Queer space, Visibility, and the Built Environment: A study of the Hirschfeld Centre and the Gay Scene in 1980s Dublin.

Partial view of the Hirschfeld Centre (left), looking south along Fownes Street. Credit: Don Wood

Abstract

Taking a series of previously unstudied photographs as its primary source, this study of the Hirschfeld Centre, Ireland's first full time, dedicated LGBTQ+ community Centre seeks to understand the interrelationship between the consolidation and increasing visibility of the Irish LGBTQ+ community and the Centre as a space in early 1980s Dublin. Seeking to understand the local significance of the Hirschfeld Centre in the Irish gay liberation movement, this study equally aims to position the Centre's development within the wider global context of LGBTQ+ spaces in the West through engaging with debates on the nature and definition of queer space in the built environment.

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Introduction

The Hirschfeld Centre was a lesbian and gay community centre located in the historic Temple Bar district of Dublin city centre. Opening its doors on March 17th, 1979 (Saint Patrick's Day), the Centre served as a social, cultural, and political hub for Ireland's LGBTQ+ community throughout the 1980s, until a fire in 1987 forced its closure. The Centre housed the headquarters of the National Gay Federation (NGF), in addition to a café, a small cinema, community services like the Tel-a-Friend and National TransVestite phone call lines, and Flikkers, a popular nightclub. The Hirschfeld Centre played a crucial role in the growth and consolidation of the Irish LGBTQ+ community. In the context of criminalisation * and the predominating religious moral conservatism of 1980s Ireland, the Hirschfeld Centre provided queer Irish people with a vital safe space for socialising and community organisation. This research explores the interrelationship between the growth and increasing visibility of the LGBTQ+ community and the Centre as a space, exploring how the development of the Centre mirrored that of queer spaces in other Western metropolitan areas in the latter half of the twentieth century. Following its 1987 closure, the Hirschfeld Centre underwent signifcant changes, with the site later sold and redeveloped into short term made-to-rent apartments and a retail unit. This overhaul, in addition to difficulties accessing building plans and other architectural sources for the centre, presented a challenge to this study. To circumvent this, and in the spirit of queer/alternative historical approaches, this study was structured around photographic sources. Foundational was the Daniel Wood Photographic collection, a series of previously unpublished and unstudied photographs of events organised in and out of the Hirschfeld Centre in the years 1980 to 1983.* Only recently donated to the Irish Queer Archive, Wood's photographs show provide a rare insight into the everyday use of the Centre. This idea of 'use' is essential; queer spaces are not inherently queer. Instead, they are 'queered' or put to queer *use*. [1]

* Consisting of 134 individual colour slides, this collection of photographs has only recently become available to the public, having been kept hidden by the photographer, Don Wood. This decision was on the request of leading figure David Norris to protect those photographed from both potential criminal charges and from being 'outed.'

[1] George Chauncey, "Privacy Could Only Be Had in Public: Gay Uses of the Streets," Stud: Architectures of Masculinity (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), p. 224.

We are here! Queer Space, Visibility, and the Built Environment

The Hirschfeld Centre was located in no. 10 Fownes Street, a three storey eighteenth century building. Prior to its letting by the NGF the site had functioned as a warehouse. Initial 'blueprints' from a working NGF session in 1978 outline a thorough plan for the development of a gay centre in Dublin city. A large, disused space, for example a warehouse or disused factory, with the potential to be converted for use was identified as desirable. [2] The site needed to accommodate multiple social outlets in addition to other community services. The potential to be converted and shaped by the community's needs was paramount. A central location was also necessary, and a site with 'strategic regard to places of habitual gay resort' preferable.[3] Given its proximity to pre-existing gay friendly venues such as the Paraliament Inn, the Fownes Street site proved ideal. Fownes street is recalled as being a badly lit, depopulated, 'shabby half street.'[4] The entirety of the Temple Bar area was then primarily derelict and slated for demolition to make way for a large bus and rail terminus. [5] The establishment of Dublin's first full time gay community centre in such an area mirrors the emergence of queer spaces across the West in the latter twentieth century. Queer spaces consciously emerged in ruins or 'forgotten places,' usually areas whose defining industry had declined or migrated elsewhere. [6] Like New York's meat packing district or Manchester's canal street, Temple bar had been consigned to dereliction, the trade that had characterised the area in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries having long since declined or relocated. However, this afforded the Hirschfeld Centre a degree of privacy; essential given the closeted status of many of its visitors. This privacy was arguably particularly important in the Irish context, given the criminal status of male homosexuality at the time. The façade of no. 10 Fownes Street did much to ward off unwanted visitors; the Centre's lower windows were covered in metal grilling (visible in figure 2) earning it the nickname 'Fortress Fownes.'[7] The 'anti-look' associated with early gay bars, grilled windows

[2] IQA Ms45953/5, Blue print for development pf a Gay Centre in Dublin, lists various requirements for a space to be appropriate, emphasis on central location, 1.
[3] IQA Ms45953/5, Blue print for development pf a Gay Centre in Dublin, lists various requirements for a space to be appropriate, emphasis on central location, 1.
[4] Tonie Walsh, Extracted from "A Liberating Party: LGBT Pride in Ireland Since 1974"; exhibition catalogue 2009-2016, 'Facebook', accessed 22 June 2023, https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.1244630585590356.1073741886.408271522559604&type=3.
[5] Taisce, ed., *The Temple Bar Area: A Policy for Its Future* (Dublin: An Taisce Dublin City Association, 1985), 3-8.
[6] Aaron Betsky, Queer Space: Architecture and same-sex desire, 1997, 6.
[7] Betsky, Queer Space: Architecture and same-sex desire, 6.

or intimidating signage, characterised the Hirschfeld Centre's façade following its initial opening.[8] This anti-look was strategic, creating a space within that though "public," remained screened or 'closeted' from *the* public.

Figure 1 Photograph of Norris (L) and Browne (R) posing on either side of the Hirschfeld Centre's new nameplate, 28 June 1980. Credit: Don Wood

Arguably the Hirschfeld Centre's inital unassuming and unwelcoming façade acted as a closet door, successfully diverting attention from the activities of those within. However, as the community became more established, external signage was added to signal the centre's homosexual identity, 'queering' the façade of no. 10 Fownes Street. On the 28th June 1980, as part of the 1980 Gay Pride Week programme of events hosted at the Hirschfeld Centre, Dr Noel Browne, a well-known Irish politician and ally of the gay community, unveiled a nameplate by the main entrance of the Centre. The unveiling of the nameplate is one of the events photographed by Don Wood. Figure 1 shows David Norris (left) and Dr Noel Browne (right) standing smiling on either side of the newly unveiled plaque. The plate simply reads 'Hirschfeld Centre' in black font on a white background, mounted on a wooden support. Magnus Hirschfeld was a Jewish German sexologist and champion of homosexual rights in early twentieth century Europe whose pioneering work into sexuality and gender had been cut short by Nazi persecution. To those in the know, the Centre's name clearly signalled its homosexual identity. The nameplate was, however, relatively conservative in terms of signposting. 'Hirschfeld' would not have been a name widely recognised by the general Irish public in 1980. In 1983, a more overt and radical sign was added to the Hirschfeld's façade; a hanging metal inverted pink triangle. The inverted pink triangle was the symbol used in Nazi concentration camps to denote and identify homosexual prisoners. Visually, the pink triangle was more assertive than the Hirschfeld nameplate. It was also already widely used by the NGF. The pink triangle was publicly associated with the gay community in Ireland through the NGF's badges,

[8] Christopher Reed, 'Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment', *Art Journal* 55, no. 4 (1 December 1996): 66.

Figure 2 Tonie Walsh (upper right) and three others attempt to hang a metal pink-triangle sign at the entrance of the Hirschfeld Centre, June 1983. Credit: Don Wood

(visible on the lapels of both Norris and Browne in figure 1) as well as in the groups' leaflets and stationery.[9] The hanging of the sign was photographed by Wood. In figure 2, a group of four young men are visible. With the aid of a ladder, a desk and a chair, and an essential youthful lack of self-preservation, the figure atop of the ladder, identified as Tonie Walsh, attempts to hang the pink triangular sign. From the mid-1970s onwards the pink triangle became widely used as an identifier by gay organisations across Europe, its adoption by the Hirschfeld Centre, much like its name, aligning it with the wider European movement for gay liberation, and acting as a bold, and overt assertion of the queer nature of the Centre.

The signage on the façade of the Hirschfeld Centre signalled the definitive presence of homosexual individuals as occupants of the site. Purchased by Hirschfeld Enterprises LTD, a holding company set up to protect the legal interests of the NGF, the Centre was queer owned, granting it, and the community, a degree of security. Speaking to *Gay Community News* in 1988, David Norris remarked on the significance of the community's ownership of the Hirschfeld Centre; "when you own actual bricks and mortar outright, you have an asset, and you have a dignity as a community." [10] The appropriation and ownership of space are central to understanding queer space as it was then defined. Writings on queer space from the 1980s and early 1990s largely defined queer space as gay territory, appropriated and distinct from heterosexual, heteronormative territory.[11] The presence of bodies coded as queer using a space thus defined queer space in architecture. Within the context of the gay

[9] IQA, MS 45955/2, File relating to the organisation of Gay Pride Week 1980-1983.
[10] David Norris, in conversation with John Bergin GCN, page 7 of 'Feature | GCN Issue 16 | GCN Archive', accessed 22 June 2023, https://archive.gcn.ie/articles/16-7-feature.
[11] 'Queer Looks On Architecture: From Challenging Identity-Based Approaches To Spatial Thinking', ArchDaily, 18 June 2021, https://www.archdaily.com/963534/queer-looks-on-architecture-from-challenging-identity-based-approaches-to-spatial-thinking.

rights movement, ownership of property and the visible appropriation of space lent LGBTQ+ communities power and legitimacy and enabled queer activists to organise. The Hirschfeld Centre gave physical location to Ireland's gay liberation movement. The first organisation to advocate for LGBTQ+ liberation in Ireland was the Sexual Liberation Movement in 1973, which was then superseded by the Irish Gay Rights Movement (IGRM). However, by 1979 the IGRM had dissolved as a result of disorganisation and in fighting. With the organisation's collapse so too did initial attempts to establish a community centre on Parnell Square in Dublin's north inner city. The NGF and the Hirschfeld Centre emerged from this organisational and spatial vacuum.[12] The Hirschfeld Centre enabled David Norris to build community support for his legal challenges to decriminalise homosexuality, the 'Campaign for Homosexual Law reform'. Figure 3 is a photograph taken by Wood of the *In Touch* magazine offices on the top floor of the Hirschfeld Centre. Taken circa November 1980, David Norris is visible on the right, proofreading a special edition issue of *In Touch* magazine that detailed his unsuccessful first attempt to challenge the laws criminalising homosexuality in the Irish High Court. In the background, several other publications and posters are visible pasted on the wall. The various clippings visible are but a small sample of the large quantities of LGBTQ+ media that would be published out of the Hirschfeld Centre, which became a hub for writing, publishing and distribution throughout the 1980s. Into the mid-1990s the successor of *In Touch* magazine, *Gay Community News*, continued to be published out of no. 10 Fownes Street, the offices on the upper floors surviving the 1987 fire that saw the Centre's other amenities close. The publication and distribution of gay material was key in consolidating Ireland's LGBTQ+ community, providing vital sexual and legal education, and increasing general visibility. The reach of these LGBTQ+ publications extended beyond the walls of the Centre, and even the NGF mailing lists, with major retailers like Eason's bookstores stocking publications from the Hirschfeld come the

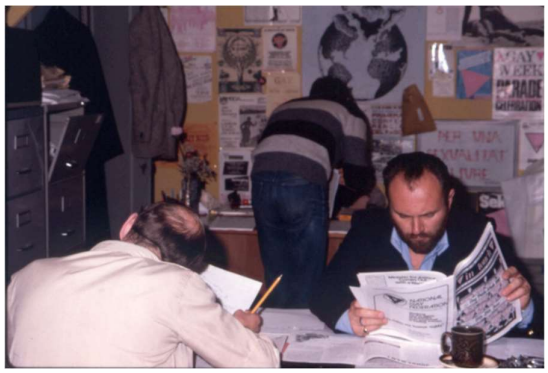

Figure 3 David Norris (R) reading a proof copy of In Touch Magazine in the offices on the upper floor of the Hirschfeld Centre, circa November 1980. Credit: Don Wood

[12] IQA Ms45953/5, National Gay Federation document outlining aim to establish gay organisation and gay centre, 1979, 1.

mid-1980s.[13] This is exemplary of how the Hirschfeld Centre both enabled consolidation within the community and increased gay visibility throughout wider society.

Figure 4 Two men dancing in Flikkers Disco, Hirschfeld Centre, 1980-1983. Credit: Don Wood

The social events run at the Hirschfeld Centre were essential, providing an outlet for LGBTQ+ people to meet and socialise in relative safety and security. Given the legal and moral climate of 1980s Ireland, beyond being merely socially taboo, the existence of a gay social scene was transgressive and radical. In providing a space for members of the LGBTQ+ community to meet and socialise, no. 10 Fownes Street became a site of queer resistance. More recent discourse on queer space has emphasised the importance of understanding 'queer' as relational, defined in the context of its challenge or defiance of normative conventions and assumptions imposed on the built environment.[14] The criminal status of male homosexuality in the 1970s and 80s cast a stain of illegality on all forms of intimacy between men. As such, the simple act of gay men dancing together at the Hirschfeld Centre's Flikkers disco was a subversive and challenging act that coded the building they occupied as queer. Photographs of the interior of Flikkers nightclub are rare, yet a number exist in the Daniel Wood Photographic collection. Figure 4 shows two young men dancing in Flikkers, identifiable by the suspended disco ball to the top right of the photograph. Their dancing together is a performance of queer identity, that codes both the bodies of the two young men and the space they inhabit as non-heteronormative. Figure 4 is accompanied in the Wood collection by a second photo, figure 5, evidently taken in succession. In figure 5 the two men, alerted to the presence of

[13] Social Life as Resistance, Gay and Lesbian Activism in Ireland 1973-1993, 41.
[14] Natalie Oswin, 'Critical Geographies and the Uses of Sexuality: Deconstructing Queer Space,' *Progress in Human Geography*, Volume 32, Issue 1, Feb 2008, 91.

the photographer, now look directly at the camera. The man in the striped shirt on the left continues to dance while the young man in rainbow suspenders bashfully covers his face. Though the gesture of hand-covering-mouth reads as self-conscious, both men smile and are visibly happy. Taken some time between 1980 and 1983, the easy joy evident in these two photographs exists in stark contrast with the prevailing reality of gay life in Ireland in this period, which was marked by unsuccessful legal challenges, acute homophobic violence, and fear. In January 1982 Charles Self, a gay man, had been murdered in his home in Monkstown, County Dublin. The ensueing Garda investigation proved highly invasive. No perpetrator was apprehended, with the investigation arguably becoming more concerned with identifying as many "active" homosexuals as possible. The fingerprints, photographs, and personal information of an estimated 1,500 gay men were collected.[15] Many members of the community were outed at work or to families as a result of the investigation, cultivating fear and distrust within the community. Throughout the summer of 1982, gay men in Fairview Park, a popular cruising spot, were targeted by a local gang. In September 1982 Declan Flynn was murdered, and his killers let off on reduced charges. In this context of legal and social oppression, the Hirschfeld Centre was essential, fulfilling the urgent need for a space in which gay people could meet, socialise, and organise in relative safety.

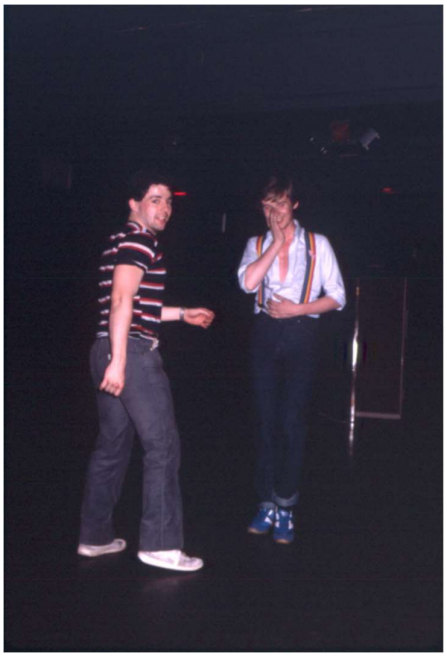

Figure 5 Two men dancing interrupted in Flikkers Disco, Hirschfeld Centre, 1980-1983. Credit: Don Wood

[15] Ann-Marie Hanlon, 'Clubbing Criminals: The Hirschfeld Centre and the Emergence of Queer Club Culture in Dublin' 18 (2022), 29.

Figure 6 Leafleting on Grafton Street, 27th June 1980. Credit: Don Wood

Having a dedicated space, not just for political organisation but as a social hub, enabled the community to consolidate and increase visibility at the Centre and beyond. As Tonie Walsh recalled in a 2023 article for *Gay Community News*, 'the human and economic resources necessary to mount a full week of quite public Pride activity only became available through the establishment of Dublin's Hirschfeld Centre.' The growth the Centre enabled is evident through a comparison of Pride events in 1980 and 1983, photographed by Wood . In 1980, the most public Pride event was a leafleting drive. On the 27th June 1980, some twenty NGF members sporting pink triangle badges and carnations gathered at the top of Grafton Street, Dublin's shopping high street, offering leaflets on the history of the Stonewall riots and the need for law reform out to passerbys.[16] Figure 6 shows a number of NGF members waving at photographer Don Wood from across the street, leaflets in hand.

By 1983, the presence of Pride on the streets had increased ten fold.[17] Dublin's first official Pride march took place in 1983. Several hundred marchers gathered under Fusilier's arch at Stephen's green to march in what had been advertised by the NGF as a 'Gay Rights Protest March,' visible in figure 7.[18] The march saw the appropriation of Dublin's streets

Figure 7 Crowd gathering in front of Fusilier's Arch before the 'Gay Rights Protest March' begins, 25th June 1983. Credit: Don Wood

[16] Tonie Walsh, interveiw with Edmund Lynch LGBT+ Irish Oral history project, (ORIGINAL 3339 Words), 6th April 2013, page 5, line 22-29.
[17] Tonie Walsh, interveiw with Edmund Lynch LGBT+ Irish Oral history project, (ORIGINAL 3339 Words), 6th April 2013, 6, line 19.
[18] IQA, MS 45955/2, File relating to the organisation of Gay Pride Week 1980-1983.

from Stephen's Green to the GPO by the community and allies. This was an undeniable 'queering' of the city's main thoroughfares, marking the strides taken by the community in just a short number of years and establishing a blueprint for later Pride parades.

The Hirschfeld Centre played an undeniable role in the consolidation of Dublin's LGBTQ+ community in the early 1980s. However, in later years criticisms would come to be levelled against the Centre, primarily concerning its lack of inclusivity and mismanagement. Though ostensibly a centre for gay men and women, in reality men dominated the space. A survey of NGF membership in 1980 gives insight into the gender demographics of those most regularly using the Hirschfeld Centre: 95.7% of the NGF's total membership were male.[19] As prominent lesbian activist Joni Sheerin noted, 'the presence of hundreds of men at a weekend disco and only the odd woman here and there, again is not very encouraging to women.' [20] Physical aspects of the building's architecture may have contributed to this exclusion, with Sheerin commenting that 'the sheer size of the place [was] off-putting.'[21] This reaction speaks to the complexity of gendered experiences within queer spaces and positions the Hirschfeld within more global narratives around the dominance of gay men in queer spaces.[22] It also points to some intrinsic issues with the Centre as a space. By 1986, the future of the Hirschfeld Centre had grown uncertain, with an internal ad hoc report outlining the ways in which the site at 10 Fownes Street did not adequately meet the needs of the community.[23] Figure 8 shows an illustration from this report outlining the types of

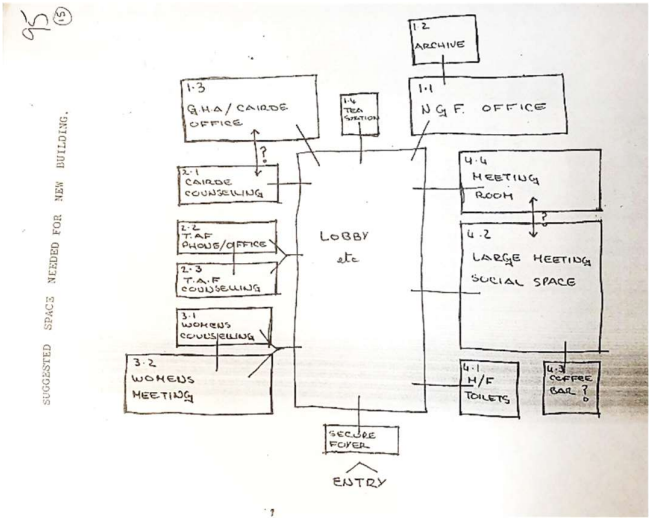

Figure 8 Illustration from 1986 ad hoc report outlining types of amenities not possible given spatial limitations of site at number 10 Fownes Street

[19] IQA MS45,936/4 Breakdown of NGF membership 1980
[20] Patrick McDonagh, 'Social Life as Resistance in 1980s Dublin,' in *Gay and Lesbian Activism in the Republic of Ireland, 1973-93* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021), 50.
[21] Patrick McDonagh, 'Social Life as Resistance in 1980s Dublin,' in *Gay and Lesbian Activism in the Republic of Ireland, 1973-93* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021), 50.
[22] Alex Bitterman, Daniel Baldwin Hess, eds., *The Life and Afterlife of Gay Neighbourhoods: Renaissance and Resurgence*, (New York: Springer, 2021), 17.
[23] IQA, MS 45,953/ 10, File relating to Hirschfeld Enterprises, Document on L and G committee ad hoc report.

new spaces needed, specifically private counselling rooms and dedicated women's and AIDS support spaces. It was becoming clear that the community had in many respects, outgrown the Hirschfeld Centre. This development is not abnormal in the lifespan of a queer space. Studies on the evolution of gay neighbourhoods have noted the tendency for the growth of designated queer sites to reach a plateau. [24] Rather than signalling the irreversible 'death' of queer spaces, this development instead simply indicates the changing needs of users. As spaces, queer sites are particularly ephemeral, their architectural identity dependent on their use. As Dublin's gay scene evolved, so too did the spaces inhabited. Throughout the mid to late eighties, commercial gay venues began to emerge and thrive. Arguably, the success of the Hirschfeld was reflected in its decline. The success of the political and cultural outreach of the Hirschfeld Centre saw a slow improvement towards acceptance in wider Irish society. Following the decriminalisation of male homosexuality in 1993, the need for self-segregation further declined. The Hirschfeld Centre served the needs of Dublin's gay community as they were in the early 1980s, enabling consolidation and the organisation necessary to create eventual greater visibility beyond the confines of the Centre, and the appropriation of space in wider Irish society.

Notes and Acknowledgements

Central to this research was the Daniel Wood Photographic Collection. Though not strictly an 'architectural' source, the photographs not only provided a 'way in' to my study of the Hirschfeld Centre, but also gave crucial insight into the activities of the LGBTQ+ community both within the Centre and further afield. The relational and inherently ephemeral nature of queer spaces presents challenges for historical study. Often existing in many shifting iterations, or for only brief periods of time, assessing queer spaces often require alternative historical approaches. Equally, non-traditional approaches are often necessitated given absences of LGBTQ+ material in established archives. This study would not have been possible without the Irish Queer Archive, a large community archive of gay and lesbian histroical documents and cultural ephemera. In 2008, the IQA was transferred to the National Library of Ireland. The existence and public accesibility of this archive is not something I take for granted. This study is indebted to the concrete guidance and insight of

[24] Bitterman, Hess, eds., *The Life and Afterlife of Gay Neighbourhoods,* 29.

queer Irish activists, archivists, and historians, specifically Tonie Walsh, Karl Hayden and the late Edmund Lynch. Thanks to the Laidlaw Foundation for their generous support of this research and to Dr Timothy Stott, for his eternal patience, goodwill and support.

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