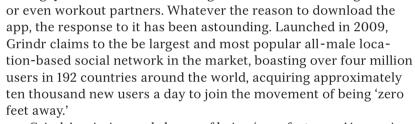# Future & Smart Cities

Urban Pamphleteer #1

Urban space, mobile technology, and user experience are consolidated in a cyborgean way through a mobile application called Grindr. For the gay

GRINDR GUYS: SCROLLING AS THE NEW STROLLING

man of the twenty-first century, Grindr is a place-based form of interaction, where GPS satellites track your location in order to reveal which other gay men are in neighbouring areas, situating each individual user in a particular place in the city and positioning them in relation to each other by order of proximity on a screen grid. Using the app makes Grindr Guys completely aware of their location while altering the way they understand their immediate space and the people who surround them. Furthermore, these social interactions foster issues regarding subjectivity, as each user on the Grindr grid is a virtual, self-constructed portrayal of themselves.

For many, Grindr is used as a means to obtain sex; for others, it is a way to get to know gay men in the area who might be interested in being friends or even workout partners. Whatever the reason to download the app, the response to it has been astounding. Launched in 2009, Grindr claims to the be largest and most popular all-male location-based social network in the market, boasting over four million users in 192 countries around the world, acquiring approximately ten thousand new users a day to join the movement of being 'zero feet away.'

Grindr logo, logo courtesy of Grindr.

Grindr's mission and slogan of being 'zero feet away' is precisely what makes the app an architectural and urban issue. Instead of having to resort to going outside in order to find a potential mate for sex, commonly known as 'cruising,' Grindr provides an alternative in the form of digital cruising, in which the act of walking or driving is replaced by the act of scrolling and tapping. Grindr addresses issues related to gay identity and the built environment, particularly when one considers histories of gay subculture and its correlation with spaces–or rather, its lack of spaces. Therefore, before describing Grindr as a tool that reconfigures, and arguably enhances, a user's relation to the built environment, it is necessary to contextualise the relationship between gay identity and the built environment to be able to note how public spaces and sexuality are reconfigured through digital spaces. Because there has been a historical and social placelessness within the built environment for citizens who identify as gay, the condition of being spaceless has fostered a cultural move into cyber-spatial grounds, particularly in the UK. Homosexuals were not considered to be members of society prior to 1967, and thus were left without legitimate places to pursue their 'pleasures.' This led gay culture to spaces identified as sex-zones, such as parks, locker rooms, dormitories, prisons, and toilets. Though areas in different cities have been coded as gay, as in the case of London's Soho and Vauxhall, there are still many countries in which homosexuality remains perceived as an illegitimate expression of sexuality, meaning that the public

Collages by Regner Ramos.

manifestation of gay identity is discouraged and thus placeless.

Forbidden by law in the UK until 1967, expressions of homosexuality were left to be manifested in private. Physical, urban spaces for gay men to congregate, such as gay bars, could be difficult to find unless the visitor knew exactly where to look. Finding another man with whom to have a sexual encounter was often an act contained and limited to these strategic spaces, through the sexual practice of 'cottaging,' the British term for having casual gay sex in public toilets. By cottaging, some gay men would partake in sporadic, intimate encounters with different gay men in the area, through the surveillance act of cruising. Even though there is still something abjectifying and objectifying about it, Grindr has changed the way gay cruising works by making surveillance a digital, rather than a purely physical act.

Being on Grindr *is* experiencing social space. Through an enhanced experience and via the constant play of gazing and proximity, the app puts the user back in urban space even if he is physically present in a private space. On Grindr, the men are products to be consumed, and the digital screen becomes a storefront display, where instead of clothes being the goods, the mannequins become the primary feature. If the mannequin is not wearing any clothes at all, consider it a bonus, as you will be able to see more of the product before you invest any time or energy into acquiring it. Hairy or smooth? Short or tall? Black or white? A twink or a sugar daddy? 'More to love' or slim and slender? Every man becomes a Ken doll waiting to go home with a new owner, even if it is to be played with once and then discarded. There, the human body is the primary cover letter, objectified and displayed; self-worth is reduced and equated to your best profile picture. Don't like what you see? Keep scrolling, keep scrolling, keep strolling, keep strolling...

Grindr increases sociability between citizens, due to a decline of sporadic social encounters in the urban fabric. Have architecture and urbanism

failed modern citizens, leaving technology to save the day? Similarly, one must then ask, does Grindr facilitate the suppression of that which it seemingly wants to liberate: the expression of homosexuality? Even though Grindr claims to encourage face-to-face meetings, the initial approach for this interaction takes place in an invisible space, hosted by servers. Perhaps, in its attempt to spare gay men uncomfortable, human emotions arising from situations such as being identified as gay or being rejected by someone they fancy, it is creating a new type of closet. The main difference is that instead of being inside the closet alone, the Grindr Guys are all locked inside together. In its attempt to empower gay men, by giving them a tool for socialising and finding each other, it is shaping and creating new subjectivities, a new type of gay man.

The Grindr Guy finds himself strategically placed between the digital and physical space, and his relationship to both is a key factor.

The Grindr Guy finds himself strategically placed between the digital and physical space, and his relationship to both is a key factor in his Grindr experience. An important question arises: how does Grindr affect urban spaces, and what is the future city like for gay men? Though Grindr's mission is to bring men together in the same physical space, there are times when Grindr becomes a substitute for the built environment. Meeting up is not the inevitable conclusion of the Grindr experience, and sometimes it is just a way to have a chat with other gay men. This renders the gay zones of cities one option for interaction, rather than the only option, reconfiguring the meaning and function of these urban spaces. On the other hand, by turning any space into a space where gay interaction takes place, Grindr challenges the heteronormative coding of physical spaces, and gay men are able to find, see, and chat with each other no matter where they may be. Perhaps it may be sensible to say that Grindr is a subtle, transitional tool for gay men to appropriate the entire city, not just the gay zones. With the Grindr Guy using the app in any urban space, whether he wishes to reveal his sexuality or not, Grindr can be a personal tool for the acceptance of his sexuality and of the reclaiming of his place in the city. In reconfiguring heteronormative codes digitally, it may be that the future city finds its social heteronomative codes refigured as well. Grindr has stepped in where architecture and gay culture became disjointed, and there is an ambiguity in the relationship between Grindr and architecture. Which influences which? Is Grindr architecture's sidekick, or is it the other way around?

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