

Richard Hornsey, *The Spiv and the Architect: Unruly Life in Postwar London*.

Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010, viii + 310 pages, US\$24.95

paperback.

In his intriguing new cultural history of postwar London, Richard Hornsey quotes an evocatively titled 1959 Library Association report, ‘The gay look (or just plain nasty?)’. In this document, a library official bemoans the rise of ‘gaudy’, ‘coarse’, ‘lurid’ and – worst of all – ‘alluring’ book jackets: ‘As a bait for a certain section of the public and to display them on library shelves to attract readers smacks of the blatant publicity of the fairground’ (p. 179), he warns. This report features as one of many varied sources in Hornsey’s eclectic study, in a chapter addressing the sexualised public and private politics of books and reading.

That chapter is contextualised through a discussion of the history of the public library. The analysis is typical of Hornsey’s technique, and of his talent for traversing between the material and the metaphorical in examining queer lives in the postwar city. First, we are directed towards the temporal symbolism of the building, and the institution of the municipal library, as a collective archive, and place of routine performance of citizenship. On a meta level, Hornsey argues, the library embodies a Freudian psychoanalytic model of memory and the healthy psyche. More prosaically, it is an important site for the housing of those books approved as tools of civic enlightenment, in this period of national and metropolitan reconstruction. Hornsey then considers the return of the ‘library’s repressed’ in the emergence of the lightweight mass-market paperback. He details the scandal and unsuccessful prosecution of Penguin over the publication of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*; and the 1962 trial of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton for the theft and

defacement of books from the Hampstead and Islington libraries. These events – instances of ‘queering’ – are presented as evidence for understanding the discourses of sexual deviance in the postwar city.

Given Hornsey’s focus on books, how should we judge his own by its cover? With such an evocative (yet ambiguous) title, the photograph on the front is our next best hope. The image shows three handsome, nattily suited, young men – more teds than spivs or queers? – propping themselves up around a neo-classical electric lamppost, lankily stepped around the gutter of a cobbled smoggy street. They engage in intimate conversation, and going by the ‘unruly’ of the book’s subtitle, we imagine that they may well be up to no good. The photographer is uncredited, the location unnamed, and the photograph untitled (although we are given *Picture Post* as its provenance).

Like the cover, the title alludes indirectly to Hornsey’s over-arching themes – of ‘deviant’ male lives, and examples of ‘queering’, in tension with the spatial and temporal ways of being envisioned and implemented by modernist technocrats and bureaucrats in this period of the professionalisation of town planning. Whether or not one feels that they are a diversion from the book’s actual focus on queer men, the indeterminate spivs of both cover and title are reflective of Hornsey’s overall style of argumentation, which meanders through the subtle ambiguities of eclectic cultural texts.

The opposition of the spiv and the architect, as Hornsey explains, provides a productive analogy for thinking through a range of reconfigurations of queer male subjectivity, in a period that saw a reconsideration of citizenship in general, and the official emergence of the homosexual citizen. This was the moment in which a diversity of queer identities merged into one dominant ‘condition’ of homosexuality,

with a range of experts – from psychiatrists and sexologists to journalists and criminologists – claiming environment rather than wilful deviance as its cause. Hornsey details how, to the exclusion of many pre-war categories of queerness, the construct of the homosexual was formed, in parallel with the re-planning of the city. His interest, throughout the book, is in the artists, filmmakers, and writers whose work expressed, and in some cases struggled with, male same-sex desire, and what it meant to be queer or homosexual, in this period.

The book begins with a scene-setting chapter focused on Patrick Abercrombie's vision for London, as a physical and psychological working through of the traumas of bombardment. The history of the 1943 London Plan has been extensively told by architectural and planning historians, but Hornsey's broad cultural studies perspective is new. Though the chapter could be better connected with the subsequent case studies, it makes a distinctive contribution through, for example, a sustained examination of the 'atom' as a key concept of the plan. Hornsey is equally comfortable unravelling the paradoxical atom as an abstract metaphor in national discourse – both energy giving and destructive – as discussing its manifestation in the patterning of Festival of Britain carpets.

One of the pleasures of the book is its author's engagement with varied cultural artefacts, skilfully connecting objects of enquiry across distinct registers and media, and in the process revealing their nuances. For example, he provides a revisionist 'homosocial' reading of a well-known film, *The Lavender Hill Mob*, as an allegory for the threat posed by queer masculinities to the health of the nation. The approach here is reminiscent of that of feminist architectural historian, Katherine Shonfield, in her book *Walls Have Feelings: Architecture, Film and the City*

(Routledge, 2000), which also analyses the Ealing comedies within the spatial politics of postwar London.

Another highlight is the discussion of the history of the photobooth as a form of image-making that becomes embedded in the city in the period, and which is symptomatic of ideals of universal access and identification with community. This history forms the backdrop to a discussion of a series of photobooth self-portraits by Francis Bacon, and a number of his photobooth-influenced painted portraits. Bacon's experiments with self-representation are explored in order to answer a question repeated twice in different forms: 'How, then, was this nascent homosexual citizen to inhabit the public realm—to which he was now being admitted, but only on the condition that he was simultaneously refused?' (p. 121, and see p. 140).

As a contribution to the history of queer London *The Spiv and the Architect* builds on Matt Houlbrook's *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis 1918-1957* (University of Chicago Press, 2005) and Matt Cook's *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2003). In contrast to the impressive archival research of such histories Hornsey focuses mainly on published sources. In doing so, his primary achievement is to begin to situate queer lives within the broader cultural landscape and physical and social reshaping of London during this formative period.

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