

# 'The Decline of Queer Establishments in Hamilton, Ontario: An Exploration of Queer Space-Making

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## Introduction

In her introduction to the book *Making a Scene: Lesbians and Community Across Canada 1964-84*, Liz Millward remarks that “any social existence claiming to be real but failing to produce its own space is a strange entity” (5). In 2007, the 2SLGBTQ+ demographic in Canada was 4% of the total population, while in Hamilton, 10% of the city’s population identified as 2SLGBTQ+ (Pike 1). Despite this significant subset, there is a lack of establishments explicitly for queer folks in Hamilton, a “strange entity” as Millward would suggest given the large queer demographic (5). For the purposes of this paper, queer establishments include any businesses whose primary goal is to serve 2SLGBTQ+ patrons by making queer-friendly and queer-dominated spaces. This does not include businesses that host ‘gay’ nights some days a month, as this can be a method of pink washing to increase revenue from queer folks without having to commit to *always* creating safe spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ people. This paper seeks to identify establishments that explicitly advertise as queer spaces or those that many 2SLGBTQ+ frequent in Hamilton from 1980-now to map the development of these spaces across time. This is important in order to understand how 2SLGBTQ+ people have taken and continue to take up space in the public sphere across time. This paper begins with a discussion on the importance of physical, explicitly queer spaces

for community formation amongst 2SLGBTQ+ folks, followed by an examination of the factors that contribute to the closure and lack of queer spaces in the city. Table 1 at the end of this paper lists the establishments that have existed in Hamilton and any details that were found about them. Overall, this paper argues that queer spaces are important for affirming 2SLGBTQ+ identity and creating community amongst queer folks. However, the lack of establishments explicitly for queer Hamiltonians inhibits this from happening. Therefore, there is an immediate need to build 2SLGBTQ+ spaces in the city to allow for queer community building and identity affirmation.

### The Importance of and Need for Queer Spaces

Hamiltonians express a desire for more queer spaces, including those that allow for socializing, recreation, mental health support, community centers, and resources that are geared towards creating spaces specifically for POC2SLGBTQ+, transgender, or Two-Spirit persons (McMaster University and The AIDS Network). Sarah Barnhart and Addison Brash have recently attempted to meet this need. Barnhart is aware of the lack of queer spaces in Hamilton especially since the few 2SLGBTQ+ establishments that did exist, including the Embassy, the Werx, and the Steel Lounge, have all closed recently (Peesker para 8). To remedy this, Barnhart organizes events for 2SLGBTQ+ women and allies to meet each other in spaces not dominated or catered towards cisgender men (Peesker para 8). In addition, Brash has organized Hamilton Queer Hangs which occurs in parks within the city (Peesker para 14). This event is open to any queer folks or allies who want to

meet other 2SLGBTQ+ people and socialize. However, both Barnhart and Brash's events lack an established place that queer Hamiltonians can frequent beyond event dates as they rely on local bars and parks to host their events. The importance and need of establishing physical spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ people remain unmet as queer Hamiltonians have yet to have a space they can access regularly.

Queer spaces are important because they allow 2SLGBTQ+ people to meet one another, form connections, and build community. Millward explores this in relation to the formation of lesbian spaces in Toronto in the 1960s to 1980s, arguing that building spaces for lesbians is important because these spaces allow lesbians to reassert their existence within a society that is largely heteronormative (7, 23). She notes that at the time, women tended to be more closeted than men and subsequently had more difficulty finding out where lesbian spaces or events were located (12-13). She goes on to argue that these spaces were also predominately occupied by white bodies who excluded, eroticized, or made hyper visible the bodies of lesbians of colour, while also ignoring how their struggles against racism and colonialism intersected with their experiences of homophobia and sexism (Millward 21). Archival data found in the *Hamilton Spectator* digitalized archive shows that there were fewer explicitly lesbian spaces than gay spaces in Hamilton. Most public spaces that served the 2SLGBTQ+ demographic tended to be advertised as "gay" spaces rather than for two-spirit, lesbian, bisexual, or other identities under the 2SLGBTQ+ umbrella. While the term 'gay' is sometimes used to include both gays and lesbians or 2SLGBTQ+ people in general, its use over other identities

signifies that the main purpose of the space is to provide services to gay men. We sometimes see the word queer used as an umbrella term for 2SLGBTQ+ people. However, this vagueness can also obscure how spaces or places can operate in the interests of some queer folk instead of all, all the while appearing to be diverse and welcoming (Sheffield, 15-16). The results from the *Hamilton Spectator* archive all used 'gay' instead of 'queer' or other identities even when spaces were not exclusively for gay men.

The overrepresentation of gay spaces compared to other 2SLGBTQ+ focused spaces showcase the challenge of creating accessible and welcoming spaces for those of marginalized backgrounds within the queer community. As Millward explores in her book, it is important to have designated areas for different identities, such as lesbian spaces (Millward 6). Despite these problems, gay spaces still offer a safer zone for queer folks to congregate and socialize with others in public. The closure of these establishments results in a lack of space for community formation to take place, which has negatively impacted queer Hamiltonians. Research done in 2019 by McMaster University and The AIDS Network shows that majority of 2SLGBTQ+ Hamiltonians surveyed did not feel that they were part of 2SLGBTQ+ community in Hamilton and 41% looked for 2SLGBTQ+ services of community outside of the city (McMaster University and The AIDS Network 56). Of these respondents, those who were transgender or had a disability were more likely than gender fluid, cisgender, or non-disabled respondents to seek services outside of Hamilton in order to meet their needs (McMaster University and The AIDS Network 56). If Hamilton had more spaces and services for our queer inhabitants, than these

individuals would be able to have their needs met within the city instead of resorting to travelling to Toronto or other surrounding cities for community and care, which also poses challenges to those who are not able to travel freely due to physical, economic, or time constraints.

### Queer Spaces of the Past

The *Hamilton Spectator's* online database provides digitalized articles from the 1980s onwards. A search for articles related to queer, gay, lesbian, LGBT, or transgender spaces in the city yields results related to happenings in gay clubs, bars, and bathhouses in Hamilton from 1992 to 2015. Five articles appeared, containing the names of 12 different establishments in the city that provided spaces for 2SLBGTQ+ folks. While the articles provide few details on the events or establishments themselves, the names and locations were enough to discern that during the 1980s and 1990s, there were multiple gay nightclubs, bars, and bathhouses for queer folks to frequent that no longer exist today, including Club 121 ("The Engine Room" 1), The Warehouse Spa and Bath (Pulga 1), The Werx ("Lost Landmark" 1), and Billies (Humphreys 1). The latter is mentioned in an article entitled, "Bomb Threat Prompts Evacuation of Fire Station Caller Says He'll Blow Up Billies" published in 1992. The article describes how someone called the *Hamilton Spectator* threatening to blow up the bar which they referred to using the f\*\*\*\*t slur, which resulted in the evacuation of patrons in both Billies and the Windsor (Humphreys 2). The owner is quoted in the article saying that he did not think the threat was because the space was frequented by gay patrons but rather, because there

was fierce competition between nightclubs in the area who were jealous of the busyness of Billies (Humphreys 2). Despite the owner's opinion, the blatant use of the slur by the threatener indicates the motive was discriminatory in nature, which suggests that even though gay establishments existed across Hamilton, such as Billies, the existence of such spaces were not accepted by all.

There has also been a decrease in the number of bathhouses within the city. A Google search for "Hamilton gay bathhouses" yields 2 results for Club Hamilton and Karel's Steam Baths. At one time, there were up to 6 different gay bathhouses ("City Scrubbing" 1-2). These spaces offered an alternative to public spaces for gay men to engage in sexual encounters and were integral to avoid public indecency charges. A 2004 news article lists the Warehouse Spa and Bath as one such bathhouse that opened in December 2002 (Pulga 1). The Warehouse was a safe and private space for men to have sex as an alternative to cruising in park areas. However, police raided the Warehouse, ticketed several men, charged two others with indecent acts, and collected the information of many others who were there (Pulga 1). The owner, Jamie Bursey, stated that because of the police raid, many patrons would not return, so his business is at risk of being shut down as a result (Pulga 2). The article also notes that these spaces were also important as they provided information on safe sex and offered clean, drug free environments for people to engage in acts that would otherwise be happening in public spaces (Pulga 2). The subsequent closure of the Warehouse and other bathhouses is discussed in a 2008 *Hamilton Spectator* article on the city of Hamilton's plan to "scrub" away these establishments by taking out 'public baths' from zoning bylaws ("City

Scrubbing” 1). The chosen language of ‘scrubbing’ away bathhouses suggests that gay sex is dirty or immoral and its closure is part of cleaning up the city. The bylaw amendment might have allowed for these establishments to be subject to bylaw infractions, resulting in closures.

### Why did Queer Spaces Disappear?

The Hamilton Civic Museum recently published their Points of Pride project which recognizes and celebrates sites across Hamilton that were places of 2SLGBTQ+ importance. The map has 28 pins so far, from bookstores to community centers and gay bars. The points on the map are accompanied with brief descriptions, some of which tell the purpose of the establishment and the owner history while others have little information. However, members can add comments if they have any additional information on these spaces. Many of the descriptions are short and do not provide an explanation of why the establishments closed, save for The Well which is noted to have closed because of a lack of funding (Hamilton Civic Museums). This information is hard to find elsewhere as well, as little scholarly sources or news articles exist concerning 2SLGBTQ+ spaces in Hamilton. However, the literature consulted suggests that the attraction of queer spaces for straight folks, gentrification, and the acceptance of same-sex relationships have influenced the decrease in 2SLGBTQ+ spaces in Hamilton.

Existing literature on the transformation of gay neighborhoods can be applied to Hamilton with discretion. The “de-gaying” of the gay district on Oxford Street in Sydney, Australia is partially influenced by the increase in

straight people who are attracted to and occupy queer spaces which results in queer people no longer visiting these previously queer dominated spaces (Ruting 260). In Hamilton, there is no dominant gay neighborhoods, however, we have had multiple gay spaces, as well as The Embassy, a nightclub that operated as a predominately gay nightclub until 2000 (Johnson para 1). The owner at the time, George, claimed that he felt excluded from gay spaces and amongst gay people as a straight man, which seems to have influenced his decision to convert the nightclub to a straight club and prohibit previous regulars and drag queens from entering the space in 2000 (Johnson para 7). This case highlights how the desire for heterosexuals to feel included in spaces that are meant for queer folks can lead to the disappearance of queer places. In this case, George had the power to make this change official as owner instead of a gradual change as was seen in the case of Oxford Street. In addition to the change in occupants is the impact of gentrification and the acceptance of same-sex relationships.

An article published on the Global News website in 2017 explores why Canada's gaybourhoods are disappearing according to Gary Kinsman, a retired university professor on Canadian gay and lesbian history. Kinsman notes that the three reasons for the fading of gaybourhoods are due to "rising real estate prices, [...] an increased tolerance of same-sex relationships [...] [and] changes to hookup culture" (Cain). With this in mind, Hamilton's increasing rental prices could be a deterrent for the establishment of queer spaces. There are many concerns on the lack of affordable housing in Hamilton which has forced many to pay steep prices for small housing units, including university students



such as myself. This high cost of rent for businesses coupled with the negative history of queer spaces shutting down might prevent queer establishments from opening thereafter. Another reason for the disappearance of queer spaces in Hamilton may be attributed to the increase in tolerance of same-sex relationships. Businesses may not want to create spaces specifically for queer folks as this may prevent straight folks from frequenting the spaces, therefore decreasing profits. Instead, the assumption that queer folks could frequent spaces that are not explicitly queer and still be able to express their queer identities because of supposed widespread acceptance may be more appealing to business owners. Lastly, the transition to virtual spaces for the facilitation of hookups, such as Grindr and Tinder, have allowed 2SLGBTQ+ folks to meet others outside of designated queer spaces like nightclubs, bathhouses, or bars. Without the need to frequent these designated queer spaces for meeting others, the profits generated decrease. However, data shows that there remains a desire from queer Hamiltonians for these spaces despite the counter arguments.

## Conclusion

Overall, this paper seeks to establish the importance of creating queer spaces in Hamilton to meet the needs of 2SLGBTQ+ Hamiltonians who desire 2SLGBTQ+ informed health care services, community spaces, and socializing spaces. Establishments for queer folks are important for affirming queer identity and fostering relationships amongst one another within the public sphere, rather than relying on private spaces or the internet to meet this need.

The lack of these spaces in Hamilton could be explained by gentrification, social changes, increased tolerance of same-sex relationships, and the rise of dating and hookup apps which facilitate encounters between 2SLGBTQ+ people.

More research must be conducted to fill these gaps in the literature, in order to better understand the lack of queer establishments in the city and what can be done to foster more of these spaces and ensure the businesses stay open. The queer clubs (circa. 1990 - early 2000s) mentioned in archived newspaper articles no longer operate, with little to no explanation as to why this is. There are also many gaps in the data about some of the queer establishments in the city. Table 1 shows that information about opening and closing dates and locations could not be found for many of the entries. While this information is likely to exist throughout archival data in other spots, it is concerning that there is little centralized information about the history of queer space making in Hamilton. This history is important for learning about the struggles and achievements of those that came before and to also evaluate the changes that have taken place since. We can also identify barriers to creating space that exist by analyzing the evolution of these spaces over time.

Table 1: Queer Spaces in Hamilton- Archival Data

<b>Year</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Closure</b>	<b>Source</b>
		Steel Lounge	Gay restaurant and bar	2016	McMaster University and The Aids Network, 2009
		The Well	Gay Community Wellness Centre	2016	McMaster University and The Aids Network, 2009

	King St. E	Embassy Nightclub	Gay nightclub	2000	Johnson, 2000
1986		Hamilton AIDS Network	Organization	n/a	McMaster University and The Aids Network, 2009
		Gay and Lesbian Association at McMaster	Organization		Dr. Dean
1982		Hamilton United Gay Societies (HUGS)	Organization		Douglass-Chin, 2021
		McMaster Gay Liberation Movement			Dr. Dean
		Billies bar and the Windsor Hotel	Bar (not exclusively gay)		Humphreys, 1992
	Hess St.	The Engine Room	Nightclub at Doors Pub (first Saturday a gay event)		Wilson, 1999
		Club 121	Gay nightclub	1998	Wilson, 1999
		Phoenix Place			Wilson, 1999
		The Warehouse Spa and Bath	Gay bathhouse		Pulga, 2004
	King and MacNab	Dominion Turkish Baths	Potentially Gay bathhouse		Wilson, 2008
	James North	Dr. Vernon	Potentially Gay bathhouse		Wilson, 2008
1898		City Baths	Potentially Gay bathhouse		Wilson, 2008
		King Sherman Sauna	Potentially Gay bathhouse		Wilson, 2008
	Holton North	Hamilton Steam Baths now Karel's Steam Baths	Gay bathhouse		Wilson, 2008
		Pink Planet	Gay bathhouse		Wilson, 2008

	121 Hughson N.	The Werx (now The Spice Factory)	Gay nightclub (also known as 121)		Wilson, 2015
		Shine Nightclub	Gay bar and club	2014	pridehamilton.ca
	King St. Alley	Crush	Gay nightclub		McMaster University and The Aids Network, 2009
		Karel's Steam Baths	Gay bathhouse		Wilson, 2008

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