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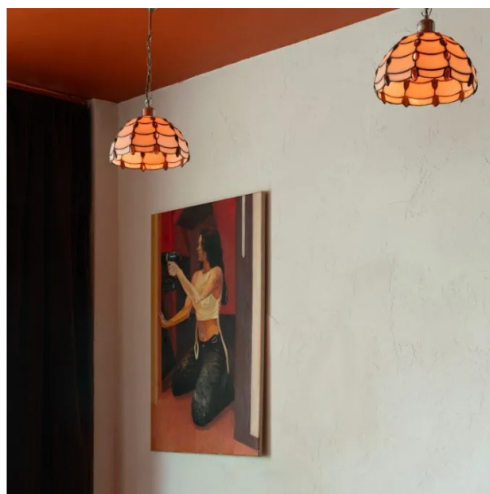
LGBTQ+ nightlife is going back to its counter-cultural roots

22 MAY 2025 • BY GINO SPOCCHIA

Pushing back against Covid's decimation of British nightlife, queer architects, designers and campaigners are taking LGBTQ+ nighttime back to its counter-cultural origins. *Gino Spocchia* reports

Queerness and nightlife go hand in hand. Out of the mainstream. Underground and counter-cultural. Whether it's the location, venue, organisers or crowd, they are always outside the norm.

Some, like new lesbian bar *La Camionera* in Hackney, east London, have been designed, built and crafted by queer hands – the same ones which will soon be shaking, stirring and drinking negronis on a brushed aluminium countertop, or raising a glass in the purpose-built seating areas.





La Camionera

The reopening of the quietly elegant La Camionera (Spanish for ‘female trucker’ and slang for butch lesbian) follows a months-long conversion of a temporary space led by its trans owner and a team of queer architects, contractors and trades. It is unique and stylish.

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But that’s not the only reason this tailored LGBTQ+ space stands out. Its mere existence sits against a background of queer venue closures because of an unholy trinity of rising costs, licensing issues and safety concerns. London, to take one city, has lost half of these safe spaces since 2006.

Waves of redevelopment and gentrification have had their impact, too. One of the most famous victims was the wildly beloved Joiners Arms pub in Hackney Road in 2015. Never forgotten, attempts continue to resurrect this institution somewhere else in London’s East End a decade on.

But can La Camionera pave the way for a design-led renaissance of after-hours ‘queerness’? One thing is for sure, there is a growing queer movement – architects included – to create safe, accessible LGBTQ+ spaces and define what that might look like.

We’re going out (OUT), to find out.

The state of play

The Night Time Industries Association (NTIA) recently reported that 37 per cent of all night clubs across the UK have permanently shut since March 2020. That’s an average of three clubs a week, or 150 a year.

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LGBTQ+ venues make up a considerable chunk of this. In the capital, between 2006 and 2022, Greater London Authority numbers show that 75 bars, clubs and LGBTQ+ pubs shut down – sometimes forever.

The list keeps growing. In the past 18 months, G-A-Y Late in Soho and The Glory in Haggerston have closed. Meanwhile, a third LGBTQ+ safe space, Bethnal Green Working Men’s Club, has been fighting closure on and off for years – though it seems the east London venue may finally have had a late reprieve.

Venue closures are happening elsewhere in the UK, too, with Birmingham losing the Village Inn, Glasgow losing Bonjour and Sheffield losing the Queer Junction nightclub.

Based on the current rate of club closures, the NTIA warns the UK could have no nightclubs of any kind by 2030. The pro-nighttime body blames the collapse partly on the long-term impact of the Covid pandemic. Once closed down and locked up, these unique spaces rarely re-emerge, eyed up by developers for larger gain.

And, while the NTIA data does not explain how many of these closures are LGBTQ+, the community is among the hardest-hit because queerness and nightlife are so intertwined. Or, as Olympia Burchiellaro, a shareholder of the *Friends of The Joiners Arms* campaign, puts it: ‘Nighttime is queer time’.

A call to (Joiners) Arms

While The Joiners Arms, where reportedly Alexander McQueen used to hang out, became one of the first LGBTQ+ venues to get protection in the planning system because of the sexual orientation of its users back in 2017, no on-site replacement has yet popped up on Hackney Road.

Tower Hamlets Council had imposed a planning condition requiring any new development on The Joiners Arms site to include an LGBTQ+ venue. Developer Regal Homes had agreed to it. However, the proposed scheme that forced the closure has been delayed. No development, no new venue.

Burchiellaro tells the AJ that The Joiners Arms shows that LGBTQ+ spaces often act as ‘canaries in the coalmine’; a bellwether of the redevelopment cycle and of the state of the nighttime economy more generally. With little planning protection, they can be easily lost because they are often perceived as ‘unproductive’ uses in buildings ripe for replacement.





Friends of The Joiners Arms protest outside the former pub

'Gentrification and redevelopment are making it more and more difficult for communities who are not solely focused on profit, like queer spaces, to exist,' argues Burchiellaro. 'And, although queer clubs and bars have always been businesses, they've always been so much more than that.'

In the meantime, the Friends of The Joiners Arms campaign has put on 'an itinerant, moving club night' at other east London venues as an act of resistance against anti-LGBTQ+ gentrification and the demise of LGBTQ+ nightlife in the capital, according to [Aska Welford](#), an architectural worker formerly with Karakusevic Carson Architects. Welford, who is leading on co-design for a future permanent home for The Joiners Arms campaign, adds: 'Even without the physical space, without a permanent, fixed space, queer people continue to exist and have a good time and be together.'

Safe and sound

In Edinburgh, GRAS architect Kirsty Watt has also resorted to moving club nights, dubbed 'Femmergy', that turn the city's historic urban fabric – including most recently a former biscuit factory – into a playground for femme-presenting members of the LGBTQ+ community, including trans people and afab women. Watt says: 'In Edinburgh the queer nightlife scene particularly focused around cis gay men and so women, non-binary and trans people weren't necessarily welcome in those spaces and that was the point of it, because there wasn't really a space at all.'



Femmergy club night

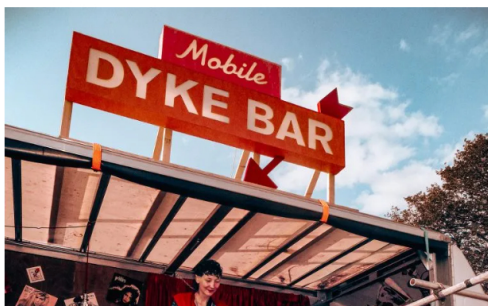
While Femmergy has difficulties finding Edinburgh venues with level access and accessible toilets, the club nights have provided a safe space for people 'to be inherently themselves and represent themselves in a way that they want to while still feeling safe', says Watt.

Both accessibility and safety are central to Femmergy, and are what makes it queer, she tells the AJ, 'because people need to feel like they have a representation within their urban space'. However, she admits that having level access and accessible toilets have 'limited us in terms of what venues we can work with, particularly in Edinburgh, because so many of the buildings are historic'.

Putting the pop in pop-up

So, if permanent dedicated spaces don't always exist, what about bringing the nuts-and-bolts of a party to the people instead? This is the concept behind the Mobile Dyke Bar, a travelling lesbian disco started by former Royal Academy Interior design student Lucy Nurnberg and her right-hand woman, Ali Wagner, as part of a wider project dubbed [Uhaul Dyke Rescue](#), a series of design-led club nights. The Mobile Dyke Bar is made of prefabricated parts which 'slot' into rental vans, which Nurnberg suggests is a tongue-in-cheek response to hyper-masculine removal van culture as much as it is a declaration of space for lesbians when there is barely any.

Its next stop is Mighty Hoopla, a pop festival in south London, later this month – the Mobile Dyke Bar's second outing at the LGBTQ+ friendly event.





The Mobile Dyke Bar at Mighty Hoopla in 2024

'The idea was that this would be a friendly space, but also about taking space for ourselves and being like, "Look, we need a bit of a dedicated corner here"', explains Nurnberg, whose Uhaul Dyke Rescue service was a reaction to 'queer spaces in London generally declining, especially lesbian spaces'.

Nurnberg adds that her interior design course informed Uhaul's philosophy, 'which is a bit secret and underground' and had to be done on the cheap. It also looks at temporary structures as queer structures.

'We had a scaffold structure on the dance floor for our first night because I know that dykes love to flex muscle,' Nurnberg explains, 'But I also wanted to make it for anybody more femme presenting, and for anybody wanting to look a bit sexy, so we put a swing on the structure and people loved it.'

Why architects should design the night

CAKE, a Dalston, east London-based practice, which was behind the **Agnes stage** at Rally festival in south London last year, has experience on an even bigger scale of delivering for a queer crowd.

The Layher scaffolding and translucent fibreglass-clad structure was designed to flip to become 'The Strap' at Body Movements – a queer festival the following day. That's when the versatility of the modular structure's raised platforms, floating walls, and one central dance floor all came into action – bringing the audience, artist and stage together. 'For both days, depending on the music, it was a completely different environment,' says CAKE architect Emiliano Zavala. 'At Body Movements people were dancing up on terraces and the whole thing was inhabited, and for Rally, the crowd was low and spread out, with the stage a kind of undercroft. The difference was really interesting.'



Agnes by CAKE Architecture

Why did CAKE take on the challenge? Hugh Scott Moncrieff, creative director, says it 'wasn't the idea of making money' but the opportunity to make creative architecture that reflects music, rhythm and sound, as well as context.

Agnes, or The Strap, was possible because CAKE had proven to festival organisers with an earlier Rally stage that you could 'spend a tiny bit of money on design work' and win against standard fabrication teams 'who weren't coming at it from an architectural lens', Scott Moncrieff adds. Agnes could be getting an upgrade for this year's August bank holiday festivals. The structure also won the **people's choice award** at last month's AJ Small Projects. A sign of better-designed nights out to come?

The future is niche – and lesbian

If the Mobile Dyke Bar and Agnes could be the future of festivals and club nights, is La Camionera the future of LGBTQ+ nighttime spaces more broadly? A well-polished, honed product for a community crying out for something decent designed especially for them?

Daniel Pope, of newly established design studio and architects **Popelo**, which worked on La Camionera, says the bar is special because the result is super-niche. Certainly, there is no underfoot nastiness, peeling paint or unwanted design features common to many of the old underground venues. Yet this is queer through and through.

'There's not really many queer spaces where you can get a really beautiful drink in a nice glass, where the floor isn't sticky,' says Pope. 'And with funding being so difficult, often queer spaces can feel quite DIY and quite shabby, perhaps not thought-through. With La Camionera, we really tried to make it feel high-end. So we focused the budget on specific areas, like the bespoke bench seat and polished aluminium bar; it feels quite luxe.'



La Camionera Interior by Popelo and WET Studio

Those additions, Pope admits, had to be costed in and compensated for elsewhere. Making decisions like these is part of the 'burden' on queer architects delivering queer spaces – often pro bono or for a reduced fee. But designing with care and enthusiasm, and, crucially, with first-hand experience of being part of the community.

As Pope says: 'While I can't talk for lesbians and there's loads of spaces for gay men in London, I know that having a lesbian space that felt really sexy was key for La Camionera.'

The architect, who worked alongside LGBTQ+ set design firm Wet Studio on the job, argues that La Camionera's queer energy was brought by that very queer team of 'builders and makers who know how you want to feel in a space as a queer person'. On that basis, bespoke queer design for clubs, bars and music experiences in general could be the way forward – and a challenge to the troubles of the wider nighttime economy and a lack of LGBTQ+ representation in permanent spaces.

He adds: 'Talking from experience, when I was not out, I would go to events and never felt like I enjoyed it. It wasn't until I started making queer friends and we would go to queer venues that you could be yourself and connect with other people in a really magnetic way.'

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