

Constructing a Victim of Violence: The Politics of “Safe Space” in Toronto’s LGBTQ Village

Benjamin Demers

Department of Geography, McGill University, Montréal, Québec, Canada

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Supervisor: Professor Natalie Oswin

As North American LGBTQ communities have become increasingly visible and subsequently been targeted by violence for this visibility, urban LGBTQ villages have often been framed by activists as “safe spaces” where these communities can protect themselves. The way violence is constructed within these spaces, however, has implications for who the space is ultimately seen to belong to, especially as police involvement in notions of LGBTQ protection increases. This thesis examines iterations of “safe space” activism in the Canadian city of Toronto during two moments in the 1980s and 1990s, focusing in particular on two organizations, the Toronto Gay Street Patrol (1981-1984) and the Church/Wellesley Neighbourhood Police Advisory Committee (1992-2000). I argue that in response to anti-LGBTQ violence, attempts to form “safe space” in Toronto’s LGBTQ village during the 1980s and 1990s often constructed a particular victim of violence whose safety was central to LGBTQ community, and which increasingly coincided with the figure welcomed by local business and residential interests. As police presence in the neighborhood increased, the privileging of these interests allowed for the public framing of groups that were seen as bad for business owners and residents as also threats to LGBTQ safety, ultimately justifying their forced removal from the village.



Photo of a Toronto Gay Street Patrol Defensersize / Self-Defense Class. Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, Toronto, Canada.