

Queer space, visibility, and the built environment:  
A study of the Hirschfeld centre and the gay scene in 1980s Dublin

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Introduction



This project aimed to examine the interrelationship between **the Hirschfeld Centre**, Dublin's first full time gay and lesbian community centre and the LGBT+ community in early 1980s Dublin.

Grounded in discussions of **'queer space'** I aimed to examine how the Centre's impact on the increased visibility of the gay community in 1980s Ireland and situate its history within the wider context of queer spaces and gay rights movements globally.

The Hirschfeld Centre

- The Centre opened on Saint Patrick's Day 1979
- Located on 10 Fownes Street, Temple Bar area
- Operated as a community Centre throughout the 1980s until a fire in 1987 forced its closure
- Housed the headquarters of the National Gay Federation (NGF), a café, a small cinema, phone service like the Tel-a-Friend phone line and National Transvestite line, and Flickers disco
- Provided a safe, central location for the LGBT+ community to meet, socialise and organise

Context

Until 1993, homosexuality was illegal in the Republic of Ireland, criminalised under the 1861 Offences Against the Persons Act. This criminal status was coupled with a moral public hostile to homosexuality. Culturally Ireland in the 1980s remained devoutly catholic and conservative. Homophobic violence was common and emmigration rates remained high across the country

Key Terms & Concepts

- **Queer:** Once a slur, but has since been reclaimed by many within the LGBT+ community. Used as an umbrella term much like 'gay.'
- **Queer theory:** In the context of queer theory, which emerged in the 1990s, queer is taken to mean non-normative, broadening it meaning and application
- **Queer space:** a complex and oft debated concept. Broadly recognised as spaces owned by/used by/populated by people within the LGBT+ community, e.g. Gay bars.
- **Gay:** Homosexual, but often used as an umbrella term to mean LGBT+ NB in the context of this research I use 'gay' to specifically refer to the male homosexual community. A more nuanced and diverse study of broader LGBT+ experiences is needed, but not possible given the time constraints of this research

Approach and Research questions

My research sought to situate the Hirschfeld Centre within broader narratives of emerging queer spaces in the late twentieth century, so I first conducted a literature review of queer theory and architectural works on queer space. The core of my project built on **The Daniel Wood Photographic Collection**, a series of photos of life and events in and around the Hirschfeld Centre from 1980-1983. Previously unstudied, and only recently made available to the public, my research considered:

- How do Wood's photographs illustrate the relationship between the Hirschfeld Centre as a space and the gay community?
- What do the photographs reveal about the Hirschfeld Centre's role in the *growth, consolidation, and visibility* of the Irish gay community?

My study of Wood's photograph's was combined with study of:

- archival sources from the **Irish Queer Archive** and the newly launched **Gay Community News Online Archive**
- Oral history testimony from the **Irish LGBT+ Oral History Project**



Fig 1, Tonie Walsh, among others hanging an inverted pink triangle sign above the entrance of the Hirschfeld Centre, June 1983, Credit: Don Wood



Fig 2, David Norris (L) and Dr Noel Browne (R) unveiling a plaque with the name of the Hirschfeld Centre, June 1980, Credit: Don Wood

Analysis

Through taxonomy of Wood's photographs, the most relevant, (i.e. those showing either the exterior or interior of the

Hirschfeld Centre) were identified from 134 slide collection. I identified events and figures photographed through study and correlation with archival sources where possible. The idea of *'queer use' was essential to my analysis*; afterall, queer spaces are not inherently queer. Instead, they are 'queered' or put to queer use. (Chauncey, 1996).

In my analysis of the relationship between the Irish gay community and the Hirschfeld Centre, themes emerged:

Consolidation

From 1980 to 1983 the Hirschfeld Centre enabled Ireland's gay community to consolidate and more forcefully exert their identity. In 1980 the first visible marker of homosexual identity was added to the exterior of the Hirschfeld (Nameplate pictured above in figure 2) This was followed by the inverted pink triangle in 1983, a bolder, more radical assertion of the Centre's homosexual identity.

Note

Ideally I would have conducted a more nuanced and in depth study of the Hirschfeld and its relationship to the LGBT+ community, specifically to lesbians, bisexual and transgender people had the time period for this project been greater. This is an emerging area of research being tackled by academics in UCD and Maynooth university with the ongoing 'Waking the Hirschfeld' Project

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Visibility

The Hirschfeld Centre as a location gave the gay community a tangible presence and facilitated activities, social and political, that rendered the community more visible in Irish society. For example, the Centre housed offices for the legal team attempting to decriminalise homosexuality as well as the offices of gay publications such as In Touch magazine (pictured in figure 3).

Conclusion

As a space, the Hirschfeld Centre enabled expressions of queer intimacy, making it *radical in its mere existence*. The Centre typifies the relationship between late twentieth century gay rights movements and emerging queer spaces. It served as a hub for organisation and socialisation and served as a catalyst that *enabled the growth and consolidation* of Ireland's gay community. The Centre gave physical location to the social and legal struggles for equality throughout the 1980s, and rendered the community more *visible* socially and politically.

Resistance

As has been explored previously (MacDonagh, 2021) the social scene at the Hirschfeld Centre became a form of resistance. Given the criminal status of homosexuality and prevailing homophobic violence and hostility, all acts of intimacy, such as that of the two young men dancing in figures 4 & 5, became a form of queer resistance.

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Fig 3, David Norris (R) reading the proof copy of a special issue of In Touch Magazine, outlining his team's first unsuccessful attempt to challenge the criminalisation of homosexuality. Offices, upper floor of the Hirschfeld Centre, November 1980. Credit: Don Wood

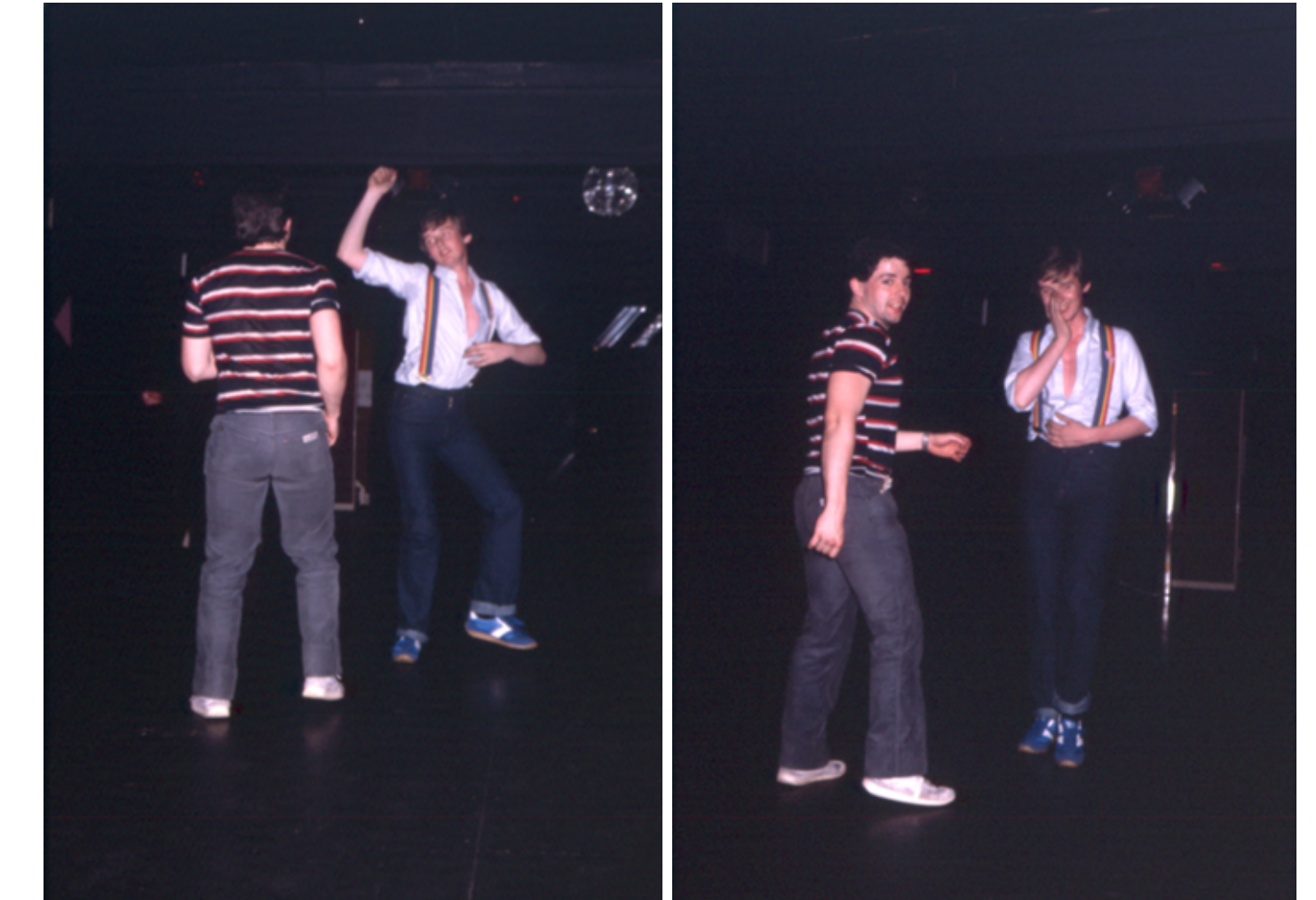


Fig 4 & 5, Two unnamed young men dance in Flickers, the disco housed in the Hirschfeld Centre, In fig 5, the two men are alerted to the presence of the photographer, but continue to dance, exact date unknown, likely circa 1983, Credit: Don Wood