The huge majority of sexual acts (excluding solitary masturbation from our definition for the moment) occur between couples who live together (Johnson et al. 1994; Laumann et al. 1994). These are overwhelmingly heterosexual. But if you are a man and you feel like sex, whether or not you have a regular partner, what can you do to get it? In Sydney, at least, you have a lot more choice at lower cost if you prefer male partners, or are at least prepared to accept one.

Just as for heterosexual sex, you can employ a sex worker, by picking one up on the street, if you know where to go, or by visiting a male brothel or ringing an escort service. This would cost you from about $20 to several hundred dollars. Or you could spend an evening in a gay bar or club and hope to pick up someone to take home or go home with. If smoky bars and dancing are not your thing you could ring a dating service or chat line (charged at about $1 a minute) and hope to be put in touch with someone suitable in the same position. You could use gay cruising sites on the Internet in the same way to find someone whom you could visit or ask around to your place. You may even be able to exchange digitised photographs with men you meet and select one you find attractive. Cheaper than the bar or sex worker options, and with more certainty of success, is a visit to a sex-on-premises venue—a sauna, sex club or backroom. If you prefer to avoid commercial or gay venues, or have no money at all, you could go out on the prowl to a beat—a beach, park, cemetery, public toilet or car park where men loiter to meet others for sex. Or you could just keep your eyes open for sexual possibilities in the places you go in a normal week—the local Returned Services club, a party at a friend’s house, the swimming pool, the gym, college, the workplace, at home watching videos with a mate.

All of these options have costs and benefits apart from the monetary costs involved. Respondents reported using (or, in the case of sex work, providing) at least
one of all of these options and displayed a keen awareness of their advantages and disadvantages. They also showed strong preferences for some options over others.

**Picking up in bars and clubs**

Some men preferred bars to sex-on-premises venues for meeting prospective sex partners because conversation was possible and the interaction more personal:

> Well, a bar is probably ideal because then you’re, it’s more per—, it’s more than just a body it’s a person there with a drink, you know, it’s a person to chat to. (Richard)

However, more commonly men mentioned that picking up in bars was difficult, or felt that they were not good at it:

> If you want to call it picking it up it’s usually at parties where it happens. I’m not—I’m not good at meeting an absolute stranger at a bar and saying, your place or mine? But it’s very rarely it will happen. (Dirk)

**Um, how about in a bar pick-up scenario?**

I never do that. Never in my whole life [laughs].

*Er, and you have never been picked up in a bar?*

Never, never never never.

*You don’t go to bars?*

I do, all the time, but I often go out with my partner, and he is always getting picked up [laughs], and I say to him, ‘if anyone looks at me, tell me’, because I don’t seem to notice that going on [...] certainly into going to bars, to have a drink to have a good time but not not to meet somebody. (Brendan)

I get the impression that people seem more sexually confident than I am. Um in terms of negotiating interpersonal kind of sex. The single people that we know seem to be pretty cool about going up and picking up sex through bars and
things like that and that’s not something that I feel I know how to do or um yeah, it’s not something I feel I know how to do. (Peter)

[O]ne of my complaints about the [bar] I remember distinctly was it just wasn’t working as a pick-up joint. That could have been me, [...] becoming inhibited and I have problems making the first contact type thing with people. [...] you might see somebody across a room who you like, but you haven’t got the courage to go up and say hello. (S Albert)

A man may also have individual reasons for preferring to meet sex partners somewhere more anonymous than a gay bar:

I don’t think I’m all that bad a looking man, I think for forty-four I look fucking good actually, but I still don’t have a lot of luck when I go out picking up men. Um, perhaps because this has been my twenty-year stamping ground everybody knows me that doesn’t help, the fact that I’ve worked for a couple of HIV/AIDS organisations probably doesn’t help, um, because people who encounter me in say an office situation at [organisation] or as a facilitator in a group down at [organisation], aren’t going to really want to [pause] are going to be intimidated anyway, so so I’ve got all these things running against me. (Tom)

**Reasons for choosing sex-on-premises venues**

Several men regarded sex-on-premises venues not as an alternative to bars and clubs (as suggested by Flowers et al. 2000 about beats), but as a complementary option, part of a good night out:

I felt like sexual company, I’d had company all night, I’d had company on the dance floor, I’d had company at the Barracks and with the other recoveries [parties] and I wanted more of that, basically. Um and I went to the [sex club]. (Richard)
Richard also felt that the culture of using sex clubs had changed over the years and that people did less picking up in bars than they used to in the 1970s.

Many men related their comparative success in sex-on-premises venues to the availability of sex in the dark, removing the need for the visual and appearance-based game of cruising. This is discussed further below under ‘Darkrooms’ and in Chapter 6 under ‘Cruising’ and ‘Choosing a partner’. They also liked sex venues because they were conducive to practices they preferred, such as oral sex, group sex or unprotected anal intercourse; because they were anonymous; because they avoided the difficulty of taking someone home or being alone with a stranger at his home; and because of the sheer number of partners available:

[In] the sex clubs [...] the guys that go there they seem to want a bit of everything [...] a taste of everything, a taste of lots of different guys, the whole line. (Richard)

An evening at a sauna or sex club can provide a series of encounters with different men or perhaps even (in Anthony’s narrative of his most recent encounter, atypical by his own account) repeated encounters with the same man. Encounters may be interspersed with other activities such as swimming in the pool, cruising, watching videos or taking time out for a coffee. The availability of alternative partners means that a man keen on having a particular practice can easily end an encounter if his partner refuses what he seeks (anal intercourse, for example).

Not everyone found venues an easy option. Peter thought they demanded too great an investment of time for an uncertain return, and preferred to allow casual sex to happen as part of his usual activities. ‘Lazy’ about sex by his own admission, he did not usually pursue his cruising on the Internet to the point of meeting in real life.

[I]t takes a certain effort and you’ve got to be particularly serious to go out and um use those venues. [...]  

*Serious about what?*  

Serious in your intent to utilise them. I mean you’ve got to have the time and the money and the inclination, I guess, to sort of like go to the effort of going out and finding someone and um that doesn’t mean that it’s—that it ever happens.
Just that it’s a—it’s a venture on itself to go out there and get it. Rather than say if you’re out at the swimming pool and someone cruises me there. Then it’s all sort of integrated into a normal just course of action that I’m doing anyway. [...] But going out to a sauna or to a club or to the sex club or something like that is a specific and sort of time-laden task. So, I can’t be bothered quite often. (Peter)

**Choosing between types of sex-on-premises venues**

Men gave clear reasons for choosing between saunas, sex clubs and backrooms—though in this heavily gay-attached sample the reasons heterosexually identified men might have for choosing spaces not identifiable as ‘gay’ were not much discussed except by the venue operators.

*Gay-coded venues and neutral territory*

Venues that are clearly ‘gay’ include baths (saunas) and sex clubs; they are mainly located in and around the gay district of Darlinghurst–Surry Hills (often referred to synecdochically as Oxford Street). Some carry a rainbow flag or a ‘gay-owned’ sign. Their advertising in the gay press usually invokes gay imagery such as Tom of Finland drawings or photos of a buffed male body.

The backrooms are attached to ‘adult’ shops that sell sex toys and goods such as dildos, blow-up vinyl dolls shaped approximately like females (or sheep for the benefit of visiting New Zealanders), vibrators, penis enlargers, amyl nitrite (called ‘poppers’ in the United States), sexy lingerie, fetish clothes, heterosexual and gay pornography in book, magazine and video form, condoms and massage oils. Entrance to the backroom is usually through a discreet door at the rear of the shop where the man will be questioned to ascertain his familiarity with the venue, or at least to make sure that he understands it is a male sex venue, and charged an entrance fee of around $5 to $15. Such shops are found in the central business district, in the gay area, around Kings Cross (the closest to a red-light district that Sydney possesses) and scattered in some suburban centres. Although there may be some
stigma attached to entering commercial sex premises, men seen entering such venues avoid being irrevocably labelled as ‘gay’. Advertising for such venues, even in the gay press, avoids using identifiably gay or even particularly masculine imagery.

*Wet and dry venues*

Some men who liked wet venues (saunas) better than dry venues (sex clubs and backrooms) stressed the sensuality of the total sauna experience—hot tub, pool, steam room, dry sauna. Some said they were happy to visit the sauna for these benefits alone, even if they did not have sex while there.

I use it as a bit of a refuge from the world at times and I like um having saunas and lazing in the tubs and wandering about and I think about one time in half a dozen visits I might find somebody that I feel like I want to be sexual with. (S Dick)

Those who preferred saunas thought dry venues, particularly backrooms, were dirty, sticky places. It is hard to avoid the inference that there is something of a class distinction between the better gay saunas and the more working-class backrooms, though no men put the distinction in quite those terms. Some mentioned that the higher entrance prices for saunas kept a certain kind of person out—though at around $20 even the better saunas could provide a cheap place to spend the night for someone who was homeless or could not afford to get home to the outer suburbs in the small hours by taxi. Saunas were seen as having more comfortable cubicles and as cleaner than dry venues, though one man questioned whether this cleanliness was more apparent than real:

[I]t’s the illusion of cleanliness and the way—I mean there’s all sorts of bacteria [...] I mean you can get hep A and not so much hep B but, yeah, just infections of various kinds transmitted through there. ...

Yeah, you know and just, you know, all that sex going on and people fingering each other [anally] and [...] seeing the fluids around and people sitting in it, walking in it and touching the door handles going in and out of the steam
rooms and cubicles. So, all of the handles I imagine have small amounts of faecal matter and saliva and all sorts of stuff all over them, really. (Anthony)

Some men were also concerned about contracting tinea or other foot infections from walking about saunas without sandals.

Some men mentioned that they found negotiation of safe sex easier in saunas, with better lighting and more opportunity of negotiating before going to a cubicle, than in sex clubs.

Men who preferred dry venues often preferred sex with their clothes on. They felt that their bodies were not so attractive as to survive appraisal clad only in a towel, or they enjoyed the appearance of other men partially dressed or dressed in masculine or fetish gear:

it leaves a little bit to the imagination (Richard)

when you’ve got somebody in chaps or, you know, sort of just a leather shirt, T-shirt, or whatever, singlets and boots, it just looks a bit more erotic, yeah, I’m definitely a dress-for-bed man. (S Max)

But the dominant reason for preferring sex clubs was the certainty of getting sex:

They’re a place where I know that I can get sex seven days a week, [...] 24 hours a day. (S Kevin)

[F]or me [a backroom] is much more successful.

Why?
It’s easier, you know, easier to get the message across that you’re interested [...] people are more [...] determined to um take the opportunity as it presents itself. They’re not necessarily going to hang around like they are in saunas like for hours [...] There’s nothing to distract you there but the other men. (S Smith)

Much of this revolved around the availability of sexual contact in darkrooms. This is discussed further below. Dry venues, particularly backrooms, were seen (like beats) as good for a quickie when time was short or ‘relief’ was the central motivation.
They can pay five dollars in a backroom down in near Chinatown. They go in there and they can have […] rough sex […] there are no conveniences. There are condoms and there is lubricant. But apart from that there’s no rooms. There’s no bed or anything like that. The doors have locks with a hole that you can see through people having sex. […] There are only two rooms, I think. The rest of it is tiny cubicles with glory-holes. What happens is that people go along a corridor, cruising up and down around the corridor, checking each other and then going to have sex in some sort of dark corner. (S Stephen)

Preferring the sleaziness of clubs to the comparative elegance of a sauna is mysterious to those who prefer saunas.

**Having sex at home**

Men who preferred having sex at home felt that it was easier to talk and negotiate, more comfortable and intimate. These men tended to prefer extended encounters and personal contact to the series of quickies available at venues. This is not to say that all venue sex is quick and impersonal. If a venue encounter was particularly successful men would sometimes go home together from the venue.

The question of ‘Your place or mine?’ of course takes negotiation and may lead to embarrassing disclosures about poverty, unemployment, pensioner status, lack of transport, unfashionable home location, income discrepancy and so on. But it can also work out smoothly:

He said er where do you live? I said oh [poorer inner suburb] he said me too, whereabouts? He said er do you live with anybody? I said no only a cat. He said oh I’m allergic to cats, my flatmates are away and we can just go to my place. So I said yeah sure, so we did. (Richard)

Because it was really raining um I would have had to get a cab where he was because I don’t have a car and he didn’t either and also he can’t come around to my place because I’ve got a regular partner who was just out for the evening.
So, I was sort of at my own devices and um so we agreed to um split the cab and um I headed over to his place. (Peter)

Interestingly, few men mentioned physical safety in another man’s home as an issue, and none explicitly mentioned the risk of being robbed by ‘trade’, though such considerations may be central to a general policy (such as Brendan’s quoted above) of not going home with anonymous partners or inviting them home, or in some cases even giving out one’s phone number.

Richard discussed the issue of sorting out ground rules at a bar or venue before setting out for home, either establishing that sex will be protected, or disclosing his HIV-positive status.

[I]f I was to take them home from the sex venue and it hadn’t been established yet I would say before we leave the venue. [...] if you’re at a sex venue and you say that at the beginning, or you say that when it happens, then the whole scenario might break down because they can’t cope with that. Then if you move onto another one then. But if you’ve taken—if you’ve gone to the trouble of taking them home and they’ve gone to the trouble of coming home with you well then you can’t move onto the next one. You’re at home alone with them. So, everything’s got to go smoothly. (Richard)

It is not clear whether Richard’s last comment is a hint of awareness of the possibility of vulnerability to violence, or merely a feeling that etiquette requires him as host to ensure that everything goes smoothly.

Sex in a bedroom, getting naked with someone, can be very challenging for non-gay-identified men or men with limited sexual experience. Peter narrates his first time on a date with a man, now his regular partner. This was his first sexual encounter outside the beat context, and it was ‘unfamiliar territory’:

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1. I asked a gay friend about this, and he said quickly, ‘Oh I never have casual sex with guys who are bigger than me’. The silent operation of such a rule would go a long way to explaining the difference between homosexual and heterosexual patterns of casual sex.
Um so I drove him home and um then we just kissed in the car and then I can’t remember the reason why we didn’t go upstairs or have sex that night. I think I said I had to go or something like that, I was feeling a bit freaked out about it all. Um and also I wasn’t feeling particularly confident about getting undressed with someone because up until that time all I’d been doing was having sex semi-clothed in beats so I wasn’t feeling very confident about how I looked. Um so he said well, okay well let’s catch up soon. We negotiated over the phone to go for dinner. We went for dinner again and then went back to his place and um yes, we had sex. […] it was pretty scary because I hadn’t been um naked with anybody for years. It was very freaky. (Peter)

Using beats: a default choice?

Some men said they never used beats. For others they seemed to be an option that was always present, a resource for casual, opportunistic or occasional use, whether as a location for having sex or for finding men to bring home. They were seen as easy to negotiate:

It works better at beats and the beaches and places like with more of a—there’s nothing subtle about it, you know. We’re all there for the same reason, you know and they make themselves obvious to what they want and you just move in straight away. (S Albert)

Beats seemed to call forth less intensity in respondents’ narratives than sex-on-premises venues, to be reported almost as an afterthought or background fact of life. For many respondents a beat was the first setting in which they had had sex with other men.

Yeah, well I only found out about beats when I was about twenty. […] I went into a public toilet because I, you know, I just wanted to you know, um, you know, urinate. And um, and all these men were there playing with themselves, and I just couldn’t believe it. I was shocked. That was discovered by chance, by
instinct. Just when I found out, I obviously didn’t do anything. [...] And the first um, the first sex, the first time I actually I, wasn’t actually, I don’t know whether they class it as actually doing the beats, but I took a train in Melbourne, and um, I stopped at um, at a train station and I went to the toilet. And this guy followed me to the toilet and then I knew he followed me, and um, then I, I walked out of the toilet and, and he followed me, and then he started talking. And um, and we had sex along the Yarra. (S Brian)

Respondents to the Sites study had much to say about the disadvantages of beats in comparison to venues. Danger was mentioned often. This could be the risk of being seen or the danger of violence, whether from the police or from hoodlums:

[A] lot of people would um, would say, is that um, if you’re having sex in a beat, there is that freedom, you know what I mean?, there’s that danger, it requires loads of adrenaline, you know, rushing through your body, because I mean, you are in a public place, so it would be a little bit like um, parachuting or something. [laughs] But I mean, I don’t experience that at all. I mean in, in my case, it’s quite the opposite because I, I become really scared, right?, and I, I, I do it so quickly because I’m terrified. I don’t find it even enjoyable at all. [...] I’d much rather have sex in a sauna, or in a sex venue because, I mean, it is safe there. You don’t have to worry about somebody seeing you or being arrested (S Brian)

Kevin, on the other hand, did not see beats as dangerous and thought he was more ‘horny’ at a beat than in a backroom. He found this hard to explain but thought it was perhaps related to the high chance in the venue of finding himself among people he knew.

Beats rarely inspired affection or enthusiasm in the way that commercial venues did. Men felt that they were not comfortable, and some thought a toilet a degrading and unsuitable place for sex. From some men’s point of view the sort of sex you could have in beats was not ‘real’ sex, being generally limited to oral and manual sex, quick and focused on the genitals. The men who frequented beats were seen as

2. See note, p. 55.
undesirable partners: loners, sad cases or married men.

However, one man (Albert) was a devoted beat user who spoke at length on the joys of sex with straight men. However, he felt that since the advent of AIDS many straight men had disappeared from the beat scene. Much of his beat activity was at beaches, and he enjoyed the opportunities for voyeurism which the beach afforded, lamenting the prevalence of neck-to-knee swimsuits and self-consciousness about their bodies among boys in the 1990s.

*So, how was it to live in [...] in the period pre-AIDS?*

It was good. [...] Well we had all the beaches [...] and then you would have [name] Beach of a night time on Saturday nights. The boys would be hovering around the girls at the Beach Hotel and places like that and um they’d get randy. It’s a bit like putting a gelding in with a mare, you know, and whipping the gelding out later on and shoving a stallion in with the mare. So, what happens is that the boys, I think, are eyeing the girls off and uh haven’t—get themselves wound up and the places close. They haven’t had the courage to uh do anything about it or they’ve missed the opportunities and sort of wander across the road where the dirty old men are lurking in the bushes. [laughter] (S Albert)

Albert frequented saunas and sex clubs in Sydney, saying that his home town did not have the population to support a genuinely anonymous venue. At home he preferred the beats, on the grounds that the men ‘that you were picking up at the beach wouldn’t go to a gay sauna’. Apart from being able to book a massage, Albert was not attracted by the other facilities offered by saunas: ‘spas and saunas and blue videos which are very, very boring’. Yet he was ambivalent about his own use of beats (he is apparently referring here to public toilets rather than to sex at the beach):

I remember when I was young, I wouldn’t do the beats, because I thought it was disgusting and filthy, and beats were always dirty and horrible. And they still are, but I do them. I find them degrading. Some of the sexual activities that goes on in there, I’m not proud of the sex I have in there, because, oh no, it’s awful, it’s really, it’s not a participatory type of sexual activity, where you’re having—enjoying—each person’s enjoying the other person, you know. It’s a take-type
situation, and the other person’s basically in there, I guess because he’s desperate [...] You go there if you want relief, and you’re using this person, this desperate person who—to relieve yourself, you know. (S Albert)

The physical structure of sex-on-premises venues

Sex venues have been likened to theme parks, for example by McInnes and Bollen (2000), quoting a slogan from a Sydney theme sex venue: ‘Headquarters: the amusement park where you are the ride’. They also resemble ghost trains or haunted houses in amusement parks in the way that they are structured so as to create a mood or sensation in the patron. The economical use of space, the maze-like layout, the black or dark curtains and walls, the patchy lighting and the often jerry-built partitions contribute to this similarity. Sex venues are constructed to create a space ‘out of time’; there are no windows or clocks. All intrusions from the outside world, except perhaps the hum of traffic or the muffled electronic ring of the cash register or telephone in the street-front sex shop, are banished.

Clearly the owners and managers of venues set them up deliberately to create this effect. Headquarters is perhaps an extreme case, with its sex areas

constructed to make them reminiscent of other sites—the back of a ute (pick-up) in a park somewhere, an industrial site, a sling bridge over a cavern near an S&M (sadomasochism) area (McInnes & Bollen 2000, p. 35).

This is more like a theme restaurant consciously decorated as a riverbed grotto or a Greek fishermen’s tavern than like the accidental structure of the spaces pressed into service as beats, what Keogh et al. (1998) call ‘non-places’. Yet many respondents seemed curiously blind to the agency of the owners in creating sexual spaces. Men rarely criticised them or commented on the profits being made for little outlay in basic but busy venues. Even when invited (in the Sites study) to suggest how venues could be improved, they failed to make any suggestions, or they answered in terms of the clientele rather than the structure or facilities of the venue:

How could the venues be improved?
Well, they could round up lots of guys, big hunky chunky guys who are oversexed and undernourished, and big dicks, and they could roll them up one at a time, and send them in every half hour free of charge! [laughs] Is that what you had in mind? [laughs] That’s the way they can improve the venues. (S Albert)

Yet Albert could describe how one sauna worked better—that is, it delivered more sex—for him than another that because of parking facilities he found more convenient to use. The one where he got more sex had a single staircase between the floors, so it was possible to check out all the other patrons rather than finding that people were circling in the same direction and not meeting. Also it had a raised platform in the darkroom, ‘and you have to push up against the other people in the place, to get past them’, thus forcing physical contact like the bottleneck of people at the kitchen door of a party.

It is not perhaps surprising that men see the other patrons as the essence of a venue: without the other men the venues would be nothing. But it is clear that the structure of particular venues constrains and enables particular sexual practices and modes of relating, just as the layout of Pizza Hut restaurants guides inexperienced restaurant goers into appropriate behaviour.3

Features of internal layout

Although venues vary individually and by type, some generalisations can be made about their internal structure. All have some form of discreet entrance at which men are ‘screened’ and pay the entrance fee. There may then be a locker room and/or change room. In a sauna the patron changes here from his street clothes to the towel or wrap provided. In a theme sex club he may change into fetish gear. The larger venues have various spaces that are not explicitly sexual spaces, although some

3. Pizza Hut restaurants serve alcohol and are somewhat more up-market than other chain establishments such as McDonald’s or KFC. But they are not aimed at confident adult restaurant patrons whose behaviour can be controlled into appropriate channels by mere social expectation. The restaurants are laid out and equipped so as to make it physically difficult to access a table without being shown in by a waiter, to use the toilets without buying a meal, to push the chairs and tables about, to take large portions of the self-serve salads, or to leave without paying.
cruising may go on there: corridors, coffee room, TV room, games room with pool table. Saunas have wet and dry sauna rooms, spa bath and perhaps a swimming pool. Except for the more minimal backrooms, most venues have toilets and some have showers. Some have video or film rooms. The explicitly sexual spaces are the cubicles (some with glory holes) and the orgy room or dark room, though sex may also occur in other spaces such as toilets or corridors. The use of these spaces is discussed further in Chapter 6 under ‘“Private” and “public” interaction in venues’. Some venues have a security camera at reception so that the staff can see out towards the street entrance. Some sauna patrons turn this facility to their own use and hover near reception to inspect each newcomer in his street clothes before he strips off in the locker room.

Steps and platforms

One feature mentioned was high steps or platforms that are very convenient for fellatio. These are not a familiar feature in Western indoor architecture, though reminiscent of rooms in paintings of Moorish harem or bath scenes:

[Y]ou’ve got the antechamber that’s fairly dark and then that sort of then converges into a much smaller room that’s totally dark with a platform half-way through it that you can sort of sit on and all that. Um and it raises you up as well because you can just sit on there and someone can suck you off sometimes. (Julian)

That’s right, it was in the column [steam] room and he was actually sitting up on the top step on the—there’s a row of seats along one of the walls and there’s two sort of steps and he was sitting on the top step masturbating and so I kind of stood on the bottom one [...] I just kind of danced around him [...] I guess I suspected, you know, because he was sitting up on the top that, you know, he was probably wanting me to go down on him because of the whole—in a sense the architecture dictates to an extent, you know, what the roles are going to be. (Anthony)
One might also suspect that male dominance behaviour is involved in men’s choice of position in such spaces, like little boys at preschool claiming the top position on the climbing frame—‘I’m the king of the castle’. Anthony certainly interprets his partner’s behaviour in those terms, explicitly attributing to the other man the expectation of being fellated or of later taking the insertive role in anal intercourse because of his dominant position and masculine self-presentation in the room.

Glory holes

Another feature designed for oral sex is the glory hole. Such holes in the partitions between toilet stalls or venue cubicles presumably developed historically from the peep holes common in public lavatories and brothels; these figure repeatedly in My Secret Life (‘Walter’ 1995[1888]). If the hole is somewhat enlarged, a man can use it to present his penis to the unseen man in the adjoining cubicle for fellatio. Glory holes may have been gouged out of the partitions by the patrons of the early backroom cubicles, which were not explicitly built for homosexual encounters but rather as spaces in which a man could sit alone (or perhaps with a sex worker or a very daring girlfriend) viewing a Super 8 or 16 mm film through a shutter, with a box of tissues at his side—the more private descendant of the ‘What the butler saw’ peep shows of the seaside piers. Such facilities became obsolete with the advent of home video, and the backrooms have belatedly adapted by pulling down partitions to enlarge the proportion of the space available for cruising or darkrooms.

[One sex club] used to be all cubicles and it didn’t have a dark space [...] there were limited glory holes. Now they’ve increased the size of the holes, the number of the holes between cubicles [and] added one dark space. (S Frank)

In a contemporary sex venue, the glory hole may have been neatly fashioned by the builders, and the fellatio may be deliberate rather than opportunistic and only pseudo-anonymous, as men sometimes deliberately make an assignation in the corridor and then walk into adjoining cubicles. The psychological appeal of such a

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4. This delay is an example of what Fletcher (1995) calls the inertia of material culture.
feature is obscure. Perhaps the non-gay-identifying man likes it because it explicitly removes any suggestion that what he as fellatee is enjoying is the other man’s body rather than the specifically genital and sensual service being done for him—the straight man can imagine the fellator to be Sharon Stone or Divine Brown. He can lose himself in the sensation without being self-conscious about being observed by another man while lost in the throes of orgasm. He does not lose face. This does not seem sufficient explanation, however, for the persistence of the feature in exclusively gay establishments. Perhaps the partition as visual barrier functions rather as the dark does in darkrooms, which are discussed further below. Anthony reports that although he can rarely achieve orgasm from fellatio alone, requiring the stronger stimulation of thrusting or manual assistance, he can come when being sucked through a glory hole:

[I]f you go down on somebody—I never had any expectation that somebody will come through oral sex. I’ve never brought anybody to [...] —oh no that’s not true, I have. [...] But only in very specific contexts and that’s at beat sex. [...] if there’s a glory hole involved [...] I think it’s quite difficult to come. I’ve never come from somebody giving me oral—except [...] at a beat through a glory hole [...] It’s, you know, too face to face or whatever. That’s interesting, yeah it’s interesting, yeah. (Anthony)

*Other features*

A few men mentioned that saunas were more conducive to anal sex than dry venues, partly because of the ready availability of washing facilities and also because the cubicles were more comfortable, often being furnished with mats or thin vinyl-covered mattresses. Men who engaged in anal intercourse in darkrooms, often standing up, were not concerned with such niceties.

Music is used to influence the atmosphere of the venue:

You can turn—have the music at a lower level, you know, or put a much cruisier tape on. If it’s too boom-boom-boom-boom everyone is running around and
they don’t know what to do. (S Jeff, venue worker)

but owners can misjudge the effect:

I worked at this other venue they wanted a—they wanted the music uplifting, louder, you know, heraldic sort of songs um that are supposed to take you away and but it really didn’t work. More people would leave because they were distracted by the music. Really the music has got to be in the background, the subliminal and almost half-beat or type of thing, so that people don’t know how long they’ve been there. (S Jeff, venue worker)

Malcolm, a venue owner, mentioned the importance of male smells in the venue:

you have masculine smells anyway through whatever building you’ve got or what air conditioning you’ve got. When you’ve got men in there they give off a man’s smell. You’ve got amyl smell. You’ve got piss smell. You’ve got come. You’ve got everything. I mean you’ve got the body heat. Right, that sweaty smell. That is enough. I mean that is heavy. That’s a heavy smell. It’s a horny smell. It’s a dirty smell, but the place is clean. (S Malcolm)

Surprisingly—to me, at least—not many men mentioned smell as a feature of venues or as an issue about sex in general.[5]

Light and dark

Visibility is a key feature manipulated by the venue owners to influence patrons’ behaviour. An intimate gloom is common—no doubt it also saves electricity and

[5] The ‘roast pork’ smell of androstenedione, the armpit and groin smell of an aroused male, is often apparent in a King’s Cross newsagency that is located above a popular backroom. The same smell often fills adult shops, whether from the aroused browsers or diffused from the backroom. Male sweat, urine and smegma contain chemicals of the androsten group, and androstenedione is a sex pheromone in pigs. As the commercial spray-can product Boarmate it is used to replace the teaser boar when sows are being inseminated. However, experimental attempts to show that androstenol acts as a human pheromone to arouse women have been unsuccessful (Benton and Wastell 1986; Black and Biron 1982). This line of investigation appears to have been abandoned (except perhaps by perfume manufacturers) since the mid-1980s.
therefore running costs. The corridors of venues, where cruising occurs, have flatter-
ingly low light levels, just high enough for men to be able to see each other to choose
partners and indicate offers or invitations by eye contact or gesture.

You got people sort of standing in the edges of a dark room, listening and
watching another group of people having sex [...] And there are people standing
in the edges, silent, but masturbating, watching the dark shadows, and the
activities in those shadows, and getting sexual pleasure from it, from a
voyeuristic point of view. That’s not virtual reality. (S Stephen)

Cubicles in some of the more salubrious venues have dimmers on the light
switches so that patrons can adjust the light inside as desired. The gloom and mist in
the steam room of the sauna create a kind of intimacy and privacy, as it is hard to
recognise people except from very close up. Some respondents found the steam room
a particularly good location in which to pick men up, as the steam provides a blanket
of subjective privacy around a couple who have just found each other. Men who
wear glasses are almost completely blind in the steam room.

In fact the whole steam room structure in such a way is to—is to um create
private space. I mean that’s what is particularly good about the steam room.

_Because you can’t see very far?_ 
You can’t see very far, that’s right and it’s quite difficult to know who it is
unless you’re quite close. [...] Provides you an anonymity. Then you have those
pillars that are all in front of the seating [...] which provides another barrier and
some of the spaces are much darker than others. So, in fact, you have spaces of
light and spaces of dark and so you can use those spaces to work out who it is
and then you can kind of, you know manoeuvre into a dark space or whatever. I
mean some people like to be in the light, other people don’t. I don’t like the light
at all, you know. (Anthony)
Darkrooms

As the name indicates, darkrooms are dark. They may be dimly lit by the glow of an emergency exit sign or an illuminated condom dispenser box, or they may be pitch black so that patrons must find their way entirely by feel. For many men, the darkroom is the key attraction of a sex venue. Here the game of cruising and the meat market of attractiveness status are suspended: men who lack good looks—or the confidence to withstand repeated rejection—are judged by different criteria.

_Do you actually think it’s nice you can’t see [in the darkroom]?_
I think that has a lot to do with it. The only reason that people will sort of get off with you is because they like the feel of you or that you kiss well or you’ve got a nice dick. [...] people are always complimenting me which is nice. [...] what I do find in the [sex club] and elsewhere as well is a lot of prejudice with height. (Julian is 1.63 m.)

I prefer to be able to take my clothes off. I prefer the potential sex partners to also be as close to naked as you get. [...] No, I just don’t think that, on display in a lot of light, I’m not likely to attract potential partners.

_Why?_
Because my body, it’s not as good a body as the, as I think it should be, to attract potential partners. Oh, and when I say body, I’m also talking about facial looks. (S Rod)

The darkroom is a world of sensation alone, of touch, smell, taste. The interactional rules are different from those of the visible world.

Like in a corridor, for instance, they’re not going to go and try to grab you and whatever. Whereas in a darkroom they feel sort of free to, you know, interact the way they want. (S Brian)

_[It’s] sex that is not negotiated, because everybody is silently sticking their cock into a mouth, or an arse, that is spontaneous, where people are sustaining_
ejaculations, and coming inside of people’s arses, coming inside of people’s mouths, you know, no form of negotiation or safe practices at all. (S Stephen)

And the darkrooms seem to be the ideal opportunity where there’s no dialogue, there’s no judgment, there’s no face. And so, there’s no visible [Kaposi’s] sarcoma, no visible thin bodies or thin faces to show. All these things that you can assess in another place. See, sex in the darkroom is really anonymous, so therefore um, in the very darkest areas you can fuck without a condom, you can blow in somebody’s mouth or arse, you can do all these different things and there’s no incrimination whatsoever because you can walk out after all. (S Frank)

[W]hen it’s going it can be, you know, it’s really really really hot. I mean you have three-way kissing sometimes and, you know, you’re kissing someone and you’ve got your hand on somebody else’s dick and somebody’s got your hand— their hand on yours and, you know, it’s sort of all this group sort of stuff and, you know, sometimes when it works it’s great.

But you can’t see them?

You can’t see them and so it all relies on how you feel physically about the person you’re with, whether you feel compatible with them. (Julian)

Some respondents react negatively to these same features:

So what about the [sex club] in particular, that you don’t like?

Oh, it’s just like a whole bunch of zombies, there’s such a horrible energy in that place, it’s more of a leather bar and there is a lot of unsafe activity happening there, it’s just too dark and evil for me. (S Tony)

So I was shocked and, and it was very dark. It was extremely dark, and I was um, you know, I was wondering myself, how can people have sex in here, because you couldn’t possibly know who, who you were having sex with. You know, it’s too dark [laughs]. But um, I was, to be honest, I was horrified [laughs]. (S Brian)
Such men avoid darkrooms because the sex is unsafe or because they find the impersonality of the sex unappealing, as in what Elton called ‘a like hole-in-the-wall-type sexual experience’.