

London Site Visit: Heddon Street, the Cave of the Golden Calf, and Queer Modernism

Ross Hickman

HIS 301, Making History

Dr. Vivien Dietz and Dr. Michael Guasco

How does one go about the process of imagining structures that have been erased from visible memory? The mash-up of urban space in London—between those buildings ‘just’ put up, those feeling the age of a couple decades or several *centuries*—provides a rough visual vocabulary of recognizing ‘history’ in architecture. Neoclassical columns, chipping paint, eroded stone—these communicate a (variably) successful longevity that only the privileged few buildings get to flaunt. Envisioning what used to sit just adjacent to the now towering curves of Regent Street in Piccadilly is a process of engaging what Simon Sleight and Geoffrey Martin term an ‘urban palimpsest.’<sup>1</sup> But the ‘palimpsest’ of Heddon Street, just off Regent Street, is incomplete, fragmented, and not altogether recognizable as a ‘palimpsest’ at all. Beyond the remote possibility of carrying out an archaeological dig beneath Heddon Street, ‘peeling back the onion’ of Heddon’s queer, artistic, and literary histories is not feasible or accessible. The ‘history’ I was looking for here was not immediately visible, and fashioning a sense of memory out of absence required concerted effort.

Heddon Street is now a colorful, manicured fixture of Piccadilly’s Regent Street—what I found to be one of the most exceptionally commercialist districts in London. Bourgeois excess flourishes on Heddon Street. One can pick up a scarf at Burberry and take a few steps over to Heddon Street Kitchen to spend £50 on beef wellington. Indulgence, decadence, and sumptuousness dominate Heddon Street, giving off a sort of polished urban hedonism. This restaurant, Heddon Street Kitchen, sits on top of a buried modernist café called the ‘Cave of the Golden Calf’ that hosted queer luminaries like Oscar Wilde, avant-garde artists, and other edgy folks in the first decades of the twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Sleight. “Memory and the City.” In *History, Memory and Public Life: The Past in the Present*, edited by Simon Sleight, Anna Maerker, and Adam Sutcliffe, 126-127.

In his book *Oscar Wilde's Last Stand* (1997), English historical writer Philip Hoare describes the Cave of the Golden Calf from the perspective of an imagined, anonymous “respectable middle-class woman”:

Modern London had become a strange place. Up in Regent Street young men wearing tight suits and nail varnish were sipping creme de menthe in the Cafe Royal, while down a dark cul-de-sac lurked a new and devilish sort of place where Futurists cavorted: a 'night club' profanely named 'The Cave of the Golden Calf'. Vague rumours had reached her that nowadays, the backstreets harboured all manner of such places, attended by members of the social elite. Such intimations confirmed all the suspicions of her class. At the root of these evils lay the name of Oscar Wilde, still unspoken in polite households. He may have been dead for more than a decade, but Wilde's decadence endured.<sup>2</sup>

Hoare conveys here a sense of the risqué ‘queer’ spaces in London where the new, ‘libertine’ social elite conspired to take modernity and run with it. Making London modern meant, for this imaginedly prudish woman, moral depravity and sensual chaos. In the normative bourgeois political imagination of early twentieth century, the Cave of the Golden Calf was not merely a hedonists’ hang-out but perhaps part of a more disquietingly conspiratorial ‘queer’ strategy for defiling, infiltrating, and laying ruin to urban space.

Taking ‘queer’ out of its contemporary reclaimed usage among people who identify with marginalized genders and sexualities, London’s ‘queer’ history might encompass a broader sense of identification with counter-cultural, sub-cultural, avant-garde, or counter-traditional people and places. Still, the ‘queer’ history on Heddon Street cannot be separated from the mixed erasures and celebrations of culture produced on the street by a particular set of famous queer British men—from Oscar Wilde to David Bowie—whose sexualities were vilified and fetishized, respectively, and figure most prominently in their current remembrance and representation as queer ‘icons.’ Bowie’s claim to Heddon Street is the photograph on the cover of his album *Ziggy*

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Hoare, *Oscar Wilde's Last Stand* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 1997), 1-2.

*Stardust*, which was taken on Heddon Street. His iconicity feels fresh and vivid on this small backstreet—a former movie theater he frequented is plastered with neon images of his wild likenesses. Wilde does not, however, enjoy the same kind of visibility. The queer people who get remembered most actively on Heddon Street, it seems, are those who were born in ‘better’ times.

Without prior knowledge of what was once there, Heddon Street Kitchen gives little sense that the Cave of the Golden Calf ever existed. The place has expertly crafted codes of a sleek European café, but matches that subtle suggestion with splashes of more contemporary architecture and design like a wooden staircase with small, minimalist slats. This restaurant is *not* trying to pass itself off as an exact recreation of a swanky early twentieth-century ‘European’ café. The average visitor might understand the aesthetic dynamics at play, but likely would not have an inkling of what used to happen beneath the floor they’re eating on.

But, since I *did know* what I was looking for, a complicated set of representations hints that the restaurant and its owner Gordon Ramsay may know more about the site’s history than is immediately visible. After meeting with the manager of the restaurant who had “never heard of the Cave of the Golden Calf,” she led me down some steps and *through a bathroom* with a secret door to a part of the restaurant called “Hidden Heddon,” an underground bar that, in her words, was “part of a former factory” on the site. Art that resisted any sort of categorization I’m familiar with was on the walls of Hidden Heddon, including a large and colorful portrait of a *cow* that is the first thing visitors see. Lining the walls of the upstairs of the restaurant are pop-art, Dada-like takes on classic pieces—take, for example, the head of Vermeer’s *Woman with a Pearl Earring* pushing a child in a stroller. Such art certainly connotes the kind of avant-garde, modernist artistic activity that the Cave of the Golden Calf is remembered for promoting.

But Heddon Street Kitchen gives little impression that the Cave of the Golden Calf was part of these modernist works, and the gentrification of the space and its cultural-political modernist function are not apparent. The brand of capitalist, consumerist modernity that Heddon Street emphasizes today may, to some limited extent, fit with ‘queer’ modernists’ ambitions to pull people out of Puritan prudishness toward artistic, intellectual, and sexual liberation. But modernist spaces, people, and projects were about more than making provocation and pleasure possible and ‘acceptable’ and chic; modernism was also a movement of intentional and active political subversion—to the forms, standards, and fears that normative society used to consolidate and exercise power over undesirable bodies. The mainstreaming of certain elements of queer modernism, like pleasure without shame, and the invisibilizing or minimizing of other elements, like more explicit sexuality and political activism, entirely misses the point of what being ‘queer’ and ‘modern’ functionally meant.

Queer modernism had its issues, of course—not least among them widespread racism and classism within historically wealthy and White circles. But without explicit and informed representations of queer modernism in a place like Heddon Street, current visitors to the street aren’t able to decide for themselves how or whether to engage with London’s modernity ‘queerly’—that is, in support of the undesirable and the marginalized and the ‘freaks’, among streets where Otherness is kept out of mind for a couple hedonistic hours.

As a queer person looking to find some juicy and validating history on what London’s queer life might have been like a hundred years ago, visiting Heddon Street was disheartening. Disheartening because I take political subversion and support of the marginalized and the ‘freaks’ to be essential rather than peripheral parts of how I express my queerness—not just in

terms of the people I'm attracted to, or the ways I dress, but in how my experience of marginalization and my resistance against normative pressures might have forebears in visible, living memory through which I and others can find strength to keep pressing for progress and plurality. Making histories, and particularly urban spaces, of queer 'modernism' or 'activism' or 'progressivism' part of public life and memory *is* possible at least recently in places like the Stonewall Inn in New York City. I'm hoping not just Stonewall or the Cave of the Golden Calf, but many other sites of 'queer' organizing, community, and expression can be part of our consciousnesses again.

Bibliography

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