

SEX ON PREMISES

The tangible world of Sex on Premises Venues is shifting as digital cruising takes over. How long will these spaces provide a place for men to find each other?

I passed by a familiar face at the top of the stairs. He smiled knowingly at me.

I remembered him from a one-time fuck some months ago – a face that had popped up on apps a few times, but had never materialised in the flesh again, until now. We spoke openly, the silence of everyone else broken by our familiarity. He invited me into a room.

I warned him I had just come, so he took his time giving me head. Soon we were fucking, our moans and grunts colliding with the shaking walls. As he rode me, I looked up to the dividing wall. A face peered back at me, a voyeur curious as to who was making all that noise.

We soon exhausted ourselves, without coming. I asked why he was there that night. He lived nearby, was horny, didn't have the patience for the back-and-forth that goes with apps.

We said our goodbyes and I went on my way. Back to the cycle of shower, walk, pause, hunt.

In news that will shock absolutely no-one, gay men and men who have sex with men (MSM) enjoy having sex. Often, we're not too fussed where – bedrooms, backrooms, bathrooms – so much so that commercial operations exist to provide gay men the opportunity to show up, fuck and leave.

They're called Sex on Premises Venues, or SOPVs. As a homogenous idea of 'gay culture' is slowly digitised into app-based cruising, and nightclubs struggle to attract the next generation of gay men, can the SOPV endure? And if so, for how long?

SOPVs have a long association with gay culture, stretching back to a time when open displays of our sexuality were at best frowned upon, and at worst illegal. These operations emerged from working class bathhouses – a necessary service when working bachelors lived in rooms, rather than self-contained apartments. There was, and continues to be, a degree of homosexual activity in these gatherings. As 'the gay identity' emerged, the working-class necessity of bathhouses gave way to gay-specific venues.

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Negotiating sex at SOPVs is predominantly a silent affair, in contrast to the textual verbosity of app-based cruising (now the number one way gay men meet for sex). Hooking up at an SOPV is entirely sensual: seeing someone you're interested in, you eye each other off, and may stand across from one another and rub your cock through your pants or towel. At an appropriate moment, you reach for each other's bulges for some light mutual rubbing. Then you find the nearest free cubicle, walk in, latch the door and begin. The more adventurous may choose to leave the door ajar, inviting others to observe or participate.

There is rarely small talk, and certainly not until the end. This navigated silence means that often the first words uttered are either "Condoms?" or "What's your status?", the latter referring to HIV status.

The negotiation of risk can be difficult in SOPVs, because speaking can spoil the charged, anonymous nature of the encounter. Back when I was HIV negative, I ended up fucking and getting fucked by men I now realise were positive, because I didn't ask. (This wasn't their fault, and, incidentally, it wasn't how I contracted the virus.) The most common mistake men make is assuming that because no-one asks, it means they share the same status. Knowing this, AIDS organisations have worked hard to interject effective health promotion in SOPVs.

It was 4.30am on a Saturday morning. I wandered the dim burrows of a cruise club with a buddy. There were a handful of men around, mostly lone rangers waiting for something to happen. In a back corner on the second floor, some guys discovered us. My buddy negotiated them into taking turns fucking me, without a condom.

One guy didn't really know what he was doing, and the fantasy of being used by an anonymous group loses its appeal when you're having to give feedback on how to fuck. After I left, someone who had spotted me there tracked me down on Facebook and sent me a message. That's when I realised that the age of anonymity was over.

Since the emergence of AIDS, SOPVs have had to work alongside sexual health organisations to avoid deeper scrutiny. Being community-owned, this has been a relatively simple process here in Australia. The AIDS Council of NSW (ACON) set up a voluntary code of conduct for sex venues that persists to this day,

involving freely available condoms and lube, and sexual health messages displayed in common areas.

This is in stark contrast to San Francisco, one of the Western epicentres of the AIDS crisis, where the SOPV scene was once the stuff of legend. Faced with an epidemic and no foreseeable solution, the San Francisco health department oversaw the policing and eventual closure of the venues. Geoff Honnor, former Director of HIV and Sexual Health at ACON, lived in San Francisco just as the AIDS epidemic hit its stride.

Honor recalls that before SOPVs in San Fran were shut down altogether, there was a period during which an almost laughable 'compromise' was sought in an attempt to safeguard against the spread of HIV. SOPVs hired 'Blowbuddies' to act as safe-sex police: men in miners' hats would wander the halls and blow on whistles when condomless sex was taking place. The gay abandon of cruise-club culture in San Fran ended not long after that. Although the AIDS crisis has settled in the city, the venues have never returned. The same goes for New York.

Unsurprisingly, shutting down the SOPVs did nothing to slow the spread of HIV in San Francisco, it simply drove sex underground. Gay men continued to fraternise and seek each other out, as we have always done.

Australia had the sense to observe this behaviour, and realised that in keeping SOPVs open, AIDS councils could access the key affected population and deliver vital messaging. Thus, the doors of Sydney's SOPVs stayed open, and a relationship between the AIDS councils and sex venues was forged and continues to this day. (An SOPV in Sydney still promotes itself as "ACON approved", as if to ward off fears of unsafe practices.)



While showering, I felt myself being watched by a nearby Daddy-type: fit, bald, hairy-chested, and stroking himself in the nearby porn room. I dried off and went over. We sat opposite each other, jerking ourselves off. He sidled over and asked me, almost apologetically, if he could watch.

"Sure," I grunted. Usually verbose, I felt this was a situation that called for as little conversation as possible. I continued to beat off, my eyes moving between the onscreen porn and his face. Soon a few others came in and watched us. One guy caught my eye: short, fit, older. He motioned for me to follow him. I winked at my voyeur beside me and wandered off for more fun.

Apps and websites such as SCRUFF, Grindr and BBRT are now the most popular ways for gay men to find sexual partners. As the gay community has become digitised, our traditional gathering grounds have suffered. Bars and nightclubs that once rode high on the Pink Dollar (the industry term for the purchasing power of gay consumers) now struggle, while the rise of app-dating means that gay men can find sex without having to congregate in one glittery strip of venues. This democratisation of interaction has coincided with (or perhaps been informed by) a shift in the gay community's drug of choice, from dance floor-friendly MDMA, to sex-at-home methamphetamine.

Unlike nightclubs and parties, however, SOPVs appear to be surviving the nuclear holocaust of a decentralised gay community. This is due, in part, to the honesty of their intentions. While music tastes, drug choices and licensing laws directly impact the club scene, SOPVs honestly address a very particular need for gay men: somewhere to fuck.

SOPVs also act as a convenient meeting place for two men who met online but have nowhere to go, often because their home is occupied – in many cases by their wives, girlfriends or parents. The importance of SOPVs as a meeting place for MSM who cannot explore their homosexual desires elsewhere can't be underestimated, not least because in these venues, MSM can be exposed to relevant sexual health info and supportive gay peers.

In spite of this very real need, SOPVs are by no means a booming industry. Post-AIDS, many original owners passed away, leaving the businesses to family members who attempt to run them at a profit. Mike Hannah is the general manager of Sydney SOPV Signal on Oxford St, in the now irregularly beating heart

of the gay ghetto. Hannah has been in the industry since the '90s, and says little has changed in terms of the type of sex that draws men to SOPVs.

"Despite the fact that we're in the 21st century, discretion is still really important for our customers," he says. "People do stuff in sex clubs that they don't do in the real world. They hook up with guys they wouldn't normally hook up with in front of their friends. They want to let themselves go."

The key to a successful night in an SOPV is a combination of knowing your place in the pecking order and having a good attitude. However, it's naive to think that SOPVs are some nirvana that eliminate the body discrimination and racism that runs rife in the gay community.

Unlike online interaction, where blocking someone or swiping left to the next guy soothes the pang of rejection, to be rebuked at an SOPV can literally leave you with your cock in your hand. It's a vulnerable state to occupy, especially at a sauna where you wander around in a towel exposing yourself almost completely. Of course, he who dares wins, and a confident but not cocky attitude will generally win out over unimaginative abs.

I'm in a good position to make these judgements, though: I'm a recognisable porn performer and TV-friendly sex activist with a symmetrically handsome face and a nine-inch cock. I'm so confident, in fact, that if ever I'm rejected at an SOPV, I walk away knowing he's the one missing out, not me. That healthy ego goes a long way in the meat market of sex venues.

It's worth pointing out that although you can have all the confidence in the world, what truly makes for a good SOPV citizen is empathy. At some point, you will encounter someone who wants to fuck you that you have no interest in. Knowing how to reject someone sensitively goes a long way, and accepting that rejection is just as important.

Mike Hannah believes that part of the problem with younger guys discovering SOPV culture is that they lack this important skill. This makes for abrasive rejections, but the more troubling outcome is that young guys are engaging in sex with men they're not interested in, because they don't know how to say no.

"Young gay men find it hard to cruise in person," says Hannah. "They find it hard to filter and say no to unpleasant experiences in here." Hannah believes SOPVs serve an important community purpose: "Guys need to practice talking to people in person."

This not only has implications for fostering a healthy, sex-positive culture amongst gay men, but also for sexual health. It's vital that gay men know the questions to ask and the limits they are comfortable with. SOPVs are gathering grounds for sexual education, and in the past have been a rite of passage for young gay men. But it is not the venue's responsibility to provide this sex education; we pass on knowledge during the act of sex itself.

Throughout that evening in the bathhouse, I encountered an angry young man. He was tall, fit, stereotypically 'masc' and could easily have made a meal of the sauna. As I was getting changed, he bluntly asked me if I had any amyl to share. I didn't. All night, he was constantly on the move, never happy with what was on offer – in the spa, sauna, porn room and eventually lying face-down in a public space. This position is usually an open invitation to anonymous fucking, but he kept waving people on.

Later, as I dressed to leave, he chatted with a similarly masculine guy, expressing his frustration that there "wasn't enough going on". I on the other hand, less masc and less muscular, had fucked half a dozen guys in various settings.

As I walked out past the considerate bowl of Minties at the door, the angry young man and his friend bro-hugged goodbye – a laughable performance in this male museum of cum and steam. While I had picked up more men than I was looking for, my angry friend was hampered by the endless filtering we do online that restricts kinetic experiences in SOPVs, and probably didn't even pick up a Mintie.

I will be back, but perhaps he won't. If he's the 'new gay', and I'm hanging onto the old world, then we're in trouble.

As to whether or not these venues will be around much longer, Hannah also recognises that there has been a shift in attitudes around gay sex from within the community, and that is affecting business. He couldn't say whether they'd still be open in another 10 years:

"We've been through tough times with recessions and HIV, but it's a fashion thing at the moment, and we're in a conservative age. Sex is supposed to be fun; places like this exemplify sex as recreation. When I first started, it felt a lot freer than it does now. There's a lot more tension with gay men exploring their sexuality." How we resolve this tension is key to the survival of our amorphous community. The generation of sex-positive gay men lost to AIDS is an ongoing issue, because these men who would now be our elders have been replaced with a largely conservative voice that preaches monogamy, and tells young gay men to prioritise marriage over pleasure. The seemingly, corporeal aspects of gay sexuality are being ushered into a dark corner, replaced with an endless stream of men we block instead of fuck. As anyone who's been to an SOPV knows, it takes a bold man to reach into the dark and grab what he can.

-NIC HOLAS is a writer who focuses on the contemporary gay experience and living with HIV.

His writing has been published by Hello Mr, Junkee, news.com.au and other.

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