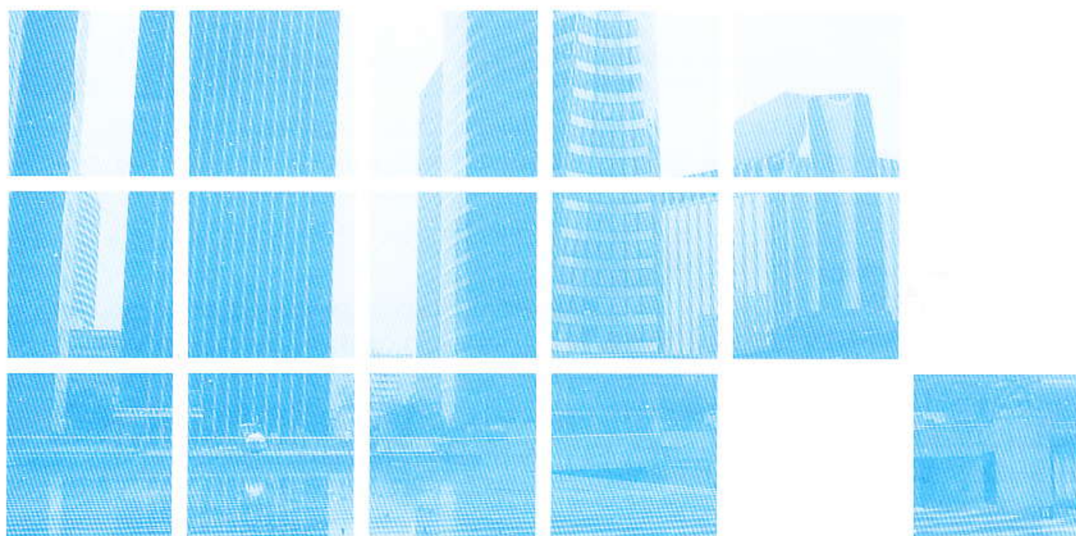

Chapter 11

Bodies, sexuality and the city

Key questions addressed in this chapter

- Why have scholars become interested in relationships between bodies and the city?
- What is meant by sexuality?
- In what ways have cities influenced, and in turn been influenced by, sexuality?
- In what ways do cities oppress disabled people?

The 'cultural turn' (introduced in Chapter 3) has brought about considerable interest in the role of people's bodies in contemporary life, especially in the city. One reason for this is that (as noted in Chapter 1) the body has frequently been used as a metaphor to describe cities. Thus, notions of 'circulation' and references to 'arteries' and 'nerve centres' frequent descriptions of urban transport systems. In addition, allusions to disease and social pathology underpin many writings about urban problems. More importantly, however, the body is also of interest because it is an important signifier of cultures in city spaces. Hence, people's bodily appearance and dress provide important signals about culture and social values.

Bodies come in many shapes and sizes but there are strong social pressures for people to conform to certain standards of appearance and the associated social values that accompany these forms. These pressures are reinforced by powerful images in films, television, advertising and magazines. Typically in contemporary Western societies these images stress relatively slim young women and relatively muscular young men (aided of course by computer-enhanced photos that can eliminate blemishes!). Not only are extremes of weight and stature avoided, but these images also stress heterosexuality and the absence of disability. These dominant images are highly specific in time and place; for example, Hollywood films from the early part of the twentieth century show a preference for a rather fuller female figure, and in the 1960s men wore long hair in a manner that would have been considered effeminate only a few years before.

The term **corporeality** is used to indicate the ways in which these body images are not just the result of

biological differences between people but are socially constructed through various signs and systems of meaning. Elizabeth Grosz has argued that 'the city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality' (Grosz, 1992, p. 242). An important task for geographers therefore is to examine 'the ways in which bodies are physically, sexually and discursively or representationally produced, and the ways in turn, that bodies reinscribe and project themselves onto their sociocultural environment so that the environment both produces and reflects the form and interests of the body' (Grosz, 1992, p. 242).

Cultural theorists stress the unstable and malleable character of bodily identities. Gender, sexuality, cultural and other physical differences between people are not natural entities but 'cultural performances' related to particular spaces. This does not mean that bodily appearances are just a question of superficial external image; they also reflect people's interior sense of themselves which (as we saw in Chapter 3) is constituted by a whole host of historical and geographical factors. Once again, then, space is a crucial factor in social processes. The ways in which identities are socially constructed through particular ways of acting (and not as the result of some biological essence) is sometimes termed **performativity**. The processes through which the body is socially constructed in spaces by wider systems of meaning is also known as **embodiment**.

11.1 Gender, heteropatriarchy and the city

As we have indicated at various stages in this book, cities are social, as well as physical, constructs. Social control within spaces is exercised through expected patterns of behaviour and the exclusion of groups who transgress (or who are *expected* to transgress) these codes of behaviour. One such code of behaviour relates to public displays of physical affection; while some may be embarrassed by people of *different* sex kissing in public, this tends not to arouse the same degree of discomfort – or even antipathy or outrage – as when people of the *same* sex show mutual attraction in public.

Bodily appearances through factors such as dress, age, ethnicity and so on provide important signifiers about whether people meet these behavioural expectations. One of the most important components of these bodily identities is gender (even if on some occasion this can be difficult to determine!). In social research the term **gender** is typically used to refer to social, psychological or cultural differences between men and women, rather than biological differences of sex. The assumption behind this distinction between gender and sex is that the way we act is primarily the result of socially created and ascribed **gender roles** rather than the product of innate biology. These gender roles are also manifest in bodily forms, appearance and behaviour. What constitutes appropriate feminine and masculine behaviour and dress has changed enormously over the years – one needs only to think of the elaborate ruffs worn by men in Europe in the Elizabethan Age or the huge male wigs worn by aristocrats in the seventeenth century.

The crucial point is that over the years there have been socially constructed differences in the appearance and behaviour of men and women. Furthermore, these differences have been constructed as sexually alluring (however *non-alluring* some of these clothing styles may appear to subsequent generations!). Thus Liz Bondi (1998a) notes that although it has proved useful in social enquiry to make a distinction between sex and gender, the two concepts are connected since gender roles imply notions of appropriate sexual behaviour. Yet, by assuming that gender roles are socially created and that the rest is simply biological, until recently research has tended to neglect issues of sexuality as a cultural practice (see below).

Differences between men and women are not simply a function of the way the different sexes 'perform'. As we have seen throughout previous chapters, they are also bound up with legal structures and the allocation of resources. There is, then, a material base to the discourses surrounding what it is to be 'male' and 'female'. Furthermore, it is now widely acknowledged that this system of power relations has universally worked to the advantage of men. The broad system of social arrangements and institutional structures that enable men to dominate women is generally known as **patriarchy**. Since patriarchy is dominated by heterosexual values,

this is also termed **heteropatriarchy**. Consequently, areas of cities dominated by these values are often termed **heteropatriarchal environments**. As always, we should recognize the diversity of the city at this point; the categories 'man' and 'woman' are cut across by divisions of class, age, ethnicity, religion, physical capacity and so on.

Gender roles in the sociospatial dialectic

Cities both create and reflect these gender roles. They reflect the system of patriarchy and, above all, are heteropatriarchal environments. For example, in the sphere of formal paid work, McDowell (1995) showed how working as a merchant banker in the City of London involves performing in a gendered and embodied way. This is a tough, aggressive, male-dominated business environment. Women are accepted up to a point, provided they can perform well at their jobs, but through numerous jibes, jokes and ironic comments they are continually reminded that they are 'the other' – interlopers in an essentially male environment. Women are therefore forced to act as 'honorary males' and adopt a masculinized form of identity. This involves working long hours, shouting down the phone if necessary to achieve ambitious performance targets and enjoying an ostentatious, consumption-intensive lifestyle (when time

Box 11.1

Key thinkers in urban social geography – Peter Jackson

Peter Jackson (the geographer, not the director of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy!) has had a big influence on urban social geography in the past two decades for at least three main reasons.

First, Jackson was one of a group of geographers who, in the 1980s, reinterpreted the role of the Chicago School of urban ecology. Previously, in the 1960s, urban geographers had drawn inspiration from the quantitative and statistical work undertaken by the School, but Jackson (and co-author Susan Smith) drew attention to the important ethnographic tradition of Park and his associates (Jackson and Smith, 1984).

Second, Jackson intervened in debates on identities, drawing attention to the fact that these were often quite restricted in scope. Thus debates on gender should involve consideration of masculine identities as well as feminine ones; discussion of sexuality should involve heterosexuals as well as gay men; and similarly, debates on ethnic minorities should also consider the neglected identities of 'whiteness' (Jackson, 1989, 1991b).

Third, Jackson was one of a group of geographers (including the enormously prolific Nigel Thrift, see Box 9.5) who argued that geographers should pay more attention to the roles of consumption in shaping identities and city life (Miller *et al.*, 1998).

In sum, Jackson's work represents a reassertion of the importance of cultural geography, but one that is different from the traditional form. This 'new' cultural geography is, among many things, concerned to understand the social construction of many accepted and taken-for-grant categories used in everyday social discourse. It is concerned to understand 'cultural politics', the idea that culture is not simply concerned with issues of aesthetic style or taste, but involves access to power and social resources (see Mitchell, 2004).

Key concepts associated with Peter Jackson (see Glossary)

Anti-essentialism, cultural politics, identities, identity politics, racism, sexuality, social constructionism.

Further reading

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Miller, D., Jackson, P., Thrift, N., Holbrook, B. and Rowlands, M. (1998) *Shopping, Place and Identity* Routledge, London

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Links with other chapters

Chapter 7: Box 7.5 Robert Park

Chapter 8: Social closure, racism and discrimination

Chapter 9: Place, consumption and cultural politics

permits). Although avoiding the uniform dark business suit that is obligatory for male merchant bankers, women dealers need to dress in such a way as to distinguish themselves from female secretaries, while at the same time not appearing either too sexually alluring or too masculine. Interestingly, this is also an environment characterized by heterosexual values and homophobia (see section on sexuality below). In a similar vein there are various types of gender culture in UK public sector organizations that serve to restrict the opportunities open to women (see Table 11.1).

Another example can be taken from certain city streets; these are sometimes dominated by gangs of young men displaying aggressive masculine attitudes. Women passing through such an environment may be subject to leering eyes, snide remarks or overt sexist comments. Such fears are especially pronounced at night – hence there have been attempts by women's organizations to reassert their right to occupy city spaces through 'Take Back the Night' campaigns. Although some men may also feel uncomfortable in many areas of the city, in general they do not feel the same degree of threat, fear or sense of exclusion (despite the fact that according to research young men are the most likely to be caught up in random acts of violence).

The case of the street gang may be an extreme one but practically *all* urban spaces tend to be dominated by masculine heterosexual norms. Hence, the public

Table 11.1 Types of gender culture in British public sector organizations

Type of culture	Characteristics
'Gentlemen's club'	➤ Woman's role seen as homemaker and mother ➤ Man's role seen as breadwinner ➤ Polite and welcoming to women who conform ➤ Women perform a caring/servicing role ➤ Ignores diversity and difference
'Barrack yard'	➤ Hierarchical organization ➤ Bullying culture ➤ No access to training and development ➤ Clear views on positions within the organization
'Locker room'	➤ Exclusive culture ➤ Relationships built on outside sporting and social activities ➤ Participation in sporting activities important to culture of organization
'Gender blind'	➤ Acknowledges no difference between men and women ➤ Ignores social and cultural diversity ➤ Separation of work from home and life experience ➤ Women as perfect mother and super-manager ➤ Denies existence of reasons for disadvantage
'Smart machos'	➤ Economic efficiency at all costs ➤ Preoccupation with targets and budgets ➤ Competitive ➤ Ruthless treatment of individuals who cannot meet targets
'Paying lip service'	➤ Feminist pretenders ➤ Equal opportunities rhetoric but little reality ➤ Espouses view that *all* women make good managers ➤ Women can empathize
'Women as gatekeepers'	➤ Blocks come from women ➤ Division between home-oriented women and career women ➤ Large numbers of women in support roles ➤ Few women in senior positions ➤ Women have a sense of place ➤ Belief in patriarchal order ➤ Pressure on women in senior positions

Source: After Maddock and Parkin (1994) cited in Booth *et al.* (1996), p. 176.

space of cities has typically been seen as the domain of men while the domestic suburban sphere has been seen as the province of women. However, in recent years feminist commentators have pointed out that the private domestic sphere is also dominated by patriarchy and masculine values. Legally enshrined as an essentially private space, state regulation of domestic spheres has been relatively limited such that gender inequalities are replicated in such environments. For example, despite much media speculation about the existence of the 'caring and sharing' 'New Man' who has a career but also takes a full share of domestic chores, there is now overwhelming social science evidence that women have a double burden of domestic and formal labour market obligations.

At a more extreme level, patriarchy is manifest in domestic violence; for example, according to the Surgeon General in the United States, the battering of women by domestic partners is the single largest cause of injury to women. Thus in the United States roughly 6 million women are abused and 4000 women are killed by their partners or ex-partners each year. While the extent of these problems should not be underestimated, it is also important to recognize that there has been change in recent decades. Thanks in no small part to social research, society is now much more aware of issues such as sexual harassment, rape and physical abuse, and advances in policy have been made. Thus most cities now have rape crisis helplines, women's centres, battered-women's shelters and well-women clinics. In addition, issues of access to childcare and equal pay have moved up the political agenda, even if progress in these spheres has not met up with the rhetoric of politicians. We should also recognize that cities have been centres of emancipation for women as well as imprisonment: modern cities have enabled many women to come together to form feminist associations to fight patriarchal systems of oppression.

11.2 Sexuality and the city

Human sexual behaviour has been profoundly shaped by the nature of cities while at the same time people's sexual activity has had a major influence upon the structure of those cities. A principal reason for this aspect of the sociospatial dialectic is that sexual activity is not just a primitive biological urge but is also a form of learned behaviour that is profoundly affected by cultural values. It is for this reason that we find such wide variations in sexual practices and attitudes towards sex in different cultures throughout the world. The term **sexuality** refers to ideas about sex. It therefore involves not only the character of sexual practices but also their social meanings. Implicit within the use of the term sexuality therefore is an acknowledgement of this socially constructed and culturally determined character of human sexual behaviour.

For most of the past 2000 years attitudes towards sex in Western societies have been primarily shaped by Christianity. The dominant view has been that sexual activity should take place only within marriage and primarily for the production of children. Sexual activity for vicarious pleasure outside of marriage was regarded as sinful. Other categories of sexual activity classed as deviant, abnormal, immoral, unnatural or sick under this moral code include: homosexuality, transvestitism, fetishism, sadomasochism, those engaging in cross-generational sex and those engaging in sex for money. However, in recent years an increasing number of minorities with sexual preferences that transgress this code have been struggling to achieve public recognition and legitimacy.

Compared with the vast amount of work on class, gender and ethnicity, geographers have traditionally paid little attention to issues of sexuality. In this respect geography has been no different from other social sciences.

Prostitution and the city

Cities have often provided opportunities to transgress prevailing moral codes and one important manifestation of this has been prostitution – the granting of sexual favours in exchange for monetary reward (usually but not exclusively by women for men). This is often termed the world's 'oldest profession' but the actual term 'prostitute' came into prominence only in the eighteenth century. In older societies, sexual favours outside marriage were often granted by women who were courtesans, mistresses or slaves. The crucial

point is that these women were often known to those procuring the sexual favours. With the development of large cities, prostitution changed in character in that the women and their clients are frequently unknown to each other. The reason for this change is fairly obvious: in small-scale agrarian societies people were much more likely to be familiar with each other, whereas in cities there was a much greater chance of anonymity. In addition, the economic destitution brought about by the early industrial cities meant that prostitution was the only effective means whereby some women could earn any income.

Urbanization and prostitution

Although precise figures are impossible to obtain, there is no doubt that prostitution was rife in many nineteenth-century cities. Ackroyd (2000) notes that in the Victorian period the number of female prostitutes in London was the source of endless speculation – with estimates ranging up to 90 000. Most did their 'business' walking on the streets, often soliciting trade in an explicit and sometimes verbally aggressive way. Indeed, so offended was the author Charles Dickens by the behaviour of one of these women that he had her arrested for using indecent language. Prostitutes were used by men of all social classes, and shops in the Strand and Haymarket area of London advertised 'beds to let', often for limited periods of a few hours.

Henry Mayhew (1862) in his survey of social conditions in London in the 1850s divided prostitutes into six groups who frequented different parts of London (although he omitted upper-class courtesans). First, there were the 'kept mistresses' and 'prima donnas'. Kept mistresses were widespread but especially concentrated in the St Johns Wood area. Prima donnas were of lower rank and frequented the smart shopping area known as the Burlington Arcade, as well as fashionable parks, theatres and concert halls. Second, there were women who lived together in well-kept lodging houses – they clustered in the Haymarket area. The third group of women living in low lodging houses was concentrated down in the poor East End of London. As might be expected, the fourth group of 'sailors' women' frequented public houses in the dockland areas, such as Whitechapel and Spitalfields. A fifth group of women inhabited the park areas, while the final group of 'thieves' women' were especially concentrated in the Covent Garden area.

Despite the continual danger of physical assault from their clients and the very high risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (it was estimated that in London 8000 would die each year), prostitutes could earn far more on the streets than they could through work in the poorly paid industries of the time (see Chapter 2). There was, however, a double standard in operation. While prostitutes were frequently persecuted, the men who used them were not. A crucial point about prostitution, therefore, is that it reflects patriarchal gender relations (i.e. the inequalities in power relations between men and women).

Sex workers in contemporary cities

Prostitution has continued to be a source of much conflict in Western cities in the twentieth century. In the United Kingdom, for example, many 'red light' zones have been established in run-down inner-city environments. The residential structure of these areas is frequently dominated by ethnic minorities who have been deeply offended by the sight of women seeking 'custom' on the streets. This has led to campaigns to expose 'curb crawlers/cruisers' (i.e. those who drive through these residential areas looking for prostitutes). Such campaigns can involve cooperation between the police and local community groups, although often the consequence is that prostitution gets displaced elsewhere in the city.

It seems clear that the majority of women are coerced into prostitution through economic disadvantage, and often experience considerable physical and psychological harm from both their pimps and their clients. However, as Duncan (1996) notes, there is a small proportion of 'sex workers' who challenge the broad moral condemnation of their trade by society and who seek their right to exercise some degree of choice over their lives in a way they think fit. Recent evidence from around the world on the effects of deregulation of prostitution is contradictory. While there are favourable reports of such a policy in New Zealand a more restrictive attitude is emerging in northern Europe. In the Netherlands for example, there has been a backlash

against relaxed attitudes towards prostitution as stories emerged of harsh treatment of prostitutes and of trafficking of women from Eastern Europe.

We should recognize at this point that the legal and social restrictions surrounding prostitution are still full of hypocrisy and contradiction. In the United Kingdom, for example, while prostitution is legal in principle, prohibitions on soliciting on the streets or living off 'immoral earnings' place heavy restrictions on the activity. As Duncan (1996) notes, widespread condemnations of prostitutes as being exploited by men or suffering from 'false consciousness' exclude prostitutes from the freedom to control their own bodies in safe conditions free from police harassment. It is little wonder then that the discourses surrounding prostitution also display ambiguity and contradiction; either portraying women as victims of sex-hungry predatory males or autonomous providers of social services. Perhaps what makes prostitution so threatening in this context is that it challenges the public/masculine, private/feminine dualisms that structure the city?

Homosexuality and the city

Homosexuality involves emotional and sexual attraction between people of the same sex. Homosexuality has existed in all cultures. For example, Ackroyd (2000) notes that there was a thriving homosexual community of 'sodomites' in medieval London centred around brothels. However, it was only in the mid-nineteenth century that the term homosexuality was devised, thereby denoting homosexuals as a distinct and separate section of the population. It has been argued that the term 'homosexuality' is so specific to this time when social scientists were bent on classifying human sexual activity into discrete categories that it is inappropriate to apply this term to analyse attitudes towards same-sex attraction in older societies (Bristow, 1997). Furthermore, the association of the term with persecution in the twentieth century has led many to prefer alternative terms such as 'gay' or '**queer**'.

Homosexuality has remained an offence in most Western societies until recently. In the United Kingdom it was only after the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 that homosexual activity was decriminalized, provided the activity took place in private between consenting adults over the age of 21. The age of consent for homosexuality in the United Kingdom was reduced to 18 in 1994 and 16 in 1998. Nevertheless, persecution continues; in 1988 two men were arrested for kissing at a bus stop in Oxford Street, London on the grounds that it incited 'public offence'. Knopp's (1987) study of the gay community in Minneapolis showed that between 3500 and 5000 men were arrested in the city between 1980 and 1984 on the charge of 'indecent conduct'.

The social construction of sexuality

There is much controversy over the extent to which homosexuality is some innate biological imperative or a socially constructed phenomenon. Psychoanalysts including Freud did much to highlight the ways in which sexual behaviour was not just related to the need for biological reproduction. However, the scholar who did most to draw attention to the socially constructed nature of sexuality – including homosexuality – was Michel Foucault (1984). His ideas about sexuality must be seen in the light of his broader concerns with the ways in which social institutions such as schools and prisons produced ways of controlling people. As noted in Chapter 3, he argued that central to this control are the discourses – sets of shared understandings – that dominate these institutions.

Discourses regarding sexuality were therefore part of these ways of controlling desire. In the context of sexuality, Foucault uses notion of discourse to understand the way in which the term 'homosexuality' was devised to denote a form of social disease. Although this was intended to delineate a group who should be controlled, by giving the group a name, it raised the consciousness of a minority of the need for emancipation. Foucault's ideas have been much criticized, especially for their neglect of gender and race, but they have been extraordinarily influential in the study of sexuality.

Homosexual urban ecology

Cities have had a profound impact upon the development of homosexuality. In general, cities have provided greater anonymity and tolerance of alternative lifestyles compared with the hostility towards gays and lesbians manifest in rural communities, especially where fundamentalist views are dominant. Nevertheless, the

Box 11.2

Key thinkers in urban social geography – Richard Sennett

As you begin to read more widely in urban social geography it is almost certain that you will soon come across reference to the work of Richard Sennett. If you are tempted to follow up his work – please do – for he is an example of that relatively rare breed – the 'public' intellectual. This means that his work has moved beyond his own discipline (urban sociology) to engage, not only with scholars in other subjects, but also with a wider public and with policy makers (Doreen Massey is a geographer who has become a public intellectual, see Box 2.2). However, as is usually the case with public intellectuals, Sennett's work has been controversial. This might arise because, paradoxically, although he writes well, his ideas can seem elusive. Nevertheless, his work is seldom dull, drawing upon a wide range of ideas from sociology, politics and economics through to design, architecture and music. His work seems to incorporate both structural class-based inequality and awareness of individual subjective experiences, without falling into the conventional modes of understanding these issues.

Sennett's personal background is especially interesting in this context for it perhaps gives some clues about his lifelong interest in cities, inequality, community and social interaction. He grew up in Chicago in the Cabrini Green public housing 'project' and thus experienced at first hand the problems of deprivation, violence and racial tension. Nevertheless, his single-parent mother had strong links with a radical Bohemian cultural milieu and after abandoning a promising career on the cello (following an injury) Sennett has devoted most of his life to urban scholarship.

Although Sennett's ideas are wide ranging in scope, underpinning them – and echoing in some ways the work of Jane Jacobs and Henri Lefebvre – is an assertion of the enlightening and beneficial aspects of heterogeneous city life. He argues that through encountering strangers of diverse backgrounds in cities we get a better understanding of ourselves; not only do we meet people with differing lifestyles, we are also freer to experiment with differing identities. Consequently, Sennett is highly critical of post-Second World War planning policies that have reduced the potential for social interactions (e.g. suburbanization, car-dominated transport systems, large shopping malls, controlled urban spaces). For some this critique smacks of utopianism; Merrifield argues: 'This is an admirable and inspiring vision to be sure. Having said that, you can't help but wonder what planet Sennett is talking about. He hopes people will not flinch away from "mixing" in public, and some will, by their own volition, decide to walk on the wild side and go out to confront the grisly urban "other" eyeball to eyeball' (1996, p. 60).

However, this criticism might be seen as a little unfair since, like many other scholars, Sennett has been preoccupied with the paradox of a seeming decline in civility and tolerance in some Western societies in an age of rising affluence and personal freedom (at least for some). He has also been concerned with the socially dysfunctional and corrosive character of modern working practices centred on subcontracting, temporary contracts, project working and performance monitoring. Yet another of his recent concerns is the bland, uniform character of much urban regeneration.

Key concepts associated with Richard Sennett (see Glossary)

(Note: these are just a selection of the concepts relevant to his wide-ranging approach.) Community, difference, ethnic village, public space, public sphere, *revanchist* city.

Further reading

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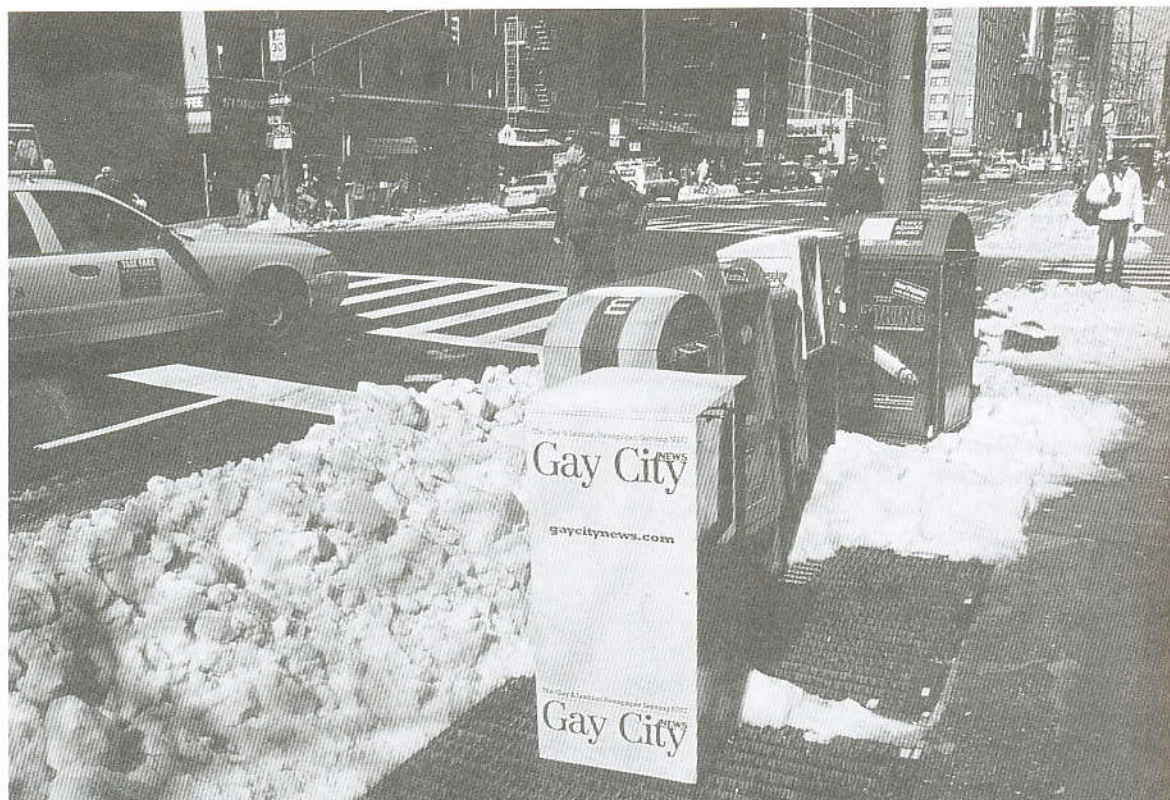
Links with other chapters

Chapter 7: Urbanism and social theory; Box 7.1 The growth of Bohemian enclaves; Box 7.3 Jane Jacobs

Chapter 9: Neighbourhood and Community; Box 9.4 Henri Lefebvre

Chapter 13: Urban social sustainability



Changing attitudes to sexuality in the city: a newspaper focusing on the gay community in New York. Photo Credit: Geoffrey DeVerteuil.

continuing danger of prosecution and police harassment means that within cities homosexuals have tended to meet in secret bars and clubs. These bars serve three main functions: first, they facilitate liaisons for sexual purposes; second, they enable the exchange of news and gossip; and third, they provide a place of introduction for new entrants into the gay world. It has been found that these bars tend to cluster together in areas that display a high tolerance and permissiveness towards deviant forms of behaviour in general. However, some of these clubs have special warning lights or bells to warn customers not to stand too close to persons of the same sex when the police were in the vicinity.

Other studies have highlighted the requirements of successful 'tearooms' or 'cottages' – public toilets and areas of parkland that facilitated cruising and sexual liaisons: first, these sites had to be in areas that minimized the risk of recognition; second, they had to be situated near major transport routes to allow easy access and dispersal; third, the sites had to be sufficiently exposed to facilitate recognition of potential customers; and, finally, the toilets needed a vantage point to keep watch for the police, homophobic people or unwanted members of the public.

Since the 1960s there have been profound changes in the nature of gay and lesbian spaces within cities that reflect broader social and political changes in society. Arguably, there is now greater tolerance towards homosexual activity by 'straight' sections of society, although the extent of this tolerance should not be exaggerated. Studies still reveal substantial prejudice among a majority of the total population and there are still high rates of physical assault against gays and lesbians. For example, one study of Philadelphia revealed levels of reported victimization among lesbians to be twice that for women in general (cited in Valentine, 1996). Gay men also

experience high levels of violent attack – even in areas of cities with a high proportion of gays. In addition there has been a marked right-wing, anti-feminist, anti-gay backlash in the United States in recent years.

Gay spaces

Weightman (1981) was among the first to draw attention to areas in US cities with distinctive gay lifestyles. He noted that gays were playing a leading role in the process of gentrification in some inner-city or transitional areas, often displacing the poorer residents. Without doubt the most famous of these residential districts is the Castro district of San Francisco that was mapped by Castells and Murphy (1982; Castells, 1983). The origins of this district can be traced back to the Second World War. Gays and lesbians serving in the armed forces were often released from military service in San Francisco and preferred to establish homes in the city rather than move back and face the prejudice of their home communities.

Another important gay space is the Marigny district of New Orleans studied by Knopp (1990). As in the San Francisco case, this is located in a culturally mixed, relatively tolerant area. Knopp describes how property developers and speculators rapidly exploited the demand for property in this area by the gay population. In particular, they exploited the 'rent gap' (already discussed in Chapter 6) by artificially inflating the values of properties by bribing private appraisers. Paradoxically, this led to an influx of lower-income gays into a predominantly middle-class area. Knopp notes that many middle-class gays in the area became concerned over the preservation of historically important areas within the city, rather than broader issues affecting the gay community. Other urban expressions of gay sexuality have been studies in Manchester (Hindle, 1994) and Newcastle (Lewis, 1994) in the United Kingdom. In addition, Binnie (1995) presents a fascinating analysis of the gay community in Amsterdam. He notes that 3000 of the 25 000 jobs in the tourist industry in the city were dependent upon gay tourism, and in recognition of this, the city authorities actively promoted the gay area. However, this advertising campaign was eventually withdrawn because of concerns over alienating the tourist industry as a whole.

Lesbian spaces

Male homosexuality has received much more analysis than lesbianism, largely because the lesbian subcultures are smaller and less visible than male gay subcultures. Nevertheless, Winchester and White (1988) were able to chart dimensions of a lesbian ghetto in Paris (see Figure 11.1). Egerton (1990) has also documented lesbian spaces in the form of squats, housing cooperatives and housing associations. These are attempts to create safe areas for women and sites of political resistance but they have sometimes been subject to violence from homophobes and misogynists. In general, women have fewer financial resources than men and they also face the threat of male violence. Lesbians therefore display a desire for relatively inexpensive housing as well as a concern with personal safety.

These factors, combined with the pressures of a predominantly heterosexual society, mean that lesbian residential areas are less overt than gay spaces and often have an 'underground' character. In addition, it would seem that lesbian spaces can be unstable resulting from underlying tensions in dense, clique-ridden environments. Castells (1983) argued that gay enclaves in cities were a spatial expression of men's desire to dominate. He argued that women have a greater sense of mutual solidarity and affection than men and less need for territorial expression. However, critics have pointed out that this argument perpetuates notions of essential differences between men and women and ignores the processes that serve to exclude women from some parts of cities. In recent years lesbians have expressed resentment at the idea that their form of oppression can be equated in a simple manner with that of gays. Indeed, their struggle is seen by some as posing a much greater threat to heteropatriarchy than the gay rights movement.

Such mapping of gay spaces in cities has greatly extended our knowledge of urban social geography but they have been limited in their contribution to an understanding of the *processes* that lead to such geographical clusterings. To begin with, most of these areas cannot be thought of as exclusively gay. Furthermore, there are many gays and lesbians who live outside such regions. Thus, Valentine (1995) argues that this work on **gay ghettos** tends to ignore the fact that many lesbians and gay men conceal their identities at certain

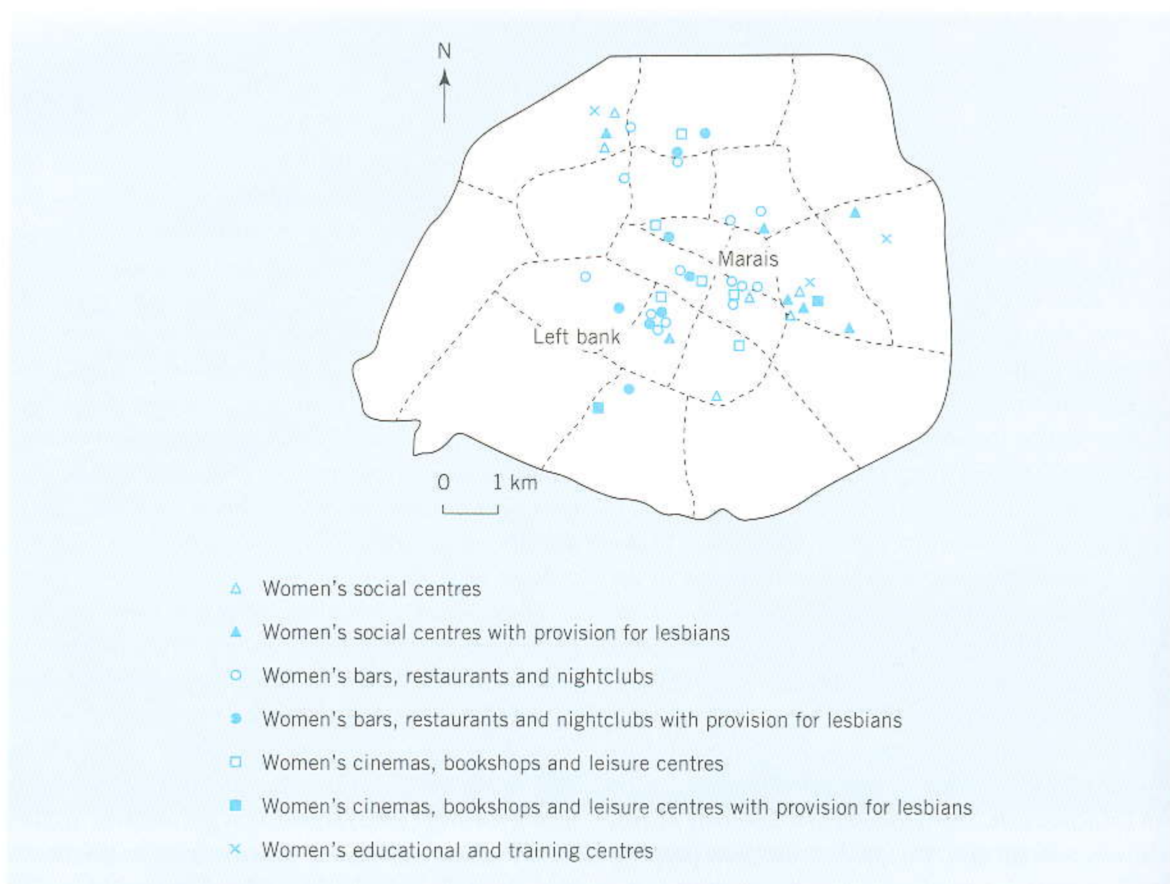


Figure 11.1 Lesbian facilities in Paris, 1984–1985.
Source: Winchester and White (1988), Fig. 1, p. 48.

times to avoid discrimination or persecution in certain contexts.

The crucial point is that such a focus on gay spaces tends to conceptualize them as different when, in reality, *all* spaces in cities are constructed in a sexualized manner. But the most telling criticism of the spatial mapping approach is that it tends to perpetuate an essentialist view of sexuality, i.e. the view that homosexuality is entirely some natural biological imperative.

Queer politics: lipstick lesbians and gay skinheads

Inspired by the work of Foucault, an increased recognition of the constructionist element in sexuality is manifest in **queer theory** and in radical gay organizations such as Queer Nation or Lesbian Nation. **Queer politics** attempts to confront and expose the heterosexually constructed nature of public spaces and social institutions (the usually pejorative word 'queer' is deliberately used in a somewhat ironic manner to acknowledge the repressive character of constructions of 'homosexuality'). In part, this strategy was motivated by a dissatisfaction with more traditional gay political movements that tended to adopt a more essentialist view, since this tended to exclude certain people such as those who are bisexual. This radical queer strategy is manifest in mock weddings, public 'kiss-ins' and gay shopping expeditions. Another subversive strategy attempts to destabilize notions of fixed sexual identities through parody and exaggeration. Not only has that classic icon of masculinity – the cowboy – been appropriated as a dress code by many gays, but there are those who behave as 'hypermasculine males' (gay skinheads) and 'hyperfeminine females' (lipstick lesbians).

It has been argued that the geographical concentration of gay people could, as in the case of ethnic minorities, provide a base for political mobilization against repression and discrimination. However, the effectiveness of such a separatist strategy has been questioned by many. It has been argued that rather than enabling homosexuality to be seen as natural as heterosexuality, such gay enclaves have helped to maintain the notion of gay lifestyles as separate, different, deviant and sinful. Thus, Castells (1983) noted that gay ghettos can be sites of liberation but they can also be likened to a prison. With the development of HIV and AIDS in the gay community, such areas assumed a new role as focal points for support networks and health care services.

Yet another change in gay spaces in recent years has been the commercialization of such areas as entrepreneurs have sought to exploit the high incomes of some gay households. For example, the Soho area of London has developed into a commercial area for gays in what has been described as the world's Pink Capital. Brighton also has a thriving gay commercial scene as shown by Figure 11.2. Clubs, bars and shops catering explicitly for gays have heightened the visibility of gay lifestyles but they have tended to cater for certain types of gays – those who are youthful and wealthy – with those who are older and poorer somewhat excluded. Thus a new form of economic class division has been imposed upon divisions based on sexuality. Another type of exclusion has centred around the body; the exaggerated masculinity and body-building activities of 'hypermasculine' gays has tended to separate them from those individuals less endowed with the 'body

Box 11.3

Key trends in urban social geography – The resurgence of Dublin

Like Barcelona, Dublin is a European city that has, in the past two decades, transformed itself from a decaying, poor area into a vibrant urban growth zone. Again, as in the case of Barcelona, this urban resurgence reflects the economic benefits that have accrued to the wider nation through membership of the European Union. A combination of structural funds and special dispensation to instigate a taxation regime that is highly favourable to major corporations have transformed Ireland from one of Europe's poorest nations to its richest.

Dublin, a city of 1.4 million, and over 40 per cent of the Republic's population, has been at the forefront of this economic growth. A highly educated relatively young population (half are under 25) has fuelled development, such that Dublin is now a major centre for many industries including software development. Most famously, the winding lanes of Dublin's Georgian Temple Bar area have been transformed into an 'urban nightscape' (see also Box 10.4) with bars, restaurants and so on. As in the case of Barcelona, this has led to social tensions; Temple Bar has become notorious for excessive alcohol consumption by young adult British tourists on 'stag' and 'hen' nights. Dublin also exhibits the gentrification, immigration, rapidly increasing house prices and social polarization that often accompanies a period of rapid economic growth.

Dublin has been championed as an example of a creative city but recent surveys suggest that growth and immigration have been accompanied by increasing intolerance and discrimination in the Irish Republic. It may of course be that those experiencing the downside of economic growth are those who are most resentful of immigration and diversity. The credit crunch has had a big impact on the Irish economy – no other economy in the euro zone is having a bigger recession – and it remains to be seen whether this leads to a big exodus of recent migrants. As in the case of Barcelona, the recession is leading many to question the path of economic regeneration undertaken in Dublin.

Key concepts associated with Dublin (see Glossary)

Civic boosterism, creative cities, deregulation, growth coalitions, social polarization, urban entrepreneurialism.

Further reading

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Ellis, G. and Kim, J. (2001) City profile: Dublin, *Cities* **18**, 353–64

Links with other chapters

Chapter 5: Box 5.3 The resurgence of Barcelona; Box 5.5 The growth of culturally driven regeneration

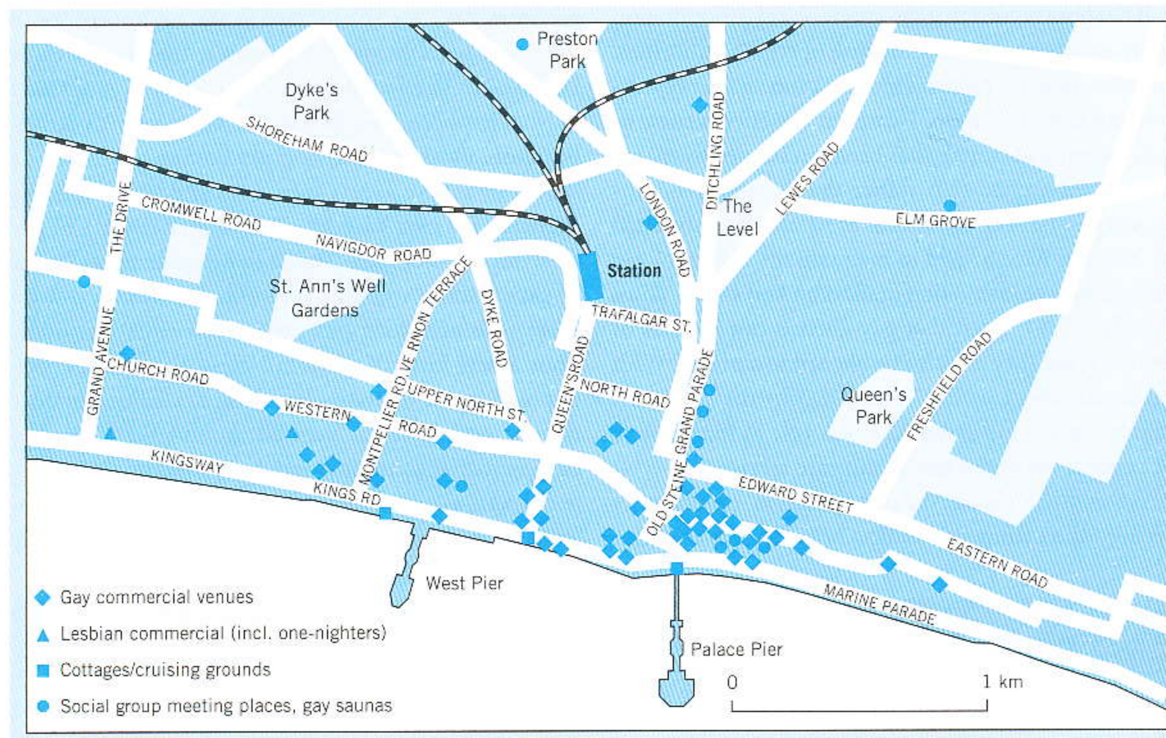

Figure 11.2 Gay commercial and social venues in Brighton in the 1990s.
Source: After Wright (1999), Fig. 5.6, p. 182.

beautiful'. There has also been a growing recognition of the divisions within the category 'lesbian':

> In large urban centers across Canada and other Western countries, the 1980s have heralded the subdivision of activist lesbians into specialized groupings: lesbians of color, Jewish lesbians, working class lesbians, leather dykes, lesbians against sado-masochism, older lesbians, lesbian youth, disabled lesbians and so on.
>
> (Ross 1990, cited in Chouinard and Grant, 1996, p. 179)

11.3 Disability and the city

In most writing on cities the able-bodied character of citizens is taken for granted and this, Imrie (1996) argues, amounts to an **ableist geography**. Park *et al.* (1998) note that 'Human geography has in the past found little room for studies of disability' (p. 208). The character of the problem has been movingly revealed by Vera Chouinard, a professor disabled by rheumatoid arthritis:

> Recently in a feminist geography conference session I was forced to stand because the room was filled. This was arguably my own 'fault' as I arrived late (having had to walk a long distance from another session), but after about half an hour the pain in my feet, leg and hips was so intense that I was forced to ask a young women if she and her companions could shift one chair over so that I could sit down (someone had left their seat, so there was an empty chair at the far end of the row). I apologized for asking but explained that I was ill, very tired and in a lot of pain. She turned, looked very coldly at me and simply said 'No, the seats are being used'. She may well have been right, but I suddenly no longer felt like part of a feminist geography session: I was invisible . . . and I was angry. Fighting a juvenile urge to bop her on the head with my cane, I began to see feminist geography through new eyes; eyes which recognised that the pain of being 'the other'

> was far deeper and more complex that I ever imagined, and that words of inclusion were simply not enough . . . My sense of myself, as a disabled, academic woman has also been shaped by more subtle aspects of daily life. Walking on the university campus and in other public places, I am constantly conscious of frequent looks (often double and even triple-takes). I realize that it is unusual to see a relatively young woman walking slowly with a cane or using a scooter and the looks reflect curiosity, but they are a constant reminder that I am different, that I don't 'belong'. It is painful for me to acknowledge this. I guess that is why I have learned to look away: to the ground, to the side . . . anywhere that lets me avoid facing up to being the 'other'.
>
> It is remarkable how thoroughly ableist assumptions and practices permeate every facet of our lives, even though we often remain relatively sheltered from and insensitive to these forms of oppression. Yet disability in some form will come to each and every one of us someday, and when it does, and ableism rears its ugly head, one finds a topsy-turvy world in which none of the old rules apply and many 'new' ones don't make sense. People develop new ways of relating to you often without recognizing it. For instance, some of my students will not call me at home, despite instructions to do so, because I am 'sick'. Other students shy away from working with a disabled professor: Some assume that the most 'successful' supervisors must be able-bodied; others are unwilling to accommodate illness by, for example, occasionally substituting phone calls for face-to-face meetings or meetings at my home rather than the office. Of course this is not true of all students, but these practices are pervasive enough to hurt every day to make it just a little harder to struggle to change relations, policies, practices and attitudes.
>
> (Chouinard and Grant, 1996, p. 173)

We have quoted at length from this article, not only because Chouinard writes in such an articulate manner, but also because it makes additional impact in referencing the world of academe; a world in which one might have expected more enlightened attitudes. However, it is encouraging to report that in recent years geographical research has at least *begun* to address issues of disability. A fundamental issue here is just what is meant by 'disability'. The United Nations has made the following distinctions between impairment, disability and handicap:

- *Impairment*: any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function.
- *Disability*: any restriction or lack (resulting from impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.
- *Handicap*: a disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or disability, depending upon age, sex, social and cultural factors for that individual.

However, an immediate difficulty with such a set of definitions is how to define what is 'normal', for incapacity and disability form a wide continuum of human capabilities. For example, as Longhurst (1998) shows, although not generally regarded as impaired or disabled, some pregnant women can encounter problems with the design of shopping malls. There is, however, a more fundamental limitation with the UN approach, since it attempts to make a distinction between *physical* definitions of impairment and disability and *social* definitions of handicap.

The social construction of disability

The social construction of 'disability' is bound up with the attitudes and structures of oppression in an able-bodied society, rather than the failing of a particular individual. In societies that view the role of medicine as primarily one of making sick people well, disability is often seen as something unhealthy. However, it follows from a social constructionist perspective that if sufficient facilities were provided, then disability would be regarded as something akin to short-sightedness (the wearing of glasses not generally being regarded as a disability). This is an excellent example of how social science can challenge taken-for-granted assumptions. What seems at first like 'common sense' can often be a function of a particular way we have been taught to think about the world.

The socially constructed nature of disability was strikingly revealed by a classic study of attitudes towards blindness. In the United States it was seen primarily as

an experience of loss requiring counselling; in Britain as a technical issue requiring aids and equipment; and in Italy as a need to seek consolation and salvation through the Catholic Church (Oliver, 1998). Different societies therefore produce varying definitions of impairment and disability. In the United States, for example, following the politicization of disability rights, there has emerged a multimillion-dollar disability industry. Disability has therefore become a major source of income for doctors, lawyers, rehabilitation professionals and disability activists.

Some argue that this social constructionist approach goes too far in that it ignores factors such as pain or impaired vision that are 'part of the bodily experience of the disabled' (French, 1993, p. 124), factors over which society has little or no control (even if they are made worse by societal oppression). But however one conceptualizes the issue, what *is* clear is that disabled people are stereotyped by a predominantly able-bodied society. This is illustrated by Table 11.2, which shows common stereotypes of disability represented in films, books, plays and the media.

Table 11.2 Ten media stereotypes of disabled people

Pitiable and pathetic: charity adverts; *Children in Need*; Tiny Tim, Kevin Spacey's role in *The Usual Suspects*

Object of violence: films such as *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*

Sinister or evil: Dr No; Dr Strangelove; Richard III, Christopher Walken's role in *100 Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead*

Atmosphere: curios in comics, books or films (e.g. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*)

Triumph over tragedy: e.g. the last item in the news

Laughable: the butt of jokes, e.g. Mr Magoo

Bearing a grudge: Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*

Burden or outcast: the Morlocks in *The X-Men* or in *The Mask*

Non-sexual or incapable of full relationships: Clifford Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

Incapable of fully participating in everyday life: absence from everyday situations and not shown as integral and productive members of society.

Source: After the *Guardian* 13 October 1995. Copyright Guardian News & Media Ltd. 1995.

Disability in urban settings

Cities frequently display numerous barriers to mobility and access for disabled people. Typical problems include high curbs, steep steps, the absence of ramps for wheelchairs, narrow doors and the absence of information in Braille. In addition, elevators/lifts for those who are impaired or disabled are often in unattractive locations (e.g. service elevators/lifts next to kitchens), badly signposted and with inaccessible buttons. Public transport systems can also pose problems for people with disabilities. Often the problem boils down to one of cost, with inadequate finances being available for adequate conversion of premises for disabled access.

As Imrie (1996) notes, the problem is also one of dominant attitudes in an 'ableist' society. All too often, architects, planners and the public at large have assumed that disability leads to immobility. Consequently, the needs of disabled people get ignored, yet it takes only a few minutes in a wheelchair to realize the scale of the problems created by most buildings or public transport systems. The barriers are therefore social and psychological as much as physical. Society's reluctance to meet the costs of ensuring accessibility for disabled persons reflects a wider set of social values towards disability. Restricted accessibility prevents disabled people from fully participating in social and economic life, such as in the world of employment. A study in Ontario, Canada, found that 80 per cent of disabled persons lived in relative poverty because of their exclusion from the job market and limited support programmes from both the public and private sectors (Chouinard and Grant, 1996).

Fortunately, in many cities the issue of disability is now being taken much more seriously. For example, in the United States the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1992 has required businesses and public institutions to provide wheelchair access. In the United Kingdom, although progress is patchy, many local authorities now have Disability Officers tasked with improving disabled access in city centres. These improvements are in part a response to the increased activities of various disability rights movements (Table 11.3). These are now many in number; for example the British Council of Organizations of Disabled People has over a hundred constituent member organizations (Campbell and Oliver, 1996). These groups have begun to campaign around issues of income, employment, civil rights and community living rather than the older issues of institutional care. As such, they reflect

one of the **new social movements** focused around what is termed **identity politics** (i.e. people with a particular identity rather than traditional class-based politics).

The gay, lesbian and disability rights movements illustrate well some of the key dilemmas in an era in which we recognize that identities are multiple and unstable. In such a context it is politically expedient at times to adopt what is termed **strategic essentialism**, unification around a single dimension of identity, such as gender, sexuality, race or disability, to achieve particular objectives. While this can bring political strength, it can also lead to vulnerability and internal tensions, for claims of universal solidarity can lead to exclusion and alienation. How to reconcile the competing claims of mutual interest and difference is one of the key issues of the twenty-first century.

Table 11.3 A typology of approaches to access for disabled people by local authorities in the United Kingdom

'Averse'

- Operates with a biomedical model of disability, or disability as being derived from physical and/or mental impairment
- Major concern is to secure investment to support the local economy. Attitude is that insisting on access will scare away developers and much-needed investment
- Access is seen as a minority issue that only affects a small proportion of the population
- Very few statements on access in local plan
- No budget to support access projects
- Never uses planning conditions to secure access
- No access officer, or where they do exist, usually performed part time by someone in Building Controls of Local Plans
- Local political system unaware of access issues and provides little support or encouragement
- Access groups either non-existent or poorly organized
- Typically a rural local authority and/or area with severe economic problems

'Proactive'

- Operates with a social model of disability or disability as a form of discrimination
- Access is seen as an issue to be considered because of the directives of government and the Royal Town Planning Institute
- Access is seen as one of many competing demands on officer time
- Appointed access officer, usually on a part-time basis
- Some small funds for access issues
- Brings to the attention of developers all the statutory requirements of access
- Seeks to negotiate with developers and persuade them to give more than is required by statute
- Major concern is to secure development but not at the expense of neglecting statutory duties on matters such as access, for instance
- Some awareness by local council of access issues but remains peripheral and rarely discussed by local politicians
- Access groups usually exist but are often weak and poorly resources
- A mixture and range of localities

'Coercive'

- Conceives of disability as an equal opportunities concern
- Access is seen as a right for all people
- The local economy will benefit by providing access, people with disabilities are consumers too
- Insists on access provision
- Will seek to use all available planning instruments
- Will not hesitate to use planning conditions relating to access
- Regular meetings between planners and local access groups
- Full-time access officer, well networked within and between departments
- Active support from local politicians with key councillors
- Active access groups
- Typically a left-wing, city authority

Source: Adapted from Imrie (1996), pp. 128 and 138.

Box 11.4

Key films related to urban social geography – Chapter 11

The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (1994) A hilarious story of cross-dressing in the Australian outback, reflecting city–country relations and sexuality.

Breakfast on Pluto (2005) A tragic-comic film based on the novel by Patrick McCabe about a gay Irish boy who moves to London to find his long-lost mother during the Irish Republican Army bombings in the 1970s. More amusing than it sounds!

The Broken Hearts Club (2000) A romantic comedy centred around a group of young gay professionals.

The Celluloid Closet (1995) A remarkable documentary on the changing ways in which Hollywood has treated gay issues over the years. Highly recommended.

Desert Hearts (1985) Not really an 'urban' film since this is a 'retro' movie set in the desert surrounding Reno in 1959, but nevertheless an intelligent, at times amusing, and balanced expression of attitudes towards lesbianism.

Go Fish (1994) A lively romantic comedy centred around lesbian lifestyles in Chicago.

Longtime Companion (1990) One of the first films to show the impact of AIDS, in this case upon affluent young professionals in New York in the 1980s.

The Monkey's Mask (2000) Something rather different. A Sydney-based lesbian detective on the trail of a killer in the world of poetry!

My Beautiful Launderette (1985) A film about sexuality, racism and neoliberalism in Thatcherite Britain in the early 1980s.

Passion Fish (1992) A warm, touching and moving consideration of issues of disability, race and sexuality set in the southern United States.

Philadelphia (1993) The first mainstream Hollywood movie to confront issues of AIDS and the gay community. Moving, thought provoking and life affirming.

Priest (1994) A powerful and moving film about the conflict between religion and sexuality for a gay young priest.

*Totally F***ed Up* (1993) A key movie of what has become known as 'New Queer Cinema', this film shows the loves and lives of young gays and lesbians in Los Angeles.

The Wedding Banquet (1993) A fairly light romantic comedy by the much-lauded director Ang Lee, but a film that provides amusing and provoking insights into issues of ethnicity and sexuality.

Chapter summary

11.1 People's bodily appearance is not just a function of innate biology, it is also socially constructed through various signs and systems of meaning. The spaces of cities provide a powerful environment that forces people to conform to certain standards of appearance and dress while at the same time also providing opportunities for people to transgress prevailing social norms.

11.2 Urban areas have had an important impact upon the development of sexuality. Cities provide opportunities for people to transgress dominant codes of sexual behaviour. The continuation of prostitution in cities reflects patriarchal gender relations. Cities have provided opportunities for the territorial expression of gay lifestyles. As in the case of ethnic segregation, this has provided opportunities for empowerment but may also be seen as reflecting continuing discrimination.

11.3 The social construction of 'disability' also reflects the continuing patterns of oppression in an able-bodied society. Both the Gay Rights Movement and the Disability Rights Movement may be seen as forms of new social movements.

Key concepts and terms

ableist geography
corporeality
embodiment
gay ghettos
gender
gender roles
heteropatriarchal environments
heteropatriarchy
homosexuality
identity politics
new social movements
patriarchy
performativity
queer
queer politics
queer theory
sexuality
strategic essentialism

Suggested reading

The body and geography

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