Gender in public space: beyond the dominant meaning of the urban

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Our communication aims at showing how an approach of public spaces that is based on gender and gay sexual identities deconstructs the dominant meaning of the urban as a whole.

The main goal is to re-inscribe the representations of public spaces within the global context of the city.
The city is generally defined as a space with a high density and diversity, in which social and spatial interaction is maximised. Anonymous relations are favored.

The city is carrying the values of emancipation, freedom and confronting otherness.

Gender studies and gay & lesbian studies challenge the right to the city of homosexual women and men.
Public space is perceived as the main vector for living together in modern societies.

Public space should embody the right to the city.

Public space is a social construct.

Various studies on gender issues denounce the normative dimension of public spaces that continue today to reinforcing the dichotomous sexed representations of cities.

In their great majority, studies that analyse the link between homosexuality and the city focus on the origines, the nature, the form and the localization of the gay districts.

The aim of our study is to analyse the practices of public space of gay men and lesbians with regards a global approach of the city and its spatial structure.

There are public spaces more public than others. How does it work in the parisian space?
Our approach is original.

WHO?
Gay men and lesbians when they are « in couple ».

An « objectified » visibility of the sexual orientation.

WHERE?
All public spaces in the city of Paris.
WHAT?

Mapping the practices and the representations of public space of homosexual and heterosexual people.

Specificity of the practices of gay men and lesbians in public space.

HOW?

With a questionnaire based on the map of Paris subdivided into regular squares of one side kilometer.
A grid on the parisian space
The questionnaire:

1) Perception: According to you, which behavior two partners of same sex could allowed themselves in each zone of parisian public space?
   - Who answered? A sample of lesbians, gay men and heretosexual people living in Paris

2) Practice: What is your practice, when you are with your partner, in each zone of parisian public space?
   - Who answered? The same sample of lesbians and gay men

The replies:

- Code 1, if « no contact »
- Code 2, if « discrete contact »
- Code 3, if « supported contact »
Perceptions of heterosexual people of possible practices of parisian public spaces of lesbians and gay men
Perceptions of homosexual people of possible practices of parisian public spaces of lesbians and gay men
Practices of parisian public spaces of gay men

Practices of parisian public spaces of lesbians

Practices of public spaces of lesbians and gay men in *Le Marais* and around
How to interpret our results with regards the very definition of a city?

Our first major result:

The unequal access to public spaces for the gay men and the lesbians or for others groups is today totally integrated in the scientific interpretation of cities.
Indeed, a great number of authors accept that cities are deeply contradictory. But that the urban remains the supremely visible manifestation of difference and heterogeneity placed together.

Consequently, the dual role of cities is not a threat that deconstruct the very values of the modern and contemporary city.
Our second major result:

The appropriation of a portion of public space by the gay and lesbian communities or by others groups is however very much discussed in the scientific litterature of the urban.

To say that a portion of public space is appropriated by a particular group, it’s to say that the space is extracted from the public sphere.

Because the appropriation tends to take over the role traditionally assigned to public spaces, and consequently to cities.
From our point of view, to say that the appropriation of public space constitutes a threat for the cities is to give voluntarily a miss on the fact that a public space open to everyone never really existed.

Few studies focus on « who counts as public » and « how is accessibility to public space regulated and by whom ». 
The appropriation by the homosexual women and men does not prevent public space from remaining a scene where the principles of freedom, confronting otherness and democracy can spread. i.e. the ingredients which make a city a digest of urbanity.

The appropriation:
- is free from any forms of exclusion and prohibition;
- results from the emergence of codes of sociability governed by the recognition of similarities between individuals.
The nature of public spaces changes.

The changes take various forms which are necessary to distinguish.

The concept of appropriation returns here more to a tool likely to reinforce the visibility and the integration of a group or individuals who are, because of their sexual identity, marginalized in the strongly normalized urban public spaces.
Concluding remarks:

To differentiate between the various transformations today at work in public spaces is the only way to stop the catastrophist visions on the end of cities as places of integration where can meet the multiple identities of a complex society.

To express the process of hybridization operating everywhere today.