

The Guardian Web Article – Closure of LGBT Venues including The Black Cap Public House

<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/apr/21/lgbt-london-venue-closures-capital-future-night-tsar>

LGBT London: what venue closures mean for the capital's future

London has lost many LGBT venues in recent years as rents skyrocket and property development accelerates. But with the mayor's 'night tsar' and new spaces emerging, there are signs of revival for the capital's queer nightlife

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Fri 21 Apr 2017 07.30 BST Last modified on Fri 11 May 2018 13.07 BST

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Drag show at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, one of London's longest-running LGBT venues, in 1976.
Photograph: Alamy

It's a springtime Saturday night in Vauxhall, a London "gaybourhood" that's lost many LGBT spaces in the last few years: Barcode, Paris Gym, Area, and The Hoist. Meanwhile, the area's skyline has transformed almost beyond recognition, with tower upon tower of [luxury newbuild flats](#).

But this Saturday in Vauxhall is a time for celebration: it's the [opening of Bloc South](#), the first gay club in this part of town to open for years. Down the road is a packed out Royal Vauxhall Tavern, where the group [Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants](#) gives a stirring speech. It feels like the good old days when Vauxhall wore London's gay crown.

"There's been a lot of press about the closing of LGBT venues all over London," explains Wayne Shires, the man behind Bloc South. "There's no conspiracy theory,

but I'd say most of these closures have been down to rent increases and development." Still, some call it part of a broader programme of the "[sweeping sterilisation of London nightlife](#)".

Last November, University College London published a report looking at [LGBTI nightlife in London since 1986](#), which highlighted an intensity of closures of long-standing venues in the capital. [According to one LGBT website](#), 151 gay bars and clubs in London shut between 2000 and 2016, and Attitude magazine editor Cliff Joannou told the Guardian he believes that a third of the capital's LGBT venues have closed since the recession.

[Between 2011 and 2016, London lost half its nightclubs](#)

This includes key venues such as Madame Jojo's, the Black Cap, The Joiner's Arms, Barcode Soho, Kazbar, the Queen's Head, Candy Bar, the Oak Bar and Green Carnation – many suffering the impact of rent hikes and rampant development.

Last month, much-loved Soho venue [Molly Moggs closed](#) without warning – and the reasons are still unclear. This old-school boozery was one of the first venues to offer an alternative to the clubbing scene as a place for the community to meet and socialise. These kind of spaces are now few and far between.

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Protesters outside the former Joiner's Arms in 2015 campaign against the closure of LGBT bars in London. Photograph: Frantzesco Kangaris for The Guardian

When popular venues The Joiner's Arms, Nelson's Head and George & Dragon all shut their doors within two years of each other between 2014 and 2016, [a whole swathe of LGBT spaces](#) were lost along the Hackney Road, with Shoreditch's gentrification reaching a saddening new high.

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In 2015, the Black Cap pub in Camden closed just a week after being awarded [asset of community value](#) status, with Camden council having stated that the venue "plays the role of a community centre for the local LGBT people in the absence of such a dedicated facility". The LGBT community is still fighting for the reopening of the Black Cap, with regular protests and dedicated campaigning work by the [Black Cap Foundation](#).

A similar response met the news in 2014 that renowned Soho cabaret venue Madame Jojo's would close. A [vigil-style march](#) (forming part of the wider [Save Soho](#)

[campaign](#)) asked for the venue to be saved, and a petition to stop the closure attracted thousands of signatures.

[Speaking to the Guardian at the time](#), Alexander Parsonage, the artistic director of a cabaret group that regularly performed at Madame Jojo's, lamented its loss. "Jojo's brought together gay culture and burlesque culture with mainstream music and club nights," he said. "[Its] closure plays to the weird gentrification that's happened in Soho over the past 10 years. For 400 years it's been the gloriously seedy underbelly of London, where some of the most interesting subculture has thrived, and yet in the last 10 years Westminster council seems hellbent to destroy that, to gut its character completely and turn everything into high end retail."

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First Out Cafe Bar near Tottenham Court Road closed in 2011. Photograph: Frank Baron for the Guardian

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Losing queer spaces in London is nothing new – although these days it no longer comes down to social oppression. The once-clandestine Caravan Club – a groundbreaking 1930s LGBT venue in Soho – was [recreated last month](#) for the National Trust and National Archives Queer City project exploring the history of queer life in London. This, along with many other events around the country this year, marks the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality through the 1967 Sexual Offences Act.

LGBT nightlife spaces are by no means alone in facing the mounting pressure of London's speculative property development. Between 2011 and 2016, the capital lost half its nightclubs and [more than 40% of its music venues](#), as luxury hotels and housing won out against cultural spaces in multiple cases.

But for the LGBT community, nightlife venues hold even greater significance due to the lack of dedicated daytime spaces – one of London's few spaces, First Out Cafe, [closed in 2011](#). The UCL report notes that LGBT venues accommodate "a range of important welfare, wellbeing and community functions".

LGBT places are an integral part of our plan to grow London's 24-hour culture Amy Lamé

It continues: “At a time of rising inequality and intense competition for space, closures of venues and other spaces present a challenge for already vulnerable minorities, for the neighbourhoods in which they form part of the social, cultural and economic fabric, and for social integration in the capital more widely.”

But the tide appears to be turning. London mayor Sadiq Khan’s awareness of venue closures led to the creation of the city’s [new “night tsar”](#) role, filled by performer and presenter Amy Lamé.

Despite the closures, Lamé – host of the Royal Vauxhall Tavern’s long-running avant garde club night Duckie and staunch supporter of London’s LGBT community – feels hopeful. “I was very worried when I heard The Hoist in Vauxhall was closing,” she says when we speak one morning in early March. “But when I talked to them, I realised they just wanted to retire.”

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London mayor Sadiq Khan, with new night tsar for the city, Amy Lamé. Photograph: Victoria Jones/PA

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“We don’t want venues to close, but some venues will close quite naturally. It’s a different story if they’re under threat. Part of my job here at city hall is to make sure places aren’t closing owing to undue pressure, say around threats from developers or other challenges to businesses here.”

Resisting that threat is something Lamé knows much about, having been involved in the successful campaign to [secure Grade II listing for the Royal Vauxhall Tavern](#) (RVT) in 2015, following its purchase by a property developer the previous year. It was the first such listing of an LGBT venue in the UK.

Thanks to grassroots movement [RVT Future](#), and a gay-friendly Lambeth council, things are looking up for one of Vauxhall’s oldest and most-loved venues. In February this year it was [granted “sui generis” classification](#) by the council, confirming and protecting the entire building’s use as a combination of pub, nightclub and performance space – thus protecting it against development into private accommodation.

There’s also a lot for support for the LGBT community from the mayor of London himself. “The mayor has put his weight behind the campaign to protect the RVT and to prevent any change by developers,” Lamé explains. “Sadiq [Khan] and I keep LGBT places close to our hearts and hold them in very high regard. And we’ve made

it really clear that it's an integral part of our plan to grow [London](#) culture, and especially London's 24-hour culture."

In December, Lamé announced [the mayor's intention to invest £10,000](#) in a research project to explore why LGBT venues are closing and what can be done to protect them.

Meanwhile, particular venue openings hold promise for the future of LGBT London. Just as Shires successfully opened South Bloc in Vauxhall, the ground-breaking performance artists Jonny Woo and John Sizzle opened the Glory in Haggerston, at the same time that Shoreditch saw the closure of multiple LGBT spaces.

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Following a campaign, the Royal Vauxhall Tavern secured Grade II listing in 2015.
Photograph: Rob Holley/PA

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Many see the Glory as a godsend for the LGBT community. It's viewed as a 21st-century community hub that aims to be thoroughly inclusive and supportive, a safe space for performers and patrons on every point of the LGBTQI+ spectrum.

But venues and nights like these are still outnumbered by spaces where gay men are the majority, with the UCL report noting that "gay men have the monopoly on [LGBT] venues". According to the report, those spaces catering to women and black, Asian and minority ethnic LGBT people have been disproportionately vulnerable to closure over the last few decades. While some stress the importance of men-only gay clubs – to serve as a safe space that has been vital in gay culture – others feel venues should be more inclusive.

"I've been to gay clubs in the past where I've been told to stop kissing my girlfriend by both staff and fellow clubbers," explains bisexual activist Lewis Oakley.

"I could never go into some bars in Soho and feel safe," adds Mzz Kimberley, one of the first black trans performers on the scene in London. "A lot of spaces don't feel safe for me. Not only because I'm black, but as a trans woman as well. A lot of gay men have a problem with lesbians and transgender women."

Mzz Kimberley and many others believe that this kind of prejudice is being left behind by an emerging 21st-century queer cultural scene that leaves traditional labels relating to sexuality and gender at the door. "The queer community for me is going to be the community of the future," she says.

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The Caravan Club – a groundbreaking 1930s LGBT venue in Soho – has been recreated for the National Trust and National Archives Queer City project. Photograph: The National Archives

We may be losing exclusively gay spaces, but the queering of traditionally straight venues is on the rise. “People like to discover new playgrounds. That’s one of the great things about having a queer party in a place that is usually oriented to straight events,” says [Daddy Issues](#) DJ and promoter Borja Peña. It’s a formula that’s working all over London – and that integration is a good way to educate wider social groups about diversity and equality.

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Still, the importance of exclusive, safe spaces persists: after the Brexit vote, hate crimes against LGBT people in the UK [rose by 147%](#). At a recent talk about the evolution of London’s nightlife, Nadine Artois and Tia Simon-Campbell, of [QTPoC](#) nights [Pussy Palace](#) and [BBZ](#), explained the genesis of their nights: “We needed a space we could be ourselves, away from the mainstream club environment. A safe haven for queer people of colour.” Artois added that gentrification and venue closures have made it difficult for them to find a space to host their nights. “There’s not really many places left to go.”

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The impact of technology on social life shouldn’t be overlooked either. London has become a virtual reality city with the potential to meet hundreds of thousands of people online, with close to 700,000 users of the Grindr app alone. The need to go to a specific venue to meet someone has become less important – which has led to [complaints that the community itself is to blame](#) for closures.

Co-chair of the RVT Future campaign Rob Holley disagrees with this idea, [telling Pink News that custom is still thriving](#): “The vast majority of London pubs (gay and straight) which close are commercially successful, but London’s crazy property market means converting the building into flats makes a bigger, quicker buck for their owners.”

LGBT venues are exceptionally diverse across London. It’s true that we’ve lost a lot recently, but it looks like we’re reinventing queer space for our constantly evolving

city – and many are hopeful that the trend of closure can be reversed. In November, TV personality Gok Wan [announced plans](#) to launch his own club night in response to London’s “diminishing” LGBT scene. “In the last six years I’ve managed to open three venues,” says Bloc South’s Shires, “so you can do it, if you try hard!”

Let’s hope, as the mayor’s motto suggests, that London is open – whatever your sexuality.

Additional reporting by Francesca Perry. Follow Guardian Cities on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) to join the discussion, and [explore our archive here](#)

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