wall to separate the interior from its public face. The solid facade remains, while everything behind it is questioned, rethought and/or changed.

Reprogramming and rebuilding the site revitalizes the spatial relations and social functioning of the bathhouse (not necessarily the physical actions) by:

- rearranging the hierarchy of bathhouse spaces, adjusting viewing positions, and juxtaposing different kinds of activities.
- eroticizing encounters through intimacy and surprise.
- intensifying material surfaces and boundaries.
- putting people into the position of the other.

The old Cashier's Desk, for instance, becomes the orientation lobby through which people enter. The former threshold into the interior is blocked; visitors cannot "experience" the bathhouse as it was.

In the basement, the sauna and showers, bright spots in baths, remain open for use. The steam room, formerly blurred through water vapor, becomes a health room available for needle exchange, condom distribution, massage therapy or homeopathy. Across from the pool, facing a line of mirrors, I placed open booths offering coin operated video screens, sun lamps and vibrating chairs. This is an area of narcissism; one's own pleasure is placed on view.

Upstairs, a set of paired stores placed in conjunction with the pair of bathrooms create a service core at the center. The store space is tight and constricted like the bathhouse corridor or sidewalks outside. From the bathroom, there is a one way window looking onto the cash register of the market. An

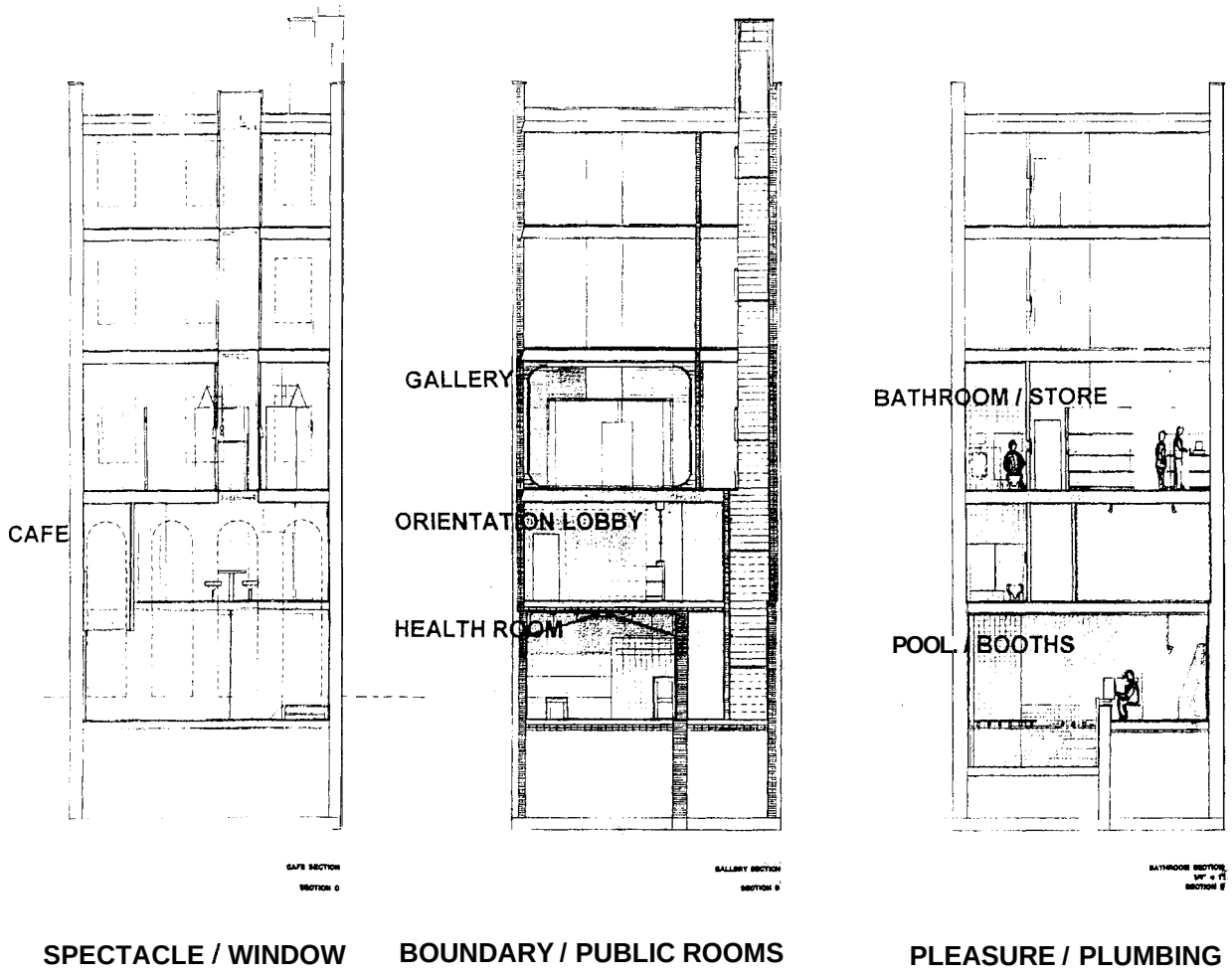

Fig. 2. Short Sections

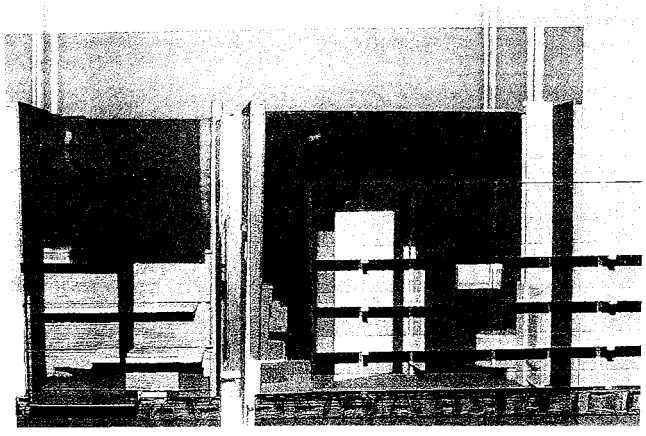

Fig. 3. Bathroom/Store

act of consumption is under surveillance; one participates in an event without knowing it.

The bathrooms, one of the few places in public where we expose our genitals, are a prime-site rather than non-site within this project. Between the rooms is a water wall allowing rain water to flow from the roof down to the pool. The urinal and toilet each have windows facing into the wall, its placement between the toilets questioning issues of source and waste.

Art/body spaces occur throughout the building. The gallery is both passageway and labyrinth; the viewer controls the route of progression by manipulating movable partitions which recall the dimension of former room walls, doors, and corridors. The performance space opens onto tables for eating, reading or socializing. The floor and walls are raised so that one sees the remnants and performance of the bathhouse in relation to current activities.

The success of the baths offered a network of procedures and practices that allowed for a number of body positions. Usually, in community spaces, we find bodies either standing or sitting. In the baths, we also find kneeling, lying down, leaning and crouching. This project tries to put people into positions they would not normally allow themselves to be in. They begin to participate in events that celebrate their differences from the existing social orders.

While the spaces are designed as artificial constructions

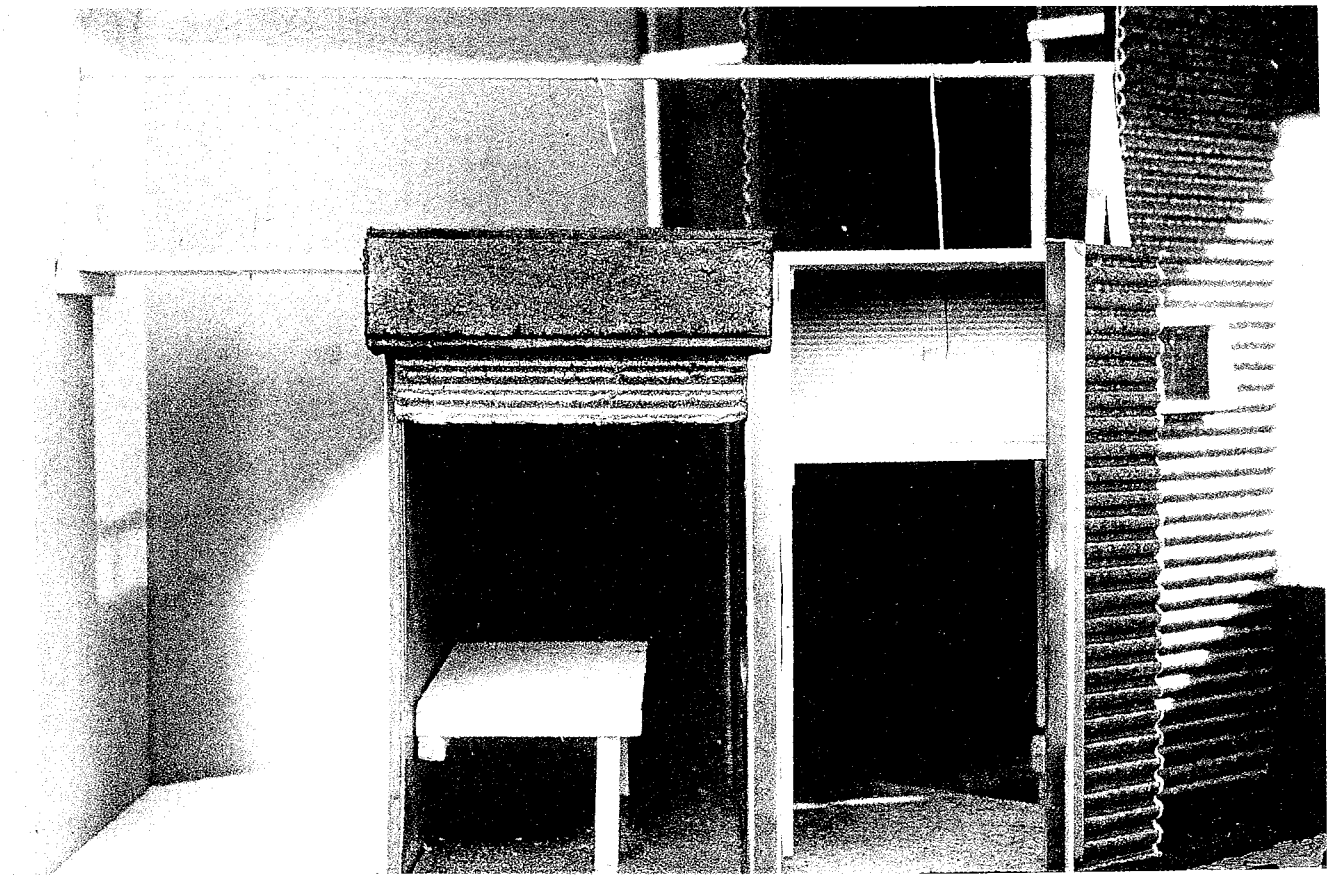

Fig. 4. Room/Materials

in temporary residence, they also create comfort zones for pause, intimacy and touch. Window seats are soft and heated to body temperature. Within a grouping of three thresholds, this project recreates the "room" of the bathhouse, highlights materiality and its sounds, and isolates body positions. One kneels because of the height of the ceiling and passes under a spot light. These spaces becomes ritual or initiation places. By accepting a position in the spectacle, the visitor experiences the play of scale, sensuality and the viewing frame.

CONCLUSION

My research has focused on gay spaces because they are places where normative relations come under question. The authority of desire (for community, sexual partners and individual identity) is celebrated and with it, specific forms of language, construction and exchange develop.

In studying bathhouse strategies and their spatial structure, I seek to uncover the potential in these "inaccessible" sites and rediscover their social possibilities. My project describes how a new program for the baths relates to the past physical and architectural experiences which took place within them. The baths gave people a place to congregate with others who shared their desires.

It is obvious to me that when we articulate something, we exclude. The existence of gay spaces does not harm society; in fact, the baths provided a place out of the way for people who did not fit into the mainstream. At the same time, their containment in the baths allowed for surveillance. Any effort to establish visibility, identity and interactions outside the social margins met with backlash.

Architecture, through a process of regulation and exclusion, sustains a given economic and ideological environment. How then do we negotiate between access and contemplation, contact and security, description and distortion? Can individual experience offer new forms of education, production and understanding?

My paper describes how the personal can escape its boundaries to become more public. We need to open a dialogue to allow people, places and time periods to interact, exchange and connect; by revealing layers, we augment context. In design and programming, the laying of one value system on the foundation of another remakes a site.

Each of us has ties to different communities. If architecture can be described as a series of constructed relationships, we need to encourage students to use and access their identities in design to construct new associations. Identity creates a sense of place and provides a safe location in which to act. Students, by interpreting their lives, promise new forms of social practice and social order.

NOTES

[1] While these gay enclaves create a new urban identity, their popularity has its downside. Real-estate values rise and the neighborhood becomes increasingly homogenized and inaccessible.

[2] Kenneth Read writes, "It would seem politic for the activists to recognize the diversity within their 'constituency' and to reach out to as many of them as possible rather than erecting barriers of disapproval between themselves and those who participate in styles that are perfectly innocuous but are not regarded as suitable." (Read, p 144.)

[3] Identity is never singular. Leo Bersani writes that "'gay identity' led many of those invited to recognize themselves as belonging to it (as well as those excluded) to protest that there are many ways of being gay, that sexual behavior is never only aquestion of sex, that it is embedded in all the other, non-sexual ways in which we are socially and culturally positioned." (Bersani, p 3.)

[4] Gonzalez-Torres looks at history through his own experiences. He uses "individual memory as a tool to counter the artificial separation of the 'personal' and the 'public,' a distinction that works in practice to delegitimize whole categories of lived experience." (Ferguson, p 25)

[5] The monument, listed on g/l maps and in travel guides, has become a meeting place as well as a memorial for those who have died from AIDS; flowers are often left on the platform which overhangs the water.

[6] In 1994, Storefront for Art and Architecture published a series of Queer Space Manifestos and "Steam" Magazine published the design for a Sexpark. (Willis, p 176-177.)

[7] The bathhouse controversy, while discussed as a public health issue, is also a sign ofhomophobia. "Homophobia continues to flourish, remaining implicit in much government legislation covering female and gay male sexuality, and frequently explicit in the right-wing press, in school playgrounds, at the pulpit, in men's clubs and in the military." (Forrest, p 104.)

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