



Blue Skies Queer Spaces

blue sky

QUEER
spaces

On 29th June 2020 LGBT Health and Wellbeing's Glasgow Community Project held a panel discussion about 'Blue Sky Queer Spaces' at which we hosted an online panel of queer space creators based in Glasgow, New York and Kampala. We heard about our panellists' inspiring work and asked them some questions about queer spaces, including whether Glasgow needs a dedicated queer community space in 2020 and beyond. Below is a summary of the main points in our discussion.

Our Panel



Alison Smith (she/her)

Alison is Access & Engagement Coordinator for [Scottish Queer International Film Festival](#). SQIFF started in Glasgow in 2015. It's an [accessible film festival](#), community focused, tailored for different groups, programmed by people from different LGBT groups within the community. SQIFF is about giving opportunities to people and seeing people progress—it's so much more than just a film festival.



Joe Issac and Morgan Holleb (both he/him)

Morgan is a nonbinary bisexual Jewish anarchist with a background in queer health advocacy & supporting survivors of domestic violence. Joe is a queer Jewish anarchist with a background in cooking. [Pink Peacock](#) is a queer Yiddish anarchist pay what you can café opening in South Glasgow soon!

Christophe Murray (they/them)

Christopher Works at the USA's largest and oldest organisation serving at risk LGBT youth, the [Hetrick-Martin Institute](#) in New York City. It was founded by two gay men – Doctor Martin and Dr Hetrickin the 1970s who insisted that being gay was not a disease. Now they do wrap around LGBT services – it's a very big centre and houses the first LGBT high school.





Ssenfuka Joanita Warry – A.K.A. Biggie (she/her)

Biggie is the director of [FARUG](#), the oldest LGBT organisation in Uganda, which focuses on L, B and Q people. It is illegal to be gay in Uganda – FARUG creates a space where LBQ persons come together as a community to heal, connect, learn and celebrate through conversations, art and movies that they are unable to enjoy at home. Unfortunately, laws say they can't work with persons under 18 and yet it is the age range where many queer women face sexuality and gender identity crises. Biggie is also on the board of sexual minorities Uganda and is the chair and founder of the LGBT Catholic club Uganda.

Sue John (she/her)



Sue works at [Glasgow Women's Library](#), which was set up initially by the unpaid labour of lots of different people, lesbians were one of the main groups of women behind starting the library. GWL has had lots of queer projects throughout the years and houses the lesbian archives, an amazing collection dating back to the interwar period.



Claricia Parinussa (she/her)

Claricia Works with LGBT Health and runs Vogue Scotland. Vogue Scotland don't have their own physical space, they're a family and everything they do comes from that. Vogue culture started in late 1960s New York from the community of black trans women who created this as a safe space away from the drag ballroom scene.

Questions to the panel from LGBT Health

What makes a good queer space, and why do we need queer spaces?

Joe and Morgan

Accessibility is necessary: income and standard queer stuff. Gender neutral toilets, also accessible toilets, ways to include d/Deaf and blind people.

We're focusing on an alcohol-free space that will be open really late and open to minors and families because representation is key. Intergenerational access is missing: the club scene only hits a specific age bracket (e.g. if I'm a queer 14-year-old where do I go?).

We don't want to compromise on politics/play respectability politics – we don't work with police, are pro Palestine, anti-capitalist, pro sex workers, vegan and environmentally conscious. The space centres queers rather than compromises to be palatable to cis-het audiences.

Biggie

In a country like Uganda, where it is illegal in day to day life to be gay, we need queer spaces. If we didn't have these, then we would have had more mental health issues; having a queer space is a solution to mental health issues: to meet people like you and talk about issues important to you is healing.

At 25 in Uganda, you are expected to look for a husband or wife to settle down. If we didn't have these spaces, a lesbian parent who was forced into a relationship and their partner would be in a horrible situation; partners have gone to their children's schools and revealed their mother's sexuality and children were bullied because of this.

Sue

Queer spaces are created because they come from lived experience of discrimination and oppression. We respond by making them safe, by prioritising elements that we think are the most important in our communities; we don't own those spaces, they are community owned.

Having a queer space is a huge responsibility - we have to be responsive to so many things and proactive about so many things.

Christopher

Wherever you're queer, that space is queer now, don't be afraid to advocate for yourself and for your space! HMI is not just about having the queer people who run the space, but honouring history. Ballroom was born at HMI.

Queer storytelling – that's how you make a queer space. How do you describe a space? That's what makes it for other people: if you can describe it well to get people there that's what will bring them there. Whatever you need to be your best queer self, they meet you where you are. Can one person make a space a queer space? Yes.

It's been an eventful few months in the world, a lot of countries have been in lockdown due to Covid-19, a huge rise in Black Lives Matter activism has affected our communities, there have been world and local events that have affected us all. How have they affected your spaces?

Sue

With COVID, the physical library space is shut; it has emphasised the importance of physical space and the importance of digital space and the advantages and the challenges of that. Amplifying voices in this new space is important.

Christopher

HMI's physical space, where youth (13-24) can come, isn't happening now – New York is very much in lockdown. When it comes to doing that, it has moved online. No contact HIV testing was something staff had to innovate for the centre.

Questions from the audience

If in Glasgow we wanted a new queer space and had to pay for it (rent etc) it would help to know how our friends in NY or Kampala pay for their space?

Biggie

FARUG pay for all our spaces as we don't have funding from the government because [our centre is] illegal. We rent a place but we don't have a sign to show that it's a queer organisation. Our offices are just our names. If the council comes around and asks to speak to us, we tell them that sports people come around to use computers and hang out.

Christopher

At HMI funding comes from the state department of education because we are connected to a high school. We also receive some funding from vetted partners, philanthropy and fundraising.

Queer spaces should be inclusive for all, what access for disabled and wheelchair users from the queer community do those on the panel have?

Alison

SQIFF is wheelchair accessible at every 'in person' event. When people don't think enough ahead, disabled people have to advocate for themselves e.g. with BSL interpreters. After the 1996 disability bill there are no excuses now, organisations should go back to funders and say 'we need money to make this access happen'.

We come with a range of experiences that overlap – some spaces will be better than others in this regard – it's an intersectional issue.

**How can we use queer spaces to make them inclusive for everyone?
How can we use space to unite our community meaningfully so that everyone can feel included?**

Christopher

Trauma informed care is important – it's what we do at HMI. Let's be transparent and tell each other stuff. If staff are domestic abuse survivors we can be open about that to help people feel safe in the space; community members might open up as well.

Joe and Morgan

Being explicitly supportive of survivors of sexual abuse – everyone not just women. Intra community conversation and what we do to support survivors; abusers are not only cis het men. If people disclose abuse history to them, they will take it very seriously and support them.

Absolute favourite thing about a queer space (your own or someone else's)?

Christopher

Ballroom – the survivor of queer culture that has fought ableism, racism, and is a vehicle that has been used by generations of ancestors.

Do we need a permanent queer centre in Glasgow?

Joe and Morgan

Yes Glasgow does need a dedicated queer space – there is a shortage in our city. There are organisations and queer events but most of these spaces are limited in scope of what they're able to provide.

We need broader work like Christopher is doing with HMI in New York: Queer specific HIV support; Housing advocacy; Dealing with DWP for marginalised people; Free public clinics.

The more queers places the better – they serve different purposes and variety is important. We need clubs, we need bookshops, we need cafes!

Claricia

It would be an absolute dream to have something that offers everything but coming from a group that organises across different spaces: you bring your queer self and it becomes a queer space. It's important to work with existing spaces to make existing spaces inclusive and accepting. As soon as queer people feel comfortable in a space, the whole energy changes and the space is changed.

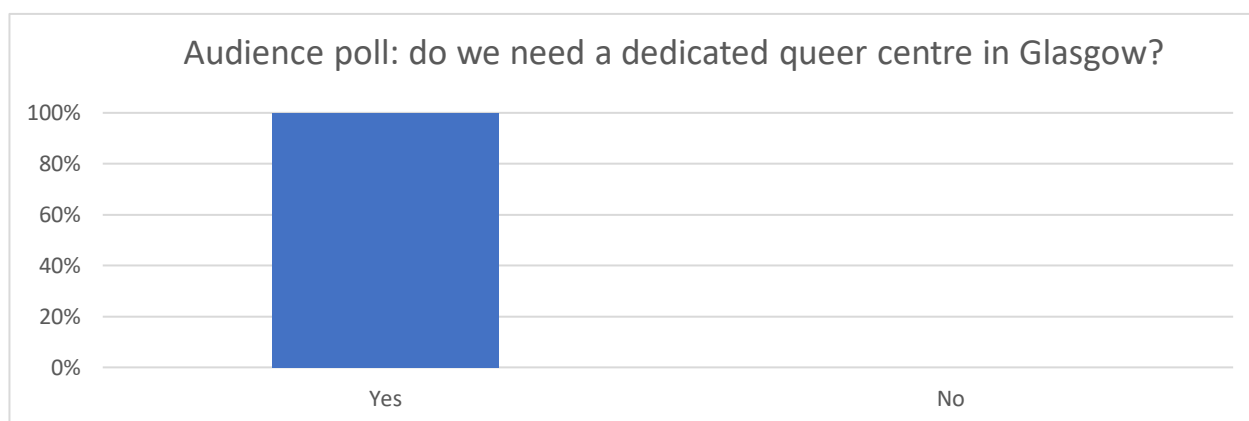
Biggie

Yes Glasgow needs more queer spaces! We try as much as possible to create queer spaces in Uganda - we create the spaces amidst all these scary situations. It's important to have queer spaces in Glasgow – since you get funding from local government, you need to have the space for people to meet, to talk about wellbeing, for young people to have access.

Why not have these things in Glasgow if you have the funding and are allowed to be queer? Queer spaces are needed everywhere – let the queer people be, if we can meet why don't we meet? If in Uganda we meet even though we're not allowed to then everyone can meet in Glasgow! Glasgow: you have all the freedom to have all the spaces, have as many spaces as you want!!

Question to the audience

What does Glasgow's future queer centre need?



- Feeling safe is essential
- Small breakout rooms so lots of different people can use at same time.
- Intersectional events and dedication to safety of those with intersecting marginalised identities
- It should be alcohol free and late opening hours
- Making sure people don't feel like they're not "the right type" of queer
- Staff to be deaf aware and know sign language so Deaf LGBTQ+ community like myself can feel relaxed and welcome
- A hugely important and often overlooked point about people in our community with experience of abuse from members of our community - thank you for raising this.
- Support fund for Travel / ticket fund (sliding scale ticket fund)
- Childcare support.
- Affordable/free food and a quiet space.