

Scott Larson

For decades homosexuals¹ have been viewed as social undesirables in revolutionary Cuba, and even today certain aspects of homosexual behavior can be construed as criminal.² In the past, those who were found “guilty” of being gay were ostracized, stripped of their jobs or social positions and at times even imprisoned or sent to forced-labor camps.³ Such treatment ultimately led thousands of Cuban gays to flee the country.

No longer officially demonized for their sexual orientation, homosexuals in Cuba are ostensibly free to live as they wish, and an estimated 4 percent to

1. Any discussion of homosexuality in contemporary Cuba raises the question of terminology (Lumsden, p. xxiv), especially as homosexual spaces often are shared by a multitude of diverse individuals who, for the sake of convenience, fall under the collective heading of homosexual (i.e. queers, transgender, transvestites, not too mention the finer Cuban distinctions *pasivo*, *completo*, *maricón*, *bugarrón*, *loca*, etc). Lumsden argues for use of the term “homosexual” (as opposed to “gay” or “queer”) since he claims it is the more readily recognizable and meaningful term to the community in Cuba. Since I have found many among Havana’s homosexual community to also use and relate to the term “gay,” I use gay and homosexual interchangeably throughout the study.

2. In 1971 the first National Congress on Education and Culture declared homosexuality to be antisocial and queers “sociopaths.” The Congress determined that known gays – “notorious homosexuals” was the phrase used – shouldn’t be allowed to infect others with their deviant ways by holding down jobs where they might come in contact with the nation’s youth. Even after consensual homosexual sex in private was decriminalized in the late 1970s, official prejudice continued. It took a revision of the Penal Code in 1987 before “ostentatious” homosexual behavior in public and private homosexual acts witnessed by a third party were no longer considered crimes. Still today, homosexuals who kiss or touch in public run the risk of being accused of “creating a public scandal,” an act which can bring a stiff fine.

3. In 1965 the Communist government of Fidel Castro established forced-labor camps, dubbed Military Units to Aid Production as a means of rehabilitating citizens who didn’t exhibit socialism’s requisite conformist attitude. Slackards, counter-revolutionaries and others whose “immoral” behavior was considered anathema to the new Cuba were sentenced to labor in rural sugar cane fields. Known by their initials, UMAP, the camps became notorious for their brutal conditions, and gays and effeminate males were among those put to work there as a means of molding them into “real” men. The camps existed for three years before internal and international pressure led Castro to close them in 1968.

6 percent of the country's 11.2 million inhabitants are gay.⁴ Still, the gay community in Cuba is more tolerated than accepted, and a powerful cultural tradition of machismo contributes to an overall environment of male homosexual marginalization. Consider the words of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, whose 1993 film *Fresa y Chocolate* focused international attention on the issue of repression and discrimination of homosexuals in contemporary Cuba:

Even today, it's still there at the social level – I won't say the official level, but at the social and individual levels. The macho tradition of our country, as in many other, especially Latin American, countries, is very strong, and the rejection of homosexuals is visible in all of them. (Chanan, p. 48).

Yet within that environment, male homosexuals in Cuba's capital city, Havana, have managed to claim a number of the city's public places as spaces of their own. It is through these spaces – where homosexuals meet to socialize, make new acquaintances and exchange information – that the community has gained a share of societal visibility and viability.

This study⁵ aims to explore the role space plays in the lives of Havana's homosexuals, to investigate how gay-tolerant spaces there are constructed, defined and defended. It focuses on three main geographic spaces: *Calle 23*, also known as *La Rampa*, in *Vedado* where a string of bars and cafes functions as a magnet for gays; a stretch of the *Malecón*, the broad avenue that runs along Havana's oceanfront where gays gather to socialize at night; and *Parque Central* in *Habana Vieja*, a traditional meeting point for homosexuals which continues to serve as a prime, modern-day homosexual cruising spot. Together these spaces form part of what has come to be known in Havana as “el mundo bajo,” or literally “the lower world.”

Why homosexual space? Why Havana?

Contemporary Cuba and its ever-evolving, ever-controversial relationship with the outside world remain fertile areas of interest, particularly in regards to political freedoms, social constraints and human rights. Within that context, much attention has already been focused on the lives of homosexuals in Cuba, in large part because a significant number of immigrant gay artists, writers and filmmakers have contributed their stories to the voluminous and oft-politicized discourse on life on the communist island.

At the same time, there has been a plethora of geographic research into the general issue of homosexuality and space in relation to society, especially as it relates to the creation of gay or socially marginalized space and the role that process plays in the formation of group identity (Elder, 1995; Knopp

4. Source: International Lesbian and Gay Association

5. Research for this project was supported by a grant from the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College of the City University of New York

1987; Mitchell 1995; Rothenberg, 1995; Myslik, 1996; Valentine, 1993; Visser, 2003).

Yet as a number of researchers have pointed out, the bulk of the body of work on homosexuals and space revolves around North American and European experiences, particularly urban ones. As a result, in the past when geographers have studied sexuality and space there was “a total lack of questions focusing on how sexualities are constructed and negotiated in peripheral economies” (Visser, 2003, p. 124) and a bias toward “categorizations informed by Anglo-industrialized experience” (Elder, 1995, p. 58).

It is within this context that Havana’s homosexual community offers particularly compelling insight into how socially marginalized groups can and do claim a certain degree of visibility and acceptance, even within a largely restrictive society, through the use of physical space.

While Havana itself is one of Latin America’s least densely populated major cities with 2,849 people per square kilometer, perpetual subdivision of houses and apartments has left families crowded into tiny spaces. In addition, in many cases throughout the city, family living arrangements are fluid, with various relatives and friends – often unemployed and officially not allowed to live in Havana – bedding down in whatever space is available in already compact apartments and houses. Such cramped and often dismal surroundings offer little in the form of relative comfort or entertainment, not to mention privacy. As a result residents of Havana often opt, if one considers that they have much choice, to live a large amount of their private lives in public places. They flock to parts of the city that offer escape, and this interplay between Havana’s residents and its public spaces is a fundamental element of the city’s character.

Private Uses of Public Spaces

The primary role of Havana’s public spaces – parks, plazas, museums and certain streets and avenues – flows from the socialist imperative to provide for the needs of the collective whole before those of private individuals. (Curtis, 1993, p. 66) Of all of Havana’s landmarks, the *Malecón* is perhaps the most famous. Described by Scarpaci et al as “Havana’s social living room,” (Scarpaci et al, 2002, p. 277) this broad, ocean-front boulevard is active 24 hours a day and attracts all sorts of visitors: lovers, street musicians and those out for a walk along Havana’s rugged northern shore. Here *habaneros* gather to socialize or just to hang out, and only during storms, when waves crash over the bulwark and flood nearby streets, is the *Malecón* empty. During the day, enterprising boys and men fish off the rocky seawall, entrepreneurs sell copies of pirated compact discs and hustlers of all stripes work the strolling tourists. Late at night the seafront becomes an open-air party

with various groups staking out space all along its length. Despite the ever-present police, the *Malecón* has also become a place for Cubans to voice discontent, though usually in subtle, self-edited ways.

Parque Central and *La Rampa* serve similar roles. There, couples, families and groups gather to relax and socialize, free from the restrictive environments of the home. In *Parque Central*, *beisbol* aficionados gather daily to debate the goings on the *Liga Nacional*, while *La Rampa* is home to the popular movie house, *Cine Yara*; *Parque Coppelia* with its world-famous ice cream emporium; and various cafes.

These three spaces have also become important to habaneros in another vital sense: as spaces for sexual expression. Given the lack of privacy available in the typical Cuban household, it should come as no surprise that a significant amount of interaction between couples of all ages and persuasions takes place away from the home, and that public spaces such as the *Malecón*, *La Rampa* and *Parque Central* would become active sexual spaces. This is particularly true in terms of male homosexuals, who at certain times claim at least parts of these spaces as their own. Historically it has been through this use of public spaces that Cuba's gays have asserted their right to participate in public society.

Gay Havana: Then and Now

As mentioned above, the story of homosexual life in revolutionary Cuba is a complicated one and several writers have tackled the topic from a scholarly perspective. One of the most current and comprehensive is that produced by scholar Ian Lumsden, who speaks of an institutionalized homophobia that stems from a Cuban strain of machismo. Lumsden notes how 500 years of entrenched social attitudes left over from Spanish colonialism have left their mark on Cuban society. He details how, in Cuba, typical modern definitions, terminology and perceptions of homosexuality cannot always be applied to Cuban males who have sex with other males. "Before 1959," Lumsden notes, "masculine, ostensibly heterosexual males were able to satisfy some of their sexual needs with 'nonmasculine' males..." (p. 28), and that such *activos* ("inserters," according to Lumsden) were considered "'real men' who passed as hombres but who used *maricones* (the equivalent of the English 'faggot') as occasional or even regular outlets to satisfy their sexual appetites." (p. 30). *Entendidos*, or discreet gays who at least outwardly appeared to be heterosexual males, were tolerated if still "despised" within Cuban society. Those less inclined to submit to such self-oppressive behavior, however, faced complete rejection. Not surprisingly such conditions forced many of Havana's pre-revolutionary gays to adopt double lives, hiding their homosexuality from friends, family and co-workers while privately enjoying intimate relationships with other males. Still, in spite of such societal pressures and prejudice,

the city's gay community actively sought to establish places where its members could meet and be themselves. As Lumsden writes:

There were countless bars, such as Dirty Dick, Johnny's Bar, and the Barrilito, where they could hang out day and night. The ambiente of the Colón barrio in Centro Habana attracted some American tourists just as it did gente decente from the middle-class neighborhoods on the other side of town... Male brothels such as the Lucero, which catered to tourists, were the exception, and unlike female brothels were not really part of the ambiente of the barrio Colón. There were many cinemas like the Rialto, the Verdun, and the Campoamor to which, according to an old homosexual, 'you could go and immediately pick up a young guy. Many had their first experience there. There was a lot of sex in those cinemas.' There was also a rich street life in which you could always find someone with whom to pass the time of day. (Lumsden, 1996, pp.33-34).

With the communist revolution of 1959, life changed dramatically for Cuba's homosexuals.

Cuba was also led by Fidel Castro, whose public persona was the incarnation of machismo. Revolutionary Cuba, he said, 'needed strong men to fight wars, sportsmen, men who had no psychological weaknesses.' The traditional Cuban image of homosexuals hardly fit this paradigm of revolutionary attributes. (Lumsden, 1996, p. 61)

Far from providing new freedoms and space for homosexuals, then, the revolution only heightened the sense of outsidership among Cuba's gays, at times even institutionalizing what until then had been homophobic cultural traditions. Through its efforts to transform Cuban society by asserting absolute control over the population and discouraging all manner of anti-social activity, the revolutionary government deemed the gay community deviant and began to close or alter many of its traditional social spaces. Again according to Lumsden:

...[T]he ambiente available to [gays] – also began to diminish. For example, bars patronized by homosexuals began to close because of state intervention, emigration of their owners, or unprofitability due to declining patronage. Cruising and sex became more difficult in traditional venues such as the Campoamor, Negrete, and Duplex cinemas on account of increased police surveillance. There was less room for homosexuals to socialize or even to 'pass' and therefore all the more reason for entendidos to be protective of their private lives. (Lumsden, 1996, p. 62)

While the situation for gays has improved dramatically since the early years of the revolution, being gay in Cuba still carries a significant stigma and finding spaces for the free expression of one's sexuality is a challenge. As a result, as Lumsden points out, few contemporary Cuban homosexuals

are “out,” at least in the Western context, and most lead hidden lives, much as their predecessors did for the better part of four centuries. Revolutionary Havana, unlike cities in the capitalist West, contains no permanent or overtly gay spaces, and while interviewees for this study identified the aforementioned gay-friendly places, many other one-time meeting places – such as in front of the Fiat car dealership on the *Malecón* and two cafés, *Bin Bom* and *Arcada*, along *La Rampa* – have been closed or otherwise restricted by the authorities.

Even those places where gays have found some material space in which to gather are marked by a conspicuous police presence, and these spaces remain decidedly temporal. Not only do they become increasingly gay late at night, but accessibility to them can ebb and flow along with the prevailing mood of Cuban authorities.

“We go to [*Cine*] *Yara* or the *Malecón*. We used to go to *Arcada*, *Bin Bom*, but they [the authorities] are closing them down,” said one interviewee, a 26-year-old, in late May 2003. “Now I go to my house with my partner because there is no longer a place for us. Now the only [public] place we can go is the *Malecón*.”⁶

Aside from the outright shutting down of a location, one favored tactic of the government is to impose per person consumos – or minimum orders – at restaurants and bars, which under Cuba’s socialist system are controlled by the state; another is for the police to descend, whistles blowing, whenever a crowd begins to congregate in a chosen public place. Ostensibly, the police are merely ensuring public safety and order by keeping a tight reign on groups gathering in public, but their presence in gay friendly spaces is particularly ubiquitous. The need to stamp out drugs and prostitution is often used as the rationale for such patrols. “But sometimes there is no explanation, just a power play,” said Kristian, a straight street musician who along with his musical partner, Orleydis, plays songs for money along the same section of the *Malecón* as the gay community meets.⁷

At other times there have been broader, more sweeping clampdowns on spaces frequented by homosexuals. Often these crackdowns are in response to larger events that have occurred elsewhere or have no direct relation to the gay community. These, it can be presumed, are designed to send the message to the entire Cuban population that the authorities are in complete control. Still, these actions have a decidedly disproportionate impact on the gay and other marginalized communities because of the limited and tightly controlled spaces where those groups are allowed to congregate. In late March 2003, for instance, some 75 Cuban dissidents were arrested and sentenced to long jail

6. Interview by author, May 25, 2003

7. Interview by author, June, 1, 2003

terms for criticizing the Castro regime's record on human rights and calling for a referendum on increased civil liberties. In an unrelated incident within days of the arrests, three men hijacked a ferry and attempted to sail across the Florida Strait to the United States. Forced back to Cuban waters by a lack of fuel, the hijackers were captured, and nine days later they were executed following expedited court proceedings that were deemed little more than show trials in the West.

Fearing an increase in dissident activity, a backlash to the executions and additional hijack attempts, the Cuban government moved quickly to head off potential problems by reasserting its control over Havana's public spaces. The number of police patrolling public places such as the *Malecón*, the long stretch of *Calle 23* that leads to it, and *Parque Central* increased noticeably. "It got much worse in March and April, in the sense that the police were around more," noted Kristian, the musician.⁸ The authorities, he and other interviewees maintained, became much quicker to confront Cubans for seemingly trivial things such as talking to foreigners or simply hanging out.

Also, within days of the arrests, the gay-friendly café *Arcada*, located just off *La Rampa*, was shut down. "One day it was just closed," said Marco, a 32-year-old who visited the café nightly and often augmented his income as a model at an art school by surreptitiously selling clothes and jewelry to those sitting at the café's tables.

Until the day in early April when it was closed, the café, which is marked by a red-and-white awning and floor-to-ceiling windows offering a clear view of the goings on inside, had served as a vital communication hub for the gay community. By day it was one of the hundreds of non-descript government-owned cafes in Havana that serve an uninspiring menu of ham and cheese bocaditos (sandwiches), pizza and juice, soda or beer. At night, however, it metamorphosed into an unofficial gay social house. Its location made it an accessible waystation on the way to the *Malecón*, a convenient place for *pingueros*, or male prostitutes, to bring their foreign friends for coffee or a beer and for members of Havana's gay community to trade gossip and find out about parties or what their friends were planning for the night. By 9 p.m., pairs or groups of men – often two or three young Cubans and an older foreigner – began to occupy the tables and by 11 p.m. the place would be bustling with male activity. Among *Arcada's* regular clientele were dozens of transvestites, but on most nights the only women around were either in the cafe with gay friends or were merely stopping by to use the restroom.

A month after it was shuttered, *Arcada* reopened, but with changes that reduced its accessibility and attractiveness to the gay community. A US \$3 minimum *consumo* was established, which effectively meant that only those

8. Interview by author, June 1, 2003

with money and the intent to spend it were allowed inside. Since most Cubans have little discretionary income, many of the former clientele were effectively locked out. Similarly, the sale of alcohol was prohibited, and the frequency of police patrols outside increased. Taken together, these measures insured that large numbers of gays could no longer meet there for a leisurely night of conversation over a soda or beer. By first closing *Arcada*, then allowing it to reopen but with the new regulations in place, the government had effectively cut off one of the few public spaces in Havana where the homosexual community had felt free to congregate.

Illegal in their own land

Revolutionary ideology and invasive government have had additional impacts on gay spaces as well. In the capitalist West, the location of marginalized groups – including gay residential communities with their attendant businesses and services – can often be attributed to economic factors (Winchester and White, 1988; Knopp 1990; Adler and Brenner 1992; Binnie 1995; Kirby and Hay 1997; Visser 2003). But with the adoption of socialist policies that have effected every aspect of life – from the theoretical elimination of social classes to government ownership of all property and enterprise and state control of housing – the Castro regime has insured, whether it purposefully intended to or not, that Cuba's cities have no concentrations of homosexual residences; no gay neighborhoods; no explicitly gay clubs, bars or businesses and none of the gentrification so often associated with male homosexual communities in developed countries.

Instead, Havana's gay spaces are impermanent, contested sites typically converted into temporary gay social spaces by stealth. The process, as described by members of the community, is a fluid, ongoing one: a homosexual pair finds a place – a public park or street, bar, restaurant or café – that isn't too crowded and where the atmosphere is to their liking. They begin to frequent the place, then tell friends who tell other friends and so on in a process similar to that described by Rothenberg (1995) in her study of the creation of lesbian social space. As the number of gays gathering increases, heterosexuals stop coming, presumably uncomfortable with or fearing the stigma of frequenting a spot popular with homosexuals. Soon, the location has become defacto gay, a place where homosexuals feel comfortable because they are surrounded by others like them.

But much as the *Arcada* example illustrates, such places offer relatively provisional haven. Once a location becomes overwhelmingly gay, the authorities take note, beef up the police presence and keep close tabs on whatever activity goes on. Eventually such spaces are closed, restricted or the authori-

ties make being there so uncomfortable that the group moves on, and the cycle starts over again.

Another example of the government's conspicuous impact on gay social space is the effort to control migration to Havana. As one might expect, homosexuals say they face greater discrimination outside of the relatively cosmopolitan capital. Elsewhere, they maintain, life is much more conservative and social traits such as machismo often manifest themselves more fully. Such constraints have led hundreds of predominately young homosexuals to leave the countryside and Cuba's smaller cities for Havana, where, despite the capital's own oppressive atmosphere, the sheer size of the gay community offers some degree of anonymity and escape. But because of the strict laws governing where Cubans can travel, work and live, a gay migrant's mere presence in Havana can make him a criminal.

Police patrol high-profile public areas such as parks and main streets asking those who frequent them for their national identification cards, or *los carnet*. Those without a *carnet* or the proper permission to be in Havana are taken to a nearby police station where they are held for several hours before being released with a fine, or *multa*.

"If they discover you are illegal they give you a 500 peso [roughly \$50] *multa*," explained one 21-year-old gay émigré from Holguín.⁹ While the amount of the fine is not so much by foreign standards, it is a crippling amount in a country where doctors and teachers can make the equivalent of US\$12 a month. Equally, if not more punishing, is the reminder that in Cuba, where one lives, works and plays is subject to government approval.

"Imagine," said the 21-year-old. "In your own country you are illegal."

The Primacy of space

Of course, gays are not the only Cubans who face such overt government intrusion into their lives. Indeed, all Cubans deal with such conditions on a daily basis. For those who frequent spaces associated with homosexuals and other marginalized groups, however, the likelihood of being asked to produce a carnet is much greater. The term "el mundo bajo" is used equally by those who frequent these spaces and the city's mainstream citizens. Depending on who is speaking, however, it carries far different connotations. To the marginalized, *el mundo bajo* represents temporarily appropriated space where, to a degree, everyone is free to be themselves. Among the average citizenry, however, the perception runs that this "world" is a place for drugs, illegal or immoral conduct and anti-social activities. To many *habaneros* only people of dubious character would enter these spaces. To be sure *el mundo bajo* attracts a certain amount of illegal activity. But in keeping with the theory of

9. Interview by author, May 26, 2003

Winchester and White (1996), the widely held but not entirely accurate negative view of this world only contributes to the marginalization of those who gather there.

Ironically, virtually all of the spaces that make up *el mundo bajo* are public places that at other times of day or in other ways serve much more socially accepted purposes. Indeed it is their very nature as places where, theoretically at least, everyone is free to assemble, which makes them attractive to gays and the other marginalized groups in the first place. Additionally, the fact that many of Havana's traditional homosexual spaces (the *Malecón* and *Parque Central*, for instance) remain important to the contemporary gay community is a testament to the central role these places have played and continue to play – geographically, symbolically and emotionally – in the public life of the city. In many ways both the *Malecón* and *Parque Central* serve as Havana's version of the traditional Latin American central plaza, a place of “primacy within the urban landscape” which can offer “daily interaction between friends and strangers and provide important sites for the public life of the city” (Rosenthal, p.50). In addition, much as the classic plaza, they provide a point of contact between different classes and types of people. It should come as no surprise that in seeking greater social access, Havana's gays would gravitate to them.

Parque Central also sits at the heart of the government's efforts to develop a robust tourism industry, which gives it additional geographic significance. The park – which covers two city blocks on the border between *Habana Vieja* and *Centro Habana* – is ringed by up-market hotels like the *Inglaterra*, *Telégrafo*, *Parque Central* and *Plaza*, and is near popular tourist attractions such as the *Capitolio*, the *Gran Teatro* and Ernest Hemingway's old haunts, the *El Floridita* bar and the *Hotel Ambos Mundos*. It is also within walking distance of numerous museums and *Vieja's* collection of colonial buildings, churches and plazas.

As a consequence, the park is especially important to Havana's male homosexual prostitutes because of its proximity to potential clients – the relatively wealthy foreign tourists who visit these sites and stay in these hotels. For many gays the park serves as a sort of headquarters. During the day many *pingueros* stroll the shady paths looking for likely customers while others simply sit in groups on stone benches passing the time until nightfall when they move on to *La Rampa* or the *Malecón*.

For Havana's male homosexual community the *Malecón* is a default destination, a place where one can always find friends, foreigners and escape from the drudgery of their daily lives. At night Havana's gays can be found all along the boulevard, but the greatest numbers congregate along the seawall just west of the intersection with *La Rampa*, in the shadow of the grand

hotel *El Nacional*. On a typical evening, scores of gays meet there, often splitting off into smaller groups to talk, drink rum or listen to music. They move up and down *Calle 23* to buy cigarettes or rum at a nearby gas station (in Cuba, one can invariably find alcohol, snacks and ice cream being sold alongside spare parts and motor oil) or something to eat in the nearby cafes, bars and clubs. Much like *Parque Central*, this stretch of *Calle 23* and the *Malecón* is near a number of high-profile hotels such as the *Havana Libre* and the *Hotel Vedado*, making it a prime place to encounter and mix with foreign tourists.

Space, or more accurately the places one chooses to frequent, can also serve as a vital means of expressing one's sexual preference. Single men, for instance, know that by going to places such as *Parque Central*, or certain parts of the *Malecón* and *La Rampa* at specific times of day, they will not only find but also be found by other gays. Of course one's presence in such spaces sends the same message to the authorities and homophobic Cubans. As such one's dress, behavior and choice of where to spend free time can be unmistakable – and inherently anti-social – statements about one's inclinations.

"It's not possible to live an open life," said one interviewee, a 26-year-old gay mechanic originally from the city of Holguín who was interviewed late one night in June 2003 on his way to the *Malecón*. "The police hassle us all the time," he added, grasping his wrist in a motion akin to being handcuffed, a reference to being hauled off to the police station for some violation or another. As if on cue, just minutes after being interviewed, the man was stopped by the police on *Calle 23* and asked to produce his *carnet*.

"D'acuerdo?" he shouted across the street. "You see?"

"Here in Cuba we're very discriminated against," added a 16-year-old transvestite, an unemployed English student who lives with her male partner but works as a prostitute at night. "The police bother us constantly, asking for our papers. They know who we (gays) are and that's why they continually bother us. Now, every so often they round us (transvestites, or *trasvestis* in Spanish) up and lock us up (*nos encieran*) for three or four days and fine us."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because we're not allowed to dress like women."¹⁰

Despite the oft-stated opinion that they are harassed purely because of their sexual orientation or manner, it is unclear whether this is the sole explanation for the mistreatment of Havana's homosexuals and transvestites. Being outwardly gay or dressing like a woman certainly marginalizes them, makes them easier to identify and stigmatizes them. But professing one's (homo)sexuality or being a transvestite are not specifically prohibited by law.

10. Interview by author, May 26, 2003

And while many of those interviewed for this study believe their lifestyle alone is to blame for police harassment, observation suggests that whether a person is gay or not, or is a transvestite, can, to some degree, be a partial, perhaps even secondary explanation. Part of the experience, certainly, stems from living in an overall oppressive society, one where all sort of freedoms – not just the freedom to publicly announce one’s sexuality – are limited. Gays undoubtedly experience police harassment more because as gays they are forced to the fringe of society; but all Cubans deal with this lack of freedom to some degree.

Indeed, there is also plenty of observational evidence to support Lumsden’s view that the police in and around recognized homosexual spaces are more focused on maintaining order and control rather than just hassling gays. Most of the places where gays congregate, after all, are occupied by non-gays as well, and straight groups and individuals appear to be just as likely to attract police attention. In fact, the argument could be made that homosexuals are targets for police harassment not so much because of their sexual orientation but because as homosexuals they inhabit marginalized and contested spaces. Much as Winchester and White theorize, the homosexual spaces discussed in this study exist on the margins of acceptable society. As a result, a person’s mere presence in such places – whether that person is gay or not – makes him or her a candidate for police suspicion, and homosexuality has become “criminalized” precisely because homosexuals choose to occupy such public locations.

A related explanation is that Cuban authorities equate homosexuality with prostitution and that an ongoing crackdown on the selling of sex, particularly when it involves tourists and other foreigners, leads to increased harassment of gays.

While Cuba has no laws that explicitly prohibit homosexuality, there are numerous broadly defined offenses that can be used to criminalize homosexual behavior. For instance, public displays of even innocent affection among homosexuals can bring *multas* of up to 400 pesos. “If the police see us holding hands they take [arrest] us for causing a public scandal,” said one 21-year-old baker.¹¹ As a result one rarely sees Havana’s homosexuals holding hands, kissing or touching each other in public.

That does not mean there is not a sexual component to Havana’s male homosexual spaces. Clearly, the spaces identified in this study are vital for all manner of homosexual activity leading up to actual sexual relations. These spaces are where male homosexuals meet other gay men, go on dates, find sexual partners and learn of and arrange for safe spaces in which to be intimate. Due to the lack of privacy inherent in Havana’s housing situation, and

11. Interview by author, June 1, 2003

the very real possibility that one's neighbors, friends or coworkers might discover one's sexual persuasion, many of Havana's gay men – even those with long-term partners – prefer to visit *alquileres*, or houses where rooms can be rented by the night or the hour, to have sex. Such rooms – which usually offer little more than a toilet and a metal frame bed topped by a tattered mattress – are scattered throughout the city's neighborhoods, and typically rent for 25 pesos a night.

Desperation also forces Cubans of all sexual persuasions to steal private moments in public spaces. For Havana's homosexuals, there are two parks – *Parque de la Fraternidad*, situated just south of the *Capitolio* and *Parque el Curita* – where once the sun goes down, many among Havana's gay community go in search of casual sex. Even within the marginalized world of *el mundo bajo*, however, these two parks have a somewhat notorious reputation.

For Havana's homosexuals, then, the search for “safe” space in which to live a gay lifestyle and pursue gay relationships is never-ending. While outright violence is rare, homophobic traditions, vague laws and the confines of contemporary Cuban life all conspire to push Havana's homosexuals to the margins of society, both culturally and physically. Gay spaces, to the degree that they exist, are secure only as long the authorities allow them to be, and the ongoing process of finding new spaces remains fraught with risk.

Conclusions

Clearly, Cuba does not fit many of the descriptive frameworks from which geographers have looked at gay communities in western, free-market democracies. And it should come as no surprise that the forces that have helped shape gay spaces across Europe and North America often fail to describe the dynamics at work in Cuba. While the situation for gays has improved markedly since the openly homophobic rhetoric of the early revolution, being gay in Cuba still carries a significant stigma, and finding spaces for the free expression of one's sexuality remains a challenge. This is especially true in public spaces. Today, those among Havana's homosexual community who wish to live public lives have been forced by a powerful mix of societal disapproval and official antagonism to create their own spaces when and where they can, and often in the face of official antagonism.

In spite of this limited and contentious access to space, Havana's gays have managed to establish a number of gay-tolerant sites within which they are able to lead some semblance of an open life. Three in particular – the *Malecón*, *Parque Central* and *La Rampa* – have long and established traditions as gay meeting places. These spaces continue to form physical focal points for the gay community. Still, as the stories of these spaces illustrate,

they are temporary and temporal havens, with access to them subject to the whims of the authorities.

For Havana's more public homosexuals, then, their very presence in specific public spaces becomes simultaneously a declaration of their sexuality and a challenge to existing homophobic traditions and societal mores. By frequenting high-profile public spaces Havana's gays, in effect, are publicizing their homosexuality and putting themselves in the precarious position of confronting Cuban authority. Still, that there are spaces in which Havana's homosexuals have found relative haven suggests a willingness among certain gays to expose themselves to the resulting harassment and abuse in exchange for physical locations to call their own. Consider the words of a 26-year-old gay mechanic originally from Holguín: "The police bother us because we're gay and they know we're gay because we concentrate in groups in these places. Every day we go the *Malecón* and every day the police come and hassle us so it's sort of a game. A serious game, but a still a game."¹²

In the end, had certain homosexuals not persevered in, in fact insisted on, creating and publicizing these locations, no gay-tolerant spaces, no matter how temporary, would exist in Havana.

Bibliography:

- Adler, S and Brenner, J. 1992. Gender and Space: Lesbians and Gay Men in the City. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. 16 (1): 24-34.
- Binnie, J. 1995. Trading Places: Consumption, Sexuality and the Production of Queer Space. In *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, Bell, D. and Valentine, G., eds.
- Chanan, M. 2002. We are Losing Our Values: An Interview with Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. *Boundary 2*. 29 (3):47-53.
- Curtis, J. 1993. Havana's Parque Coppelia: Public Space Traditions in Socialist Cuba, *Places* 8(3) p. 62-29
- Elder, G. 1995. Of Moffies, Kaffirs and Perverts: Male Homosexuality and the Discourse of Moral Order in the Apartheid State. In *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, Bell, D. and Valentine, G., eds.
- Kirby, S., and Hay, I. 1997. (Hetero)sexing Space: Gay Men and "Straight" Space in Adelaide, South Australia. *Professional Geographer* 49(3): 295-305.
- Knopp, L. 1987. Social theory, social movements and public policy: recent accomplishments of the gay and lesbian movements in Minneapolis, Minn. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. 11: 243-61
- Knopp, L. 1990. Some Theoretical Implications of Gay Involvement in an Urban Land Market. *Political Geography Quarterly* 9: 337-52.
- Lumsden, I. 1996. *Machos, Maricones and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

12. Interview by author, Aug. 19, 2003

- Mitchell, D. 1995. The End of Public Space? People's Park, Definitions of the Public, and Democracy. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 85(1): 108-133
- Myslik, W., 1996. Renegotiating the social/sexual identities of places: gay communities as safe havens or sites of resistance? In: Duncan, N. (Ed.), *Bodyspace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*. Routledge, London, pp. 156–169.
- Rothenberg, T. 1995. 'And She Told Two Friends': Lesbians Creating Urban Social Space. In *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, Bell, D., and Valentine, G., eds. London: Routledge, pp. 165-181.
- Scarpaci, J.; Segre, R.; and Coyula, M. 2002. *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis*. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.
- Visser, G. 2003. Gay Men, Leisure Space and South African Cities. *Geoforum*, 34(1): 123-137.
- Winchester, HPM, and White, PE. 1988. The Location of Marginalized Groups in the Inner City. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. 6 (1):37-54.

