Recovering the Gay Village: A Comparative Historical Geography of Urban Change and Planning in Toronto and Sydney

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that the historical geographies of Toronto's Church and Wellesley Street district and Sydney's Oxford Street gay villages are important in understanding the contemporary transformations currently ongoing in both locations. LGBT and queer communities as well as mainstream interests argue that these gay villages are in some form of "decline" for various social, political, and economic reasons. Given their similar histories and geographies, our analysis considers how these historical geographies have both enabled and constrained how the respective gay villages respond to these challenges while opening up particular possibilities for alternative (and relational) geographies. While there are a number of ways to consider these historical geographies, we focus on three factors for analysis—post World War II planning policies, the emergence of "city of neighborhoods" discourses, and the positioning of gay villages within neoliberal processes of commodification and consumerism. We conclude that these distinctive historical geographies offer a cogent set of understandings by providing suggestive explanations for how Toronto's and Sydney's gendered and sexual landscapes are being reorganized in distinctive ways.

Keywords: gay village, neighborhood, planning, urban change, Toronto, Sydney

Introduction

In this paper, we examine the historical geographies of the now iconic gay villages in Toronto's Church and Wellesley Street district and Sydney's Oxford Street (figures 1 and 2 respectively).[1] We argue that a comparative historical geographies approach provides insights into the complex and multidimensional processes fomenting an ongoing and profoundly distinctive reordering of gendered and sexual landscapes occurring in both Toronto and Sydney. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the ongoing debates about the nature, characteristics, and implications of the shifting fortunes of some traditional gay villages in the Global North.

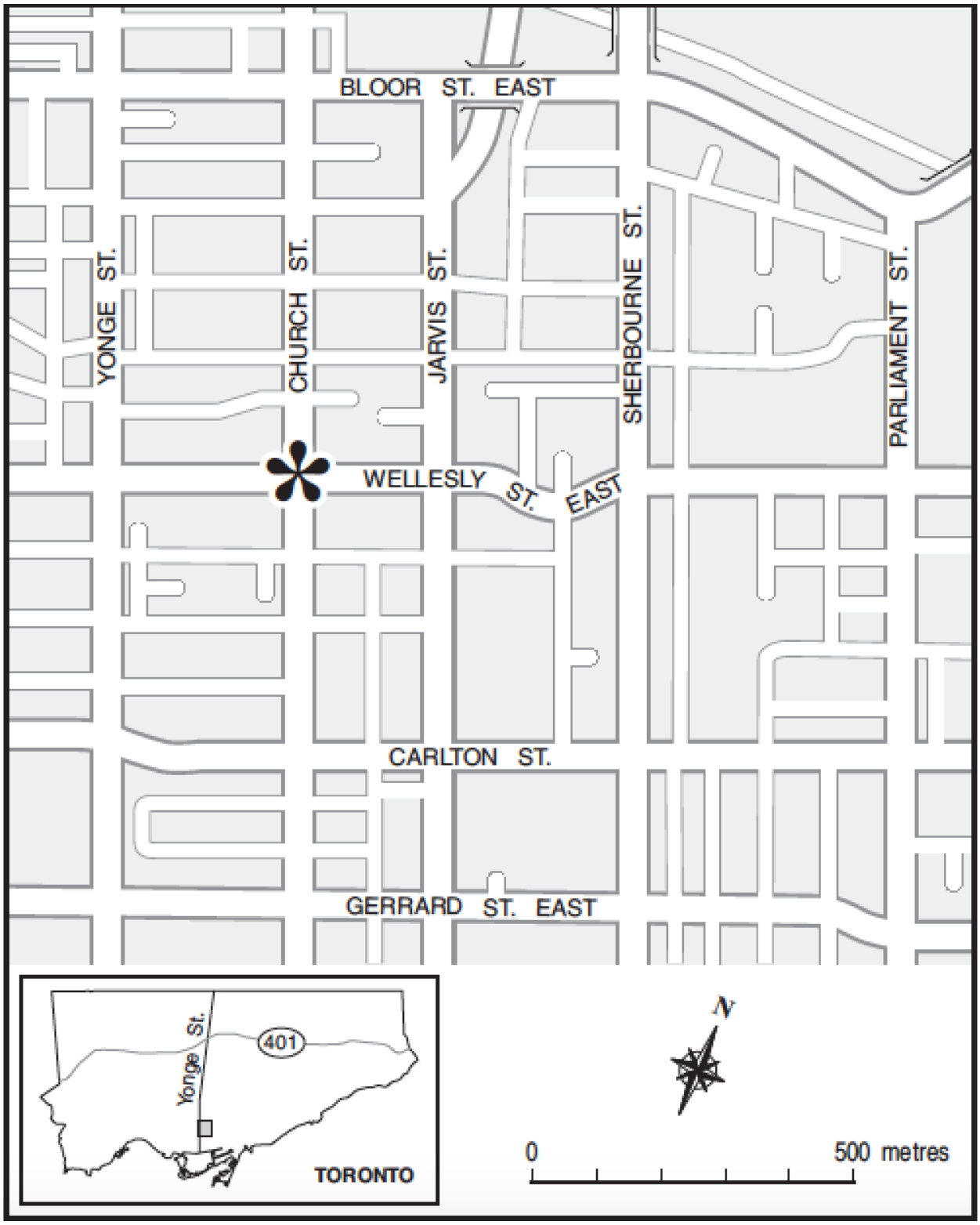

Figure 1. Toronto's Gay Village – Church and Wellesley Street area.

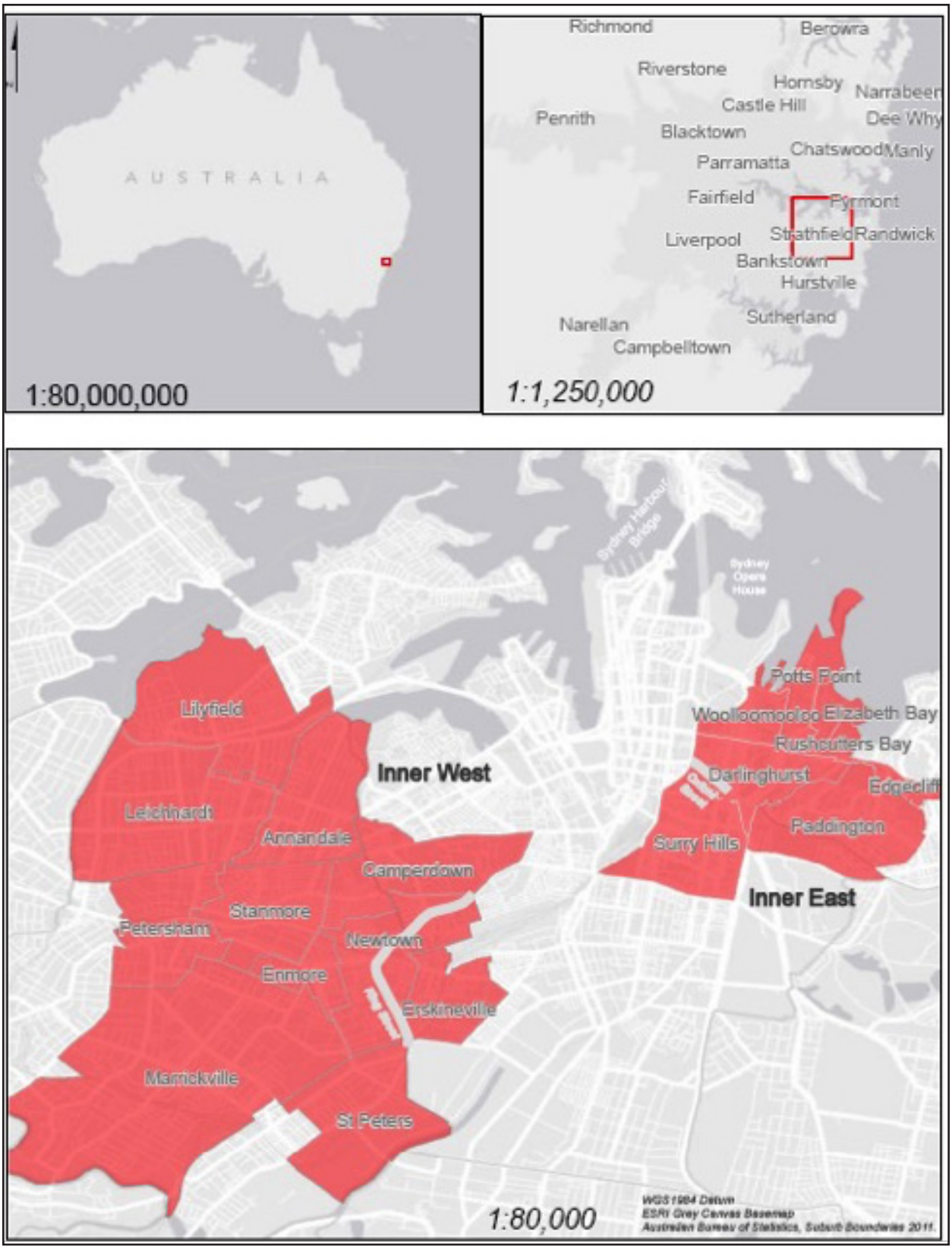

Figure 2. Sydney's LGBTQ neighborhoods: inner east and inner west.

We begin with a brief discussion of the current geographical scholarship on the emergence of gay villages in the Global North with an emphasis on the contemporary literature detailing the perceived "decline" of some longstanding gay villages, including those in Toronto and Sydney. In the next section, we explain why a comparative historical geography of Toronto and Sydney might be insightful and we lay out the distinctive historical geographies underpinning the emergence of each city's gay neighborhoods in the post-World War II period.[2] Our analysis considers how these historical geographies both enable and constrain the possibilities and potentialities for the respective gay villages while opening up particular possibilities for alternative (and relational) geographies. In doing so, we discuss convergences and divergences in the development of gay villages and other gendered and sexual landscapes in Toronto and Sydney. Our extensive conclusion underscores the cities' differences and draws on our historical geographical analysis to pose questions about the future of their gay villages.

Gay villages: segregation and integration

A substantial body of scholarship examines the emergence and development of gay villages in the Global North in the period following World War II. This research highlights the dominant role that gay men (mainly white and middle-class) played in the development and growth of gay villages, initially through their appropriation of places for safety and support to their use of these neighborhoods for political, social, and economic security and activism.[3] At the same time, lesbian and queer women also inhabited urban locations and neighborhoods and utilized gay village spaces, albeit in distinctive and less visible ways.[4] Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, these districts increasingly engaged in local politics, consolidating their presence and creating community through economic development, the provisions of services, and political activism around rights protections. The HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s helped cement villages as hubs of LGBT life, and in places such as Toronto and Sydney they provided core services including hospice care, outreach, health education, and counseling services.[5]

In the 1980s, gay villages were increasingly caught up in broader urban social and economic processes that saw them incorporated, through the neoliberal policy initiatives of the entrepreneurial city, into increasingly commodified and consumable urban landscapes.[6] Currently, both Toronto and Sydney represent their respective villages as examples of their tolerance and openness to diversity. This seeming assimilation into mainstream urban life has prompted some scholars to argue that the assimilation of some LGBT people into mainstream life both reflects and reinforces LGBT "neoliberal sexual politics" that privilege those sexual and gendered minorities who are willing to participate in normative, middle-class, consumer society within monogamous married coupledom.[7] This framing of a "homonormative politic" has prompted some to argue that we cannot understand this to be a universal or monolithic result and that we need to attend to the "difference, unevenness and geographical specificity" of gendered and sexual relations in the gay village and beyond.[8]

As recent scholarship suggests, contemporary gay villages, including those in Toronto and Sydney, are experiencing forms of "degaying" within broader political, social, and economic processes at work in many Global North cities.[9] The commodification of gay villages as tourist venues, as well as shopping and entertainment districts, has attracted a wide variety of consumers and businesses not necessarily identifying as LGBT. Many LGBT venues are now popular with heterosexuals while other social spaces such as bars and restaurants are becoming more mixed or have lost their queer sensibility entirely. In both Canada and Australia, legislative and social recognition of LGBT people has resulted in their increasing visibility in a broad range of locations beyond the gay village in places understood to be "gay friendly." While many argue this new visibility is only available to certain normatively gendered and sexualized gays and lesbians,

others suggest these spatial changes reflect greater acceptance of sexual and gendered difference, as well as a growing social cohesion across a wide variety of neighborhoods.[10] Nevertheless, as scholars argue, while some gays and lesbians are able to fully integrate into the mainstream, others continue to be marginalized as "queer," that is, as those living outside of the homonormative lifestyles supported by legislative and social change.[11]

Scholarship also suggests that gay villages are in decline because of increased internet and social media use, allowing LGBT and queer individuals to find other like-minded individuals without the need for expressly LGBT and queer spaces such as gay villages.[12] Some LGBT and queer people, particularly youth, perceive the gay village as reflective of older generations' histories, sensibilities, and lifestyles.[13] These locations are arguably of little interest to newer generations, who are able to experience a wider variety of locations, identities, and subjectivities, and who are less interested, perhaps, in subscribing to essentialized gay and lesbian identities associated with gay villages.

Evidence of gay village "decline" in Toronto and Sydney

Both Toronto and Sydney have well-established gay villages, which over the last thirty years have been fully integrated into the fabric of each city's downtown core. Toronto's gay village emerged in the late 1970s and is presently centered on the intersection of Church and Wellesley Streets, one block east of Yonge Street, Toronto's main downtown thoroughfare.[14] Today, the village remains the hub of gay social, economic and political life with its collection of bars, restaurants, bathhouses, convenience stores, restaurants, and boutique shops. The 519 Church Street Community Centre serves a substantial LGBT population, many of whom live in the surrounding residential neighborhood.

Sydney's gay village, popularly called Oxford Street, is adjacent to the Central Business District (CBD) in the inner east. Nightlife, leisure, and commercial activities are focused along Oxford Street between College Street and Taylor Square (presently), comprising bars, clubs, cafes, sex shops, and other retailers, while there is a congregation of LGBT venues, community facilities (social and health services), and residents in the surrounding suburbs of Darlinghurst, Surry Hills, Paddington and Potts Point. An incipient concentration of both establishments and residents was apparent in Oxford Street by the late 1960s.[15] The Oxford Street "scene" is associated with gay men, but there are lesbian venues and services, and a neighboring residential concentration of both lesbian and gay couples.[16] Oxford Street is epitomized as the "heartland" of Sydney's LGBT community broadly—an imagining buttressed by the annual fanfare of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade.[17]

In Toronto, concerns over whether the gay village was experiencing economic and social "decline" surfaced in the early 2000s when a series of economic downturns resulted in, among other things, the loss or closure of several longstanding and iconic businesses.[18] LGBT and mainstream newspaper and magazine articles began exploring the shifting demographics of gay village life marked by an increasing number of non-LGBT people living, shopping, and/or socializing in the area and diluting the queer "feel" of the gay village as a whole and particular individual venues.[19] While some writers regard these changes as a mark of the LGBT community's coming of age, others are concerned about the potential loss of political, economic, and social strength offered by recognized gay neighborhoods.[20]

As in Toronto, the early 2000s saw growing concern over the "demise" of Sydney's Oxford Street as a gay village and safe space. Over the last decade, this concern has been expressed by both the LGBT and mainstream presses, with evidence resting on the closure of a number of long-standing, iconic venues (the c. 2002 closure of The Albury at 6 Oxford Street is sometimes considered '"the final straw"), a growing straight nightlife presence (including a cluster of

straight clubs at the College Street end of Oxford Street), and increasing homophobic street violence.[21] Alongside calls to "save" Oxford Street, media and community commentaries have pointed to the coalescence of another LGBT commercial, residential, and service concentration in Sydney's inner west, centered on King Street, Newtown, and encompassing the adjacent suburbs of Camperdown, Erskineville, Enmore, Leichhardt, and Marrickville.[22] This marks a divergence from the Toronto case and will be considered later in the paper: by the early 2000s, Newtown was already considered by LGBT and mainstream commentators as a consolidated "alternative" LGBT neighborhood, and indeed, a "new hub" of LGBT Sydney. Oxford Street, nonetheless, is still widely perceived as Sydney's gay village, retaining commercial and residential LGBT concentrations (especially of/for gay men), with concerted efforts by the City of Sydney Council and local communities to revitalize its "gay character."

At the present time, then, both Oxford Street and the Church and Wellesley village are undergoing some form of metamorphosis. In both cities there is considerable debate over the exact nature and underlying causes of these changes, whether they can be understood as positive or negative, and whether LGBT and queer political organizations should be actively engaged in guiding or directing these transformations. Given that both villages and related events, such as Pride and Mardi Gras, are used to demonstrate their city's cosmopolitanism and competitiveness, mainstream interests, including local municipal councils and LGBT organizations, are concerned about the potential fate of their gay neighborhoods. As we argue here, in order to understand the nature and framing of these debates, it is important to understand each of these village's historical geographies. In the following sections, we consider their respective historical geographies through three specific themes — post World War II planning policies, the emergence of "city of neighborhoods" discourses, and the positioning of gay villages within neoliberal processes of commodification and consumerism.

Historical geographies of sexuality in Toronto and Sydney

Historical geographies offer insights into current processes, through an examination of the "how" and the "why" of current developments. Referring to the development of gay commercial districts, Camilla Bassi argues: "Each locale possesses its own peculiar historical and social processes, the outcome of which is by no means certain."[23] Both Toronto and Sydney are world cities and major gateways for immigration and settlement.[24] While it is beyond the scope of this paper to lay out in detail the similarities between Toronto's and Sydney's gay village development, we would argue that our own work documents the notably similar political, economic, and social histories of the ongoing development of gay villages in Toronto and Sydney.[25] LGBT and queer political and social activism within discrete national contexts has been markedly similar but with varying and distinctive differences.[26] Both Toronto's and Sydney's LGBT urban histories and geographies are positioned within the wider processes of queer globalizations and deployments (and taken up locally in particular ways).[27] Taken together, this suggests the complex and multiple complications in developing understandings about the distinctive developments of gay villages in the Global North.

While there are numerous factors to consider in terms of both the emergence and contemporary circumstances of each city's gay village, we focus here on three main themes— post World War II urban planning initiatives, the emergence of the concept of "neighborhood" as central to the health of inner cities and, in the context of contemporary neoliberal processes, local business initiatives, such as Toronto's business improvement associations (BIA) and local government cultural and economic revitalization plans in Sydney.

Historical geographies of sexuality in Toronto

This section examines the intertwined histories of Toronto's shifting urban planning policies and the changing fortunes of what has become Toronto's "traditional" gay village in the two decades after World War II. While attempts to demarcate stages of development are rightly critiqued as failed attempts to tidy up inherently messy and complex sets of processes, nevertheless scholarship considering Toronto's urban development highlights three main stages in its evolution—the 1950s and 1960s urban renewal period, the turbulent reformist activism of the 1970s and early 1980s, and the transition to neoliberal governance structures in the post-1995 period.[28] At the same time, Toronto's loosely associated gay and lesbian socio-spatial networks consolidated into what was widely recognized as a gay neighborhood by the early 1980s.[29] By the mid-1990s, neoliberal ideologies increasingly guided Toronto's planning and economic policies, drawing the village into commodified, consumerist neighborhood development and ultimately positioning the gay village as symbolic of Toronto's diversity, tolerance, and cosmopolitanism.[30] The integration of the gay village into Toronto's contemporary urban fabric is a result, in part, of its serendipitous beginnings in the 1950s and 1960s in the seedy and marginal downtown core, a location that would ultimately become the political, social, and economic heart of Toronto's urban landscape.[31]

As one of Canada's major cities, Toronto's population increased substantially in the late 1930s as the country geared up for war, and then again during the war efforts in the 1940s.[32] Toronto's factories, manufacturing industries, and related service industries offered stable employment opportunities for both men and women who flocked to Toronto in unprecedented numbers and many of whom lived in the inner city's low rent apartments, boarding and rooming houses.[33] Toronto's downtown core, centered around Yonge Street from south of Bloor Street to Front Street, gained considerable notoriety, dotted with massage parlors, strip joints, discount stores and a seedy assortment of bars and restaurants, populated with those considered to have unsavory reputations and appetites. In keeping with the histories of other LGBT neighborhoods in North America, Toronto's post World War II homosexual population clustered in and around these less desirable areas, able to live relatively open lives amongst other marginalized groups largely in the Bloor and Church Street district.[34] So visible was Toronto's homosexual subculture in the 1960s that newspaper articles in the mainstream press claimed that Toronto was Canada's "homosexual capital." Those seeking information on the locations of homosexuals could always rely on the lurid headlines in local tabloids to find each other.[35]

In the post-World War II period, Toronto's planning efforts were directed largely to the inner suburbs surrounding the city of Toronto. Such efforts were driven by a deep desire to return to pre-war norms about the heterosexual family and children. Developers and planners stressed the notion that raising a family required single family homeownership, with greater indoor and outdoor space.[36] Governments directly intervened to encourage such developments through the provision of subsidized schools, hospitals, housing, and the construction of roads and major arterial highways.[37]

In Toronto, the boom in the suburban developments undermined inner-city neighborhoods as the middle and upper classes moved to the suburbs, encouraging the construction of major roadways through older downtown neighborhoods. Inner-city housing stocks declined as larger homes were converted to multiple-unit rentals, alongside a deterioration of the housing stock, which supported planning initiatives for urban renewal and the demolition of older housing stock for public housing.[38] Toronto's gays and lesbians were unlikely to live in the newly developing suburbs, thereby encouraging many to live and work in the downtown core where their proclivities were more likely to be tolerated. Canadian cities (including Toronto) also experienced

substantial immigration in the 1950s and 1960s, which supported the refurbishment of inner-city housing stock as ethnic minorities began to concentrate in recognizable districts or territories. Neighborhood groups organized to prevent mass demolitions promoted by urban renewal schemes and highway construction, in part to support the preservation of many well-established downtown neighborhoods.[39] The city of Toronto also undertook major redevelopments in the CBD including the construction of a new city hall, the construction of Eaton Centre retail space, and the promotion of high-rise residential and commercial buildings.[40]

By the early 1970s, Toronto had a number of local social movements that, as Lynch and Ley argue, pushed back against the "technocratic practices of the state" grounded in modernist notions of urban renewal.[41] The work of Jane Jacobs was highly influential in promoting vibrant low-rise and eclectic inner-city neighborhoods. As the city embraced these ideas, the downtown experienced "a wave of heritage protection and the beginnings of inner-city gentrification in the early 1970s."[42] Neighborhood preservationist movements were particularly successful in pushing back against development, prompting a shift in Canadian planning perspectives to one that increasingly regarded the downtown CBD as an important hub for regional economic health, the provision of goods and services, and a center for social and cultural life.[43]

A nascent gay village: Toronto in the 1970s

The partial decriminalization of homosexuality in 1969 opened up the possibilities for more public activism. LGBT political and social organizations were founded in downtown Toronto in the early 1970s. Groups such as the Community Homophile Association of Toronto (CHAT) established a community center, café, and library in the Church Street area. CHAT believed such spaces would bring together and politicize local gays and lesbians by providing alternative spaces to the bars and bathhouses.[44] Clashes with anti-gay activists such as Anita Bryant and local pastor Ken Campbell, as well as organizing against police harassments of local bathhouses, fostered more aggressive forms of political activism geared towards defending homosexual commercial establishments. By the end of the 1970s, gay and lesbian activists fully recognized the Church and Wellesley Street area as a gay neighborhood and called for its defense, not only by gays and lesbians but also by the local municipal council. George Hislop ran as the first openly gay candidate for City Council in 1980 prompting one mayoral candidate to claim, somewhat ominously, that Hislop's presence clearly demonstrated Toronto was becoming "San Francisco North."[45]

The election of a "reform" council in 1969 prompted calls to end major urban renewal projects and to protect and preserve inner-city neighborhoods. In the 1970s, local planning ideologies espoused a "postmodern strategy of place making, one that continually brought attention to the revitalizing capacity of the urban neighborhood."[46] As a result, ethnocultural neighborhoods were no longer perceived as temporary locations from which to aspire to assimilation but as stable and supportive communities contributing to the vibrancy of city life. Taken together, the new urban social movements, the development of stable ethnic enclaves, and the growing gay and lesbian rights movement encouraged an understanding of the Church and Wellesley Street neighborhood as one worth protecting as a legitimate political and social territory for gays and lesbians to participate in city life.[47]

At the same time, in many North Americas cities there was a shift in perceptions about urban life as a growing number of single women, single men, and childless couples enjoyed downtown residential lifestyles, particularly the middle class. Scholarship recognizes the role of gays in the early gentrification movement in downtown neighborhoods, including "less affluent gays and other unconventional middle-class groups" and "avant-garde artists and others 'non-conformist' in their life style and politics."[48] Scholarship has documented the important role that

gay men and lesbians have played as early gentrifiers in more marginal locations in the city, including the impact of gay men in Toronto's downtown Cabbagetown neighborhood adjacent to the nascent gay village in the early 1970s.[49]

Neoliberalism and Toronto's gay village

In the 1990s, cities in Canada experienced increasing financial strain as the Ontario provincial and federal governments began downloading the costs of welfare and social programs, and infrastructure repair and management, to local municipalities. In response, cities increasingly employed more entrepreneurial, self-promotional approaches to attract new economic development. Neoliberal ideologies underpinned cities' endeavors to market themselves through the creation of place identities, edgy architecture, urban design, and cultural spectacle.[50] Cities understood the importance of "place-making" in creating a positive city image, making such locations magnets for employment, industry, and tourism. Cities also recognized that certain "lifestyles and symbolic economies that exist in these spaces through recreation, leisure, and cultural activities" also supported a city's image as a vibrant place to live.[51] By the early 2000s, Toronto's gay village (as with other gay villages in North America, Europe, and Australia) was fully incorporated into the fabric of the post-industrial entrepreneurial city that knitted together commodified, consumer-based neighborhoods with downtown urban lifestyles.[52] The gay village's incorporation into commodified urban landscapes is a reflection, in part, of the aspirations of some gay men and lesbians for inclusion in a neoliberal politics that results in the privileging of some gay men and lesbians who desire to live within middle class, gender-normative, monogamous coupledom—a form of homonormalization.[53]

The HIV/AIDS crisis had a devastating impact on the LGBT community through the 1980s, while at the same time contributed to the consolidation of the neighborhood as a recognizable and stable gay and lesbian enclave. In coping with the ravages of the disease, the provincial and federal governments funneled funding and assistance into services centered in the village and supported spaces provided by the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT), Casey House, and 519 Church Street.[54] Given the centrality of the village in downtown Toronto, the majority of the services for LGBT people, including services for queer youth, remain there, although some services targeting queer immigrants are located closer to their constituencies.

Toronto's village today

Today, Toronto's village is unequivocally included as one of the important and distinctive inner-city neighborhoods in the city of Toronto's marketing and tourism activities. Recently, anxiety about the possible decline in the village has grown, particularly with the loss of several iconic businesses, rising rents, and an influx of heterosexuals into the condominium market and entertainment venues. Legislative and social advances, including human rights protections and gay marriage, ensure that LGBT people are increasingly visible and mobile across a variety of locations, creating alternative yet relational geographies. Our own research suggests that rather than understanding changing gendered and sexual landscapes as one of decline and decay, it might be more suitable to understand these changing landscapes as part of more complex relational geographies between neighborhoods supporting visible queer populations and marking greater social cohesions.[55] In Toronto, other neighborhoods supporting queer communities include Parkdale ("Queer West"), Brockton Village, Roncesvalles, and Leslieville. Scholarship also attests to claims by some that younger queers view the gay village as a relic of the past, as no longer relevant, or as a location that was never particularly welcoming of certain groups.[56]

Recently, the village has been presented with an opportunity for self-reflection in the wake of a successful bid for World Pride, held in Toronto in the spring of 2014, and the Pan American Games in the summer of 2015. One distinguishing feature of the urban commercial landscape in

Toronto is the ability of local businesses to establish Business Improvement Associations (BIAs) under the Ontario Municipal Act, 2001. This allows business owners to form an association with the approval of the local council and a two-thirds majority of local businesses. Once established, membership is compulsory and funds are raised through the imposition of an annual levy. The purpose of BIAs is to "improve, beautify and maintain public lands in the BIA and promote the area for business and shopping."[57] The Church and Wellesley Village BIA, created in 2002, has recently formed a closer association with the LGBT community through relocating to 519 Church Street Community Centre.

Preparing for World Pride and the PanAm Games provided the local LGBT business community with an opportunity to undertake more long-range planning around the future of the gay village and its role in LGBT and queer life. With the support of local city Councilor Kristyn Wong-Tam, the local BIA and LGBT activists launched a planning study to determine the future of the gay village. The BIA is largely working to preserve the long-term economic viability of the village as a tourist attraction. Partly as a result of the planning study, the BIA undertook several initiatives, including renovating Cawartha Park, commissioning a mural representing LGBT life, and the opening of "temporary parklets" along Church Street in the summer and fall of 2013.

Although the process is currently ongoing, it is possible to see the institution of particular narratives about the centrality and importance of the village for LGBT and queer people. This means, in part, a re-visioning of the village as a "place of arrival and return," as a place for people to come out, and as a place for LGBT and queer people to gather for political and social protest.

Historical geographies of sexuality in Sydney

We now turn to a discussion of historical geographies of sexuality in Sydney, with particular attention to the emergence, development, and decline of the gay village around Oxford Street. This discussion picks up the three foundational themes—planning, neighborhood, and neoliberalism—and draws out Sydney's similarities and differences in comparison with Toronto in support of our argument that an historical geographical approach offers insights on how and why these villages are developing in distinctive ways. We begin with the immediate post-World War II era, reaching to the 1970s, the decades that saw the emergence of a gay subculture in Sydney, at first subterranean, and eventually its material and spatial anchoring in and around Oxford Street.

Sydney is the oldest city in modern (i.e. British-occupied) Australia, founded in 1788 when the colony (later state) of New South Wales (NSW) was established. Since the late twentieth century it is considered Australia's primary global city. The immediate post-World War II era ushered in a period of sustained population and economic growth. As part of the post-war rebuilding, the plans of federal and state governments for economic and social development (encompassing large infrastructure, manufacturing, and commercial projects) relied on policies encouraging population growth through both natural increase and state-sponsored immigration. These growth policies were implicitly heteronormative, encouraging sexual and social reproduction in and through nuclear family units, realized (as elsewhere in the Global North) in a post-war "baby boom" (with children of that generation called "Boomers").

Such heteronormative policy was made explicit in urban planning directives, processes, and practices in gateway cities such as Sydney.[58] Increased population meant a need for increased housing, and state and private housing organizations, financial institutions, and land developers geared new suburban estates and "home packages" toward heterosexual nuclear families.[59] While the expanding Sydney suburbs were increasingly planned as sites of heteronormative family life, the inner city was seen as undesirable for residential development and more suited to industrial and commercial activities, including factories, warehouses, offices, and port facilities. The vision

was of the inner city as a zone of male employment where breadwinning husbands and fathers worked during the day, returning to their wives and children in heterosexual suburbia in the evening.[60]

In contrast with the suburbs as a place of family and moral order, nighttime in inner-city Sydney was imagined as a site of vice and immorality, perhaps best materialized in the clubs, street prostitution, violence, and crime associated with the red-light district in the inner east suburb of King's Cross.[61] It was in the liminal spaces of the inner city that Sydney's gay and lesbian subcultures continued to find a home, as they had since the early part of the twentieth century.[62] If there could be said to be any planning around sexual and gender minorities at this time, given that (male) homosexuality was still illegal, it could be found in police activities to disrupt "camp" venues, social gatherings, and public cruising, and to prosecute individuals. While urban planning served heteronormative social forms, legislation and police enforcement sought to limit and marginalize homosexual communities.[63]

Nevertheless, a subculture, and subcultural sites, did develop in post-war inner-city Sydney, for both gay men and lesbians.[64] Historians suggest the subculture was arguably more concentrated and visible in Sydney than in other Australian cities.[65] Indeed, it eventually consolidated into a highly visible gay village (Oxford Street) in the 1970s.[66] In this light, the specific urban geography of Australia plays a part, and Wotherspoon tackles the geographical question: "Why, within Australia, did the fastest and most overt growth of a gay sub-culture occur in Sydney rather than in any other city?"[67] He limits the answer first by population size. Anonymity, required for the marginal(ized) subculture, was found only in the largest cities. In post-war Australia, this meant Sydney or Melbourne. Of this choice, Sydney was preferable for personal, employment, and economic perceptions and realities. In the mid-twentieth century, Melbourne was perceived as conservative, restrictive, and snobby, while Sydney was described as an open, effervescent "city of possibilities." This was borne out in the world of visual, performing, and literary arts, for instance, which took root more strongly in Sydney, and beckoned immigrants from Melbourne. Another consideration was cost: Sydney, especially the "undesirable" inner city, was considered cheaper to live in.

Relational geographies of Sydney, Melbourne, and other Australian cities were thus important in the spatial consolidation of gay subculture in Sydney. Nevertheless, the *sites* of that subculture – clubs, bars, cafes, baths – were mobile, transient venues that shifted across Sydney's inner city during the post-war era.[68] Gay men and lesbians, while increasing in population, remained underground. Their criminalization and their contestation of social mores meant that the subculture was marginal—socially and legally—and thus liable to social retribution and police raids. Venues clustered, and the clusters dissipated, across the inner city, from the CBD to East Sydney, King's Cross, and Paddington. But the late 1960s brought public homosexual rights claims and murmurings of social acceptance in some liberal quarters, enabling enhanced visibility in the name of social and legal change, even while male homosexuality remained criminal.[69] In the late 1960s a cluster of more visible gay clubs (e.g. Ivy's Birdcage, Capriccio's) settled on Oxford Street, and "from the early 1970s it was the Oxford Street area that became the focus for gay venues."[70] Amidst the relational and mobile geographies of the post-war period, the confluence of rights, politics, incremental social change, and an incipient geographical anchor provided the material foundation for a gay village in Sydney.

Consolidation of a gay neighborhood: Sydney in the 1970s to the 1990s

The consolidation of Oxford Street as a gay area occurred remarkably quickly with some fractions of the gay male community arguably inspired by the gay neighborhoods they could see emerging and flourishing in California: San Francisco's Castro and Los Angeles's West

Hollywood.[71] Building on the foundation of the successful bars of the late 1960s, there was a rapid emergence of new leisure and organizational venues in and around Oxford Street, which became a locus for a flood of new clubs and bars, new baths and sex-on-premises venues, gay bookshops, and the offices of the newly created gay press. The clustering of venues generated a "gravitational effect" whereby more venues catering to the subculture—and largely gay male clientele—were encouraged to move to Oxford Street.

This gravitational effect not only drew gay venues and facilities to Oxford Street and nearby, but it also drew a gay residential population to the suburbs surrounding Oxford Street, to Darlinghurst, Surry Hills, Paddington, and Potts Point. Of course gay men and lesbians had lived in the inner city earlier, given the relatively cheap cost of accommodation in these residentially undesirable areas, but the late 1960s also saw the beginnings of inner-city housing gentrification in Sydney. "Pioneer" gay gentrification, as documented in some magazines of the time (e.g. *Oz*), had commenced in the late 1960s, but the consolidation of gay commercial and organizational facilities encouraged more gay residents to move in. Within a relatively short space of time, a discrete geographical area had emerged as a site of "gay identity," in both commercial and residential terms.[72] Oxford Street had become a gay village. As Wotherspoon argued: "there was now a definite area where the new 'gay' man could feel at home, in territory that was clearly stamped in his image."[73]

The gay village continued to consolidate throughout the 1970s and 1980s, attracting further venues, organizations, and residents. During these decades, the gay press and their offices proliferated (Sydney was, and still is, served by multiple gay newspapers); the offices of gay rights groups relocated to the neighborhood; health services aimed at gay clientele moved in (including GPs, dentists, counselors and, later, HIV/AIDS services); and new services for gay youth (e.g. Twenty10) or religious gays (e.g. the Metropolitan Community Church) were established or moved in.[74] Thus, "by the early 1980s Oxford Street between Hyde Park and the Paddington Town Hall had become known as the 'Glitter Strip' or 'The Golden Mile', and the surrounding area was referred to as 'The Ghetto', an acknowledgement of the high concentration there of both gay men and places catering for them."[75]

The development of the gay village has entailed successes but also failures. One of the failings of the quick and ad hoc consolidation of Oxford Street was the attention of venues and services to gay men and the displacement of lesbians in terms of services and residents. With gentrification of the area, lesbians, often with less financial means than gay men, were priced out of the housing market, while services aimed at lesbians and other queer women were similarly affected by increasing commercial rents. This contributed to the development of a discrete lesbian residential and service neighborhood during the 1980s in the inner west suburb of Leichhardt.[76] Women's health services, lesbian counseling services, women's refuges, women's and lesbians' social and business clubs, and lesbian residents began to congregate. The suburb eventually earned the moniker "Dykehardt." However, this was also arguably a loss to the Oxford Street village and local sexual and gender diversity, which remains largely associated with gay men's leisure (except during the Mardi Gras Festival).

The consolidation of "gay territory" around Oxford Street also yielded some distinct benefits. The spatial concentration of gay commerce, organizations, and residents provided political strength—as well as perceived and real economic advantages—for securing rights claims. The concentration in the inner city strengthened the "voice" that impelled NSW anti-discrimination laws in 1982 and the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1984. Parallel with such changes in NSW parliament, a geographical hub for LGBT community organizations and leadership (and commercial and sex venues, and residents) allowed for a focused, coordinated, and joint response from the state and the gay community to the advent of HIV/AIDS in the early

1980s, generating one of the most effective responses in the world, targeting safer sex messages at the gay male community, and keeping infection rates relatively low (roughly 14 per 100,000 people compared with 167 per 100,000 people in the United States).[77] Local politics has also responded to the LGBT residential concentration, with the local government (the City of Sydney Council) and representatives for the State electorate genuinely supporting LGBT causes. Since 1993, the State electorate member has been an independent candidate championing LGBT rights.[78]

The neighborhood has been both an economic and a political success. This is seen, in particular, in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival, a month-long LGBT festival incorporating a famous parade along Oxford Street, dance parties, a film festival, and cultural and sporting events. The event (at least the parade) has been held annually since 1978, when it was initiated as a local response in support of Stonewall Day. Since this inauspicious beginning, the Mardi Gras Festival has become an international tourist event supported by the NSW government and the City of Sydney Council, earning up to A$90 million per annum.[79] From its political beginnings, the event—the parade particularly—has become a highly erotic display. This is perhaps emblematic of Oxford Street itself as a political locus of sexual rights. Knopp suggests, and we agree (particularly given one of us has been a Sydneysider since the early 1990s), that Sydney's gay village impelled political success without compromising a highly sexualized subculture and erotic visual culture, which is something seen in few other cities globally.[80] This can be further extended by noting that, in Australia, political claims are rarely based on a discourse of "civil rights," as epitomized by the United States, but rather on a language of "equal rights" (as in Canada) that reflects Australian ideals and traditions of "a fair go" for everyone.

An end to village life in Sydney?

Oxford Street *might* have been at its peak as a gay village in the 1990s. The early twenty-first century has witnessed stories of the area's decline in the LGBT and mainstream press—and indeed, material evidence in the closure of many iconic gay venues (e.g. The Albury, The Beresford, Flinders Hotel) and the substantive movement of many LGBT organizations to elsewhere in the inner city, alongside the notable increase in "straight" nightclubs along the street and associated homophobic violence and harassment from non-resident heterosexual men.[81] Researchers suggest several reasons for this decline as a gay territorial locale, including increasing straight residents (and venues) due to the "cultural cache" of the gay village; rising rents pricing out both gay residents and businesses; and social acceptance and online networks, reducing the need for a geographical concentration of bars and clubs for social and sexual meets. The commercial strip itself has shifted toward a distinct nightlife focus, with a preponderance of nightclubs and a diminishing number of cafes, restaurants, and retail outlets.

This decline has not gone unchallenged, however. Attempts to arrest the decline have come from various quarters for diverse political and economic reasons. Middle-aged and older men, as well as generations of activists, remember Oxford Street as a site of political developments, coming out, and social life, and seek to hold onto this well-known gay territory for themselves and future generations. The City of Sydney Council seeks to sustain both the political and economic success of the gay village and its associated events (such as the Mardi Gras festival). Indeed, Oxford Street is incorporated in its neoliberal "city-marketing" strategy—the "City of Villages"—as an internationally-renowned "gay village."[82] To this end, the City of Sydney Council has instituted a series of strategies and plans aimed at reducing the problems facing the gay village and recuperating its perceived gay character (as bohemian, creative, and cutting-edge).[83] These range from safety measures, such as police presence and the establishment of "safe space" along the street, to initiatives to re-occupy the street with "daytime" and/or creative enterprises by offering low-rent or rent-free shop fronts to artists and pop-up stores.[84] These latter governance

strategies are an attempt to recover the gay village by rebuilding a broader local commercial base and thus enticing citizen-consumers back to the street through the "creative" or "cultural" economy—arguably a distinctly neoliberal approach.

It is possible, nonetheless, that the decline is now "rusted on" with limited means to arrest it, irrespective of neoliberal strategies or other political tactics. Indeed, the active legacy of mobile, relational geographies continues to rewrite Sydney's sexual and gender landscapes. As noted earlier, the perceived decline in Oxford Street since the early 2000s has been matched by the evident development of another LGBT neighborhood in Sydney's inner west, centered on King Street, Newtown, with a residential spread into the surrounding suburbs of Camperdown, Erskineville, Enmore, St. Peters, and Marrickville. This area has already been proffered by the LGBT media and local LGBT residents as the new LGBT heartland of Sydney.[85] The most recent sign of "anchoring" this "new LGBT heartland" has emerged in 2014, with *SX*, one of Sydney's two main LGBT newspapers, introducing a regular multi-page feature called "Spotlight on Newtown," highlighting queer-friendly restaurants, bars, shops, and community organizations in the inner west. There is no similar section for Oxford Street.

Perhaps the most pertinent evidence of the ascendency of Newtown as an LGBT neighborhood is the very material presence of increasing numbers of LGBT venues and facilities. There are long-established LGBT commercial venues in the area, including The Imperial, Newtown, and Bank Hotels. Additionally, several LGBT organizations have moved into the area, including Twenty10 youth services, the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations, a Metropolitan Community Church congregation, and the Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service. As shown by the new *SX* feature, the local neighborhood economy and social life caters to daytime communities as well as nightlife, with a proliferation of cafes, restaurants, and retail stores, some clearly "queer" in both staffing and aesthetic. Of significance also is the presence of venues and organizations that cater for the LBT in LGBT. The area is home to The Gender Centre, the key NSW advocacy service for trans and genderqueer rights. Much of Sydney's lesbian social scene can be found in local venues, including The Imperial, The Bank, The Sly Fox and The Red Rattler. The neighborhood straddles parts of both the City of Sydney and Marrickville Councils, both of which are encouraging LGBT visibility and social inclusion by "marketing" LGBT commercial and residential concentrations in Newtown and Erskineville (Sydney), and Newtown and Enmore (Marrickville). Thus, councils provide some measure of boosterism for this "new" LGBT neighborhood, which is also perceived, experienced, and "marketed" distinctly from Oxford Street.

While Oxford Street is typically understood as a gay male space, Newtown and the inner west are seen as providing a home for a broader demographic of sexual and gender minorities, including lesbians, queer women, and trans people. The Australian Census 2011, for instance, found that the ten suburbs with the highest concentration of male and female same-sex couples were both in inner-city Sydney, but while male couples are most concentrated in Darlinghurst, Surry Hills and Potts Point in the inner east, female couples are concentrated in Newtown, St. Peters, Enmore, Erskineville, and Marrickville in the inner west, alongside still significant concentrations of male couples. The combination of residential concentrations of female and male couples, as well as a congregation of LGBT commercial venues and organizational services since 2000, indicates the presence of a LGBT neighborhood in Sydney's inner west. While some suggest that this challenges the continuance of Oxford Street and adds to its decline, others contend that the inner west caters to and provides a home for a different LGBT demographic – one perhaps more inclusive of sexual and gender diversity than the "traditional" gay (male) ghetto.

Thoughts on historical legacies and the future of the gay village

We argue that the distinct historical geographies of the Church-Wellesley and Oxford Street gay villages help to position each differently within the urban fabric of, respectively, Toronto and Sydney. These different historical geographies and urban legacies enable (perhaps) divergent futures. Toronto's Church-Wellesley village now finds itself in a different, and more hopeful, set of circumstances in terms of determining its future vis-à-vis Sydney's Oxford Street. To begin with, the use of the "ethnic" model of territorial identity in Church-Wellesley village arguably benefitted from an earlier recognition and incorporation of "other" ethnic differences in processes of political inclusion, cultural heritage, and urban planning than in Sydney. The village's location, initially marginal, benefitted from being close to Yonge Street when the city began rejecting urban renewal planning and instead embraced inner-city preservation. Toronto's lesbian and gay political movement surfaced at the same time as these inner-city movements, such as those by Chinese and Caribbean organizations, and despite the fact that gay and lesbian organizations were not accorded equivalent respect, their representation as a social movement with a territorial base was persuasive in terms of making rights and territorial claims.[86]

The drive to preserve ethnic heritage, social and cultural difference, and unique neighborhoods emerged much later in Sydney, not taking hold until the 1990s. Since then, in Sydney as well as Toronto, the local city councils have incorporated their "gay villages" into "city of neighborhoods" discourses, aimed at boosting initiatives around creative industries, marketing, and tourism by commodifying the diversity, cosmopolitanism, and lifestyle of the inner city. But there has been a difference here between Toronto and Sydney, arguably resulting from the earlier recognition of Church-Wellesley as a unique neighborhood in Toronto. Even as the City of Sydney Council rolled out its 'City of Villages' campaign in the early 2000s, Oxford Street was not identified as the only gay village in Sydney. Already by the early 2000s, the City of Sydney was identifying Newtown and Erskineville, which lie within its jurisdictional boundaries, as other gay spaces in the inner city alongside Oxford Street. While we are certainly not championing neoliberal city-marketing, it nevertheless seems that by the time the City of Sydney recognized the Oxford Street gay village as such, and sought to capitalize on this territorial identification, neighborhoods in Sydney's inner west were already garnering a "queer" reputation, leaving little room for Oxford Street to continue to claim uniqueness as a gay village. Since the time of these first campaigns over a decade ago, Oxford Street has continued to decline materially and imaginatively as *the* gay village within Sydney, while Newtown and the inner west have continued to solidify as queer neighborhoods.[87]

As a result of the different political and territorial legacies of Church-Wellesley and Oxford Street, it seems that late 2000s discourses about the deterioration and decline of gay villages arguably promoted debates about the preservation and future of Church-Wellesley before it reached the state of decline being experienced by Oxford Street. Major LGBT service providers such as 519 Church, Queer Youth, and ACT remain in the village, while St. Mike's is the major trans surgery hospital. Indeed, the village evinces a strong institutional base in the form of 519 Church, the BIA, and a lesbian-identified city councilor dedicated to the economic and social health of the area. These institutions are taking advantage of high profile events such as World Pride and the PanAm Games for self-reflection and to "rebuild" the territory and identity of the village. Taking the opportunity presented by these events, institutions such as the BIA are seeking to rebrand the village, offering new narratives about its role—a role that embraces, to a certain extent, the ability of LGBT people to be visible in other neighborhoods but at the same time argues (and tries to incorporate into the narrative) the ongoing importance and centrality of the village in the lives of new generations of LGBT and queer people.

This is not to say that such attempts have not been made around Oxford Street. The placement of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade (and other festival events) in Oxford Street, as an international hallmark event bringing thousands of visitors, annually renews the narrative about Oxford Street as a "gay homeland." The City of Sydney Council has attempted to arrest the decline of Oxford Street's daytime economy and street life through enticing creative and cultural industries into the street with low-rent spaces. And there is certainly a call from older generations of gay men to preserve and remember Oxford Street as central to the Australian gay imaginary since the 1960s, and notably during the gay rights era of the 1970s and 1980s.[88] However, we suggest the particular historical geography of Oxford Street has yielded specific pressures and fewer opportunities to stabilize its territory and identity.

For instance, there are some quite geographical issues concerning the location and physical affordance of Oxford Street and its connection with Sydney's downtown core. The Church-Wellesley Village is located downtown, and has benefitted from being in Toronto's core, near the Eaton Centre, iconic Maple Leaf Gardens, refurbished Dundas Square, and Ryerson University, a location central to urban regeneration schemes. Oxford Street, however, is one suburb east of Sydney's CBD and separated by parkland, a seemingly minor difference but consequential for its integration in urban change. The significant regeneration of Sydney's CBD that has taken place since the 1980s has focused on the northern end (Circular Quay, The Rocks) and western side (Darling Harbour, Barangaroo) of the city core, with the east (Hyde Park, East Sydney, and Oxford Street) receiving less attention. Oxford Street itself—the road—is a main traffic thoroughfare, six lanes wide, from the CBD to the eastern suburbs, and not a place for sightseeing and daytime leisure vis-à-vis refurbished Circular Quay, Darling Harbour and The Rocks. This, along with the westward movement of the downtown "core," adds to Oxford Street's disconnection from transformation and regeneration schemes. The residual space of Oxford Street, once with a vibrant daytime economy of restaurants, cafes, and retail, has in recent years transitioned to a nighttime economy based on clubs.

The changes in Oxford Street's business profile, its disconnection from the CBD, and the movement of the city's core toward the west, while not "causing" the development of Newtown as a queer neighborhood, have arguably helped facilitate changing LGBT spaces and networks. Mobile linkages and differences between Oxford Street and Newtown create distinctive relational geographies for these LGBT neighborhoods. Linkages include networks of LGBT venues, organizations, and residents. Differences include distinct daytime and nighttime economies linked to certain identities, such as largely gay male nightclubs on Oxford Street compared to queer/mixed venues (bars, pubs, cafes) in Newtown, Enmore, and Erskineville.

In Toronto, however, given its specific historical geographies and affordances, the Church-Wellesley village seems to be regrouping and rebranding with some success, partly due to current opportunities with local businesses and politicians who are committed to the village and taking advantage of upcoming hallmark events. The Church-Wellesley village arrives at this point in time with similar pressures as Oxford Street in terms of rising rents, changing demographics, and new social media taking clientele, etc. Yet it is also quite differently incorporated into the urban fabric—both the downtown core and other neighborhoods—enabling opportunities to proactively write a narrative in response to changes and draw on resources to stabilize itself. While there are alternative neighborhoods emerging, such as Queer West and Leslieville, they are not materialized in the relational geographies of LGBT landscapes in the way Newtown has become embedded as a queer neighborhood in Sydney, with a distinct profile connected with but contesting Oxford Street. In Toronto, Church-Wellesley village, at least for now, seems to have sustained its place in the city by re-embedding and rebranding itself.

NOTES

1 We are grateful to funding for this research provided by a Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Grant, 2008–2012, and a University of Western Sydney International Research Initiative Scheme Grant, 2012.

2 In this article, we use the acronym "LGBT" as lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans. Identities are often grouped together as "LGBT" to reflect collective interests and community as sexual and gender minorities. Lesbian generally refers to women who are sexually attracted to other women, and gay refers to men who are attracted to other men. Trans is used by individuals who are alternatively gendered across a range of embodiments. We use queer to denote a particular contemporary moment when some individuals reject a gendered and sexual specificity but still position themselves within non-normative sexual and gender understandings—a positioning that is reflected in recent urban changes.

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84 These local government strategies and plans, which are discussed on the City of Sydney Council website (http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au), include the Oxford Street Safety Strategy, the Oxford Street Revitalisation Strategy and the Oxford Street Cultural Quarter Action Plan.

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