



Performative Spaces: Babylon and Farose *Gay*¹ Saunas

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Introduction

Bangkok is visualized on the global map of tourism and travel as a major location for sexual pleasure and consumption (Askew 2002). The media-driven image of Bangkok in the Western imaginary is its tourist red-light districts or a place akin to an “erotic theme park” (Robinson 1993). This pervading image of Bangkok as well as the growth of tourist-oriented prostitution can be traced to the foreign-oriented sex trade in the 1960s that followed in the expansion in the tourism sector from the mid-1970s and was given the blessing (indirectly) of the state through tourism promotion. Sex-related businesses including those that catered to homosexuals expanded in the process, and by the 1990s the growth in the numbers of *gay* bars and discos in the Patpong area of Bangkok and in Pattaya were evident. Additionally, the economic boom of Thailand that resulted in the rapid urbanization of Bangkok metropolis has created spaces for sexual cultures to develop. Thai metropolis became “the site for the formation of a variety of sexual cultures (lesbian, transsexual and *gay*) which are part of a complex of global sexual cultures and identity formation” (Askew 2002: 253). Along with the flourishing of the sex tourism, included *gay* tourism and evidence of this can be seen today from the number of *gay*-related businesses and services and how they are actively promoted and advertised through maps, pamphlets, brochures, and on the Internet.

Bangkok has long been considered to be the “*gay* capital” of Asia, and the international popularity of Babylon sauna for example, known for being the best *gay* bathhouse in the world, attests to the image of Thailand as a “*gay* paradise”. This reputation is demonstrated when newspapers reported two years ago of the threat of the Singapore *Nation* party and the opening of *gay* establishments in Singapore in taking the “pink” dollars away from Thailand². The expanding *gay* business establishments in Bangkok both as a landmark in the mapping of *gay* tourist spots across the globe signifies the global connectivity of these establishments, how regional and international forces configure in the construction, operation, and spread of *gay*-related businesses in Thailand. From a distance, these erotic male-to-male locations all seem to be a copy of each other and local Thai men randomly cater to them. However, the local practices of these erotic sites tell us of the peculiar and ambivalent characteristics of each place and how they are defined and placed in the mental mapping of the *gay* geography of Bangkok. At the same time, these sites offer hints of their relevance of how Thai *gay* men conceive of their sexuality.

In this paper I describe Babylon and Farose saunas in Bangkok: their architectures, landscape, the activities that occur in each sauna, and the meanings that my informants put in these activities. What will be evident from the following texts is how each sauna has constituted a culture that has become its identifying marker, differentiating them from other *gay* places and spaces in the city. Babylon and Farose as cultural sexual spaces are shaped by their distinctive physical structures as well as the behavior of their clientele in these spaces. Men who enter them have an idea of what they are going to experience inside: sex with *farang* (foreign) men, images and representations of muscular men, *kathoey* show, fine dining, dilapidated rooms that reek with the smell of semen, dark rooms without doors and lights, nude men continuously walking in and out of the rooms where other men are engaging in sexual acts, the sound of groaning and moaning emanating from the cubicle rooms, hundreds of nude men dancing in the basement, etc. Because Babylon and Farose

inhabit markedly different and peculiar spatial/temporal qualities, the experiences of men who go there suggest that these qualities transform and define them. Each space constitutes its own “habitus”. At the same time, the men who go there re/create and re/constitute these places. The re/constructed meanings and associated functions of “Babylon” and “Farose” define the existential natures and meanings of these two saunas in the homoerotic landscape of Bangkok.

Babylon: the best *gay* sauna in the world

In the words of one of my informants, Babylon is the “Miss Universe of all the saunas in Thailand”. Touted as one of the best *gay* bathhouses in the world based on *gay* almanacs, *gay* travel guides, and the Internet, this description echoes the prestige and image of the place for many Thai and foreign *gay* men: that of a *gay* complex that is almost akin to “paradise”. According to Keen, “go to Babylon. It’s a good place – clean, cool, many things to do like sex, disco, pool, gym. Quite expensive but it’s got special events such as the show, bubble night, the foam party. There are many things to do in Babylon.”

Conspicuously not situated within the red light district of Silom⁴ road but rather hidden in the deep end of a small alley in a private residential and business area, Babylon’s location conveys much about its history as about its character. The surrounding neighborhood of Babylon is mainly constituted by luxury condominiums and consular/embassy offices⁵. In recent years, the quiet neighborhood has been gentrified into a *gay* residential place for upper middle class local *gay* men and foreign *gay* expatriates⁶. Gary Atkins (2005) has made the following descriptions of the neighborhood of Babylon:

Soi/Nantha itself is a very interesting neighborhood if you look at it: the Austrian embassy compound, the consulate of the sultanate of Omar sitting behind gilded gates, the Banyan Tree hotel. On the other side of the *soi*, the wall, there’s a wall, condos - new condos, but if you walk there in the afternoons, for those of you who are daytime

participants, what you hear is often the soccer games of the young and poor Thai males over the abandoned field behind all those condos, behind Babylon, coming out of what used to be one of Bangkok's biggest squatter slums, Suan Phlu, which existed for up to 10-20 years until it burned down a year ago, threatening Babylon by the way. Not far away sat the Bangkok jail for illegal immigrants, the detention center, close by is the Baptist theological seminary. My point is, the whole neighborhood is little islands, little islands of race, class, and globalization all broken into these particular areas. And no place more so a global island I think than Babylon. I took a taxi once in the airport. Most taxis drivers I found know about Babylon. They may not quite know where it is, but they've heard of it. And so the taxi driver that I got, when it broke into *soi*/Nantha at midnight, he said, "Babylon, Babylon. This is the place to be, Babylon".

When Babylon sauna first opened in 1987 on the corner of *Soi* (street) Nantha and Sathon road - by a Chinese man who came from a rich family that owns the entire *Soi* Nantha - it was made up of a winding serpentine-like building and was initially intended to serve as a public spa for men⁷. The architecture of the first Babylon sauna and its environment and activities were captured in lengthy detail by a Singaporean *gay* man who wrote about it in 1995 and whose essay was published in a *gay* website⁸. I will reproduce lengthy parts of essay in this chapter as a main source of reference in describing the culture of the Babylon sauna and in illustrating how the architecture of Babylon has evolved from its original aesthetics.

Babylon - the name suggests it all: freedom, idyllic tranquility, green bucolic surroundings, the cradle of hedonism, playground for the debauched, where the sole aim in life is the fulfillment of carnal desires and the abandonment of all else.

It's 8.30 p.m. and the whole place is dimly lit; I'm having much trouble seeing what I'm writing. It's April Fool's Day, and the warm air swathes over the half-naked bodies of men on the balcony, waiting, anticipating, and expecting something to happen. They sit at their tables sipping a

cold glass of beer or reading the latest *gay* porno offering, hoping the empty chair next to them will soon be occupied by the man of their dreams or just occupied, period. They listen to the soft saxophone piping through the sound system and try to relax. It's Saturday night, something ought to happen soon.

Further down, it's the steam room with its therapeutic vapors and unintended innuendoes. Sit down on the bench and let the billowing clouds swarm you. Sweat like crazy, you're supposed to like it. Go further in and you can't see a damn thing, it's pitch dark. But you can feel the mass of bodies plastered against the wall and hear the occasional sigh which signifies what, you can never be sure. You stand for five seconds and you understand the darkness perfectly: you start to feel hands on your body and always on a body part in particular. It's that chamber in Babylon where you experience maximum pleasure with minimum vulnerability, where looks or personality don't matter, there's no possibility of rejection, an anonymous everlasting orgy.

If you go down to the third level of the building on either side, you will find what I will call the sleeping chambers although it's understood that very little sleeping actually occurs there. Each chamber is about the size of the main bathroom of an HDB flat and the sole piece of furniture is a cushioned platform slightly larger than a single bed. And lest we lose sight of mortality in such times as these, black and white posters in each chamber and other accessible places remind you that "Safe Sex is HOT SEX" and to "Be Man Enough to Protect Your Lover". And for the ignorant, an educational poster on the second level gives the necessary information and pointers in prevention.

Outside the sleeping chambers, the passages lead from one section of chambers to another in the semi-darkness, like some sort of labyrinth leading to a thousand possibilities. The hall is lined with men waiting, waiting. For a partner perhaps but some have already coupled up and are just waiting for an empty chamber. A couple, a middle-aged white man and his Thai boy can't even wait and have started making out in the hallway. Then there is the incessant traffic of humanity up and down the corridors; men seem to be continually on the move,

roving, their shifty eyes darting in their sockets, searching for something.

The gym is, sensibly, one of the few well-lit places in this whole building. The equipment is wide-ranging and sophisticated but unlike other gyms, this one's definitely not decorated by a muscle-head. Elegance and class permeate this space, just like the rest of the building. The centerpiece of the room is a headless, limbless statue of the ancient Southeast Asian kind. Genuine or not, I couldn't tell. Metal weights clang in time to the music videos on Channel V as gym instructors, in white shorts and shirts, look on and give a helping hand or work out on their own.

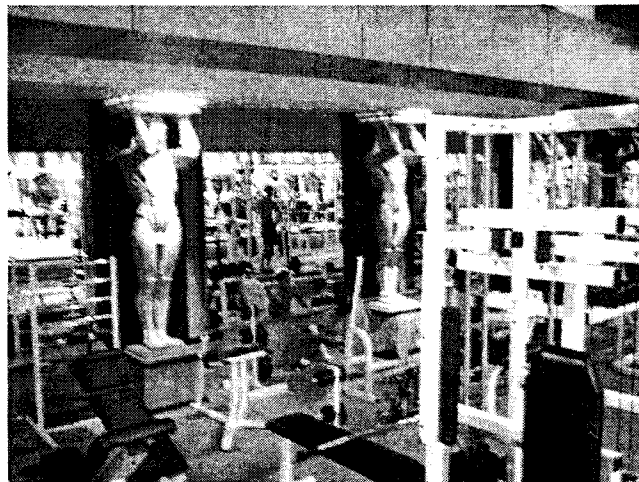
Opposite the wine bar on the ground floor is the TV room where good movies are shown in continuous succession. Tonight's offerings: Last of the Mohicans, The Flintstones, Die Hard, The Piano and The Terminator. The movies are, thank God, not Thai-dubbed. And for the more intellectually discerning, there's a magazine corner with the latest periodicals: Time, Newsweek, Asiaweek and Fortune. The furniture is tasteful yet casual: rattan chairs complete with matching tables. On one side of the room is a glass wall through which you can see a man-made pond, koi swimming aimlessly inside with vines twining up a metal structure rising out of the middle and a gurgling fountain by its side.

If you're looking for a man, well this is the place to be. Oriental, white, young, geriatrics tottering into their final years, gorgeous faces with tight pecs, abs and biceps, paunchy businessmen whose fortune is anything but their faces. Macho to the bone or queens right down to manicured fingernails - the variety is there; all you have to do is choose. Or you can simply window-shop, sample the goods, no commitments, no strings attached.

As you leave the building into the real world, you know you have just left Paradise and long to return. Babylon is the place where there is no discrimination, everybody's minority, everybody sympathizes, everybody understands. In the few hours you have been there, you

have left the world and all its prejudices, and entered another stage of existence where only pleasure and fulfillment await. For 200 baht, Paradise never came so cheap. Or so you'd think.

In 2000 the sauna moved further down to the deep end of *soi* Nantha and expanded into a complex. Around this time, Babylon sauna was already widely known among *gay* men as a cruising place for sex. The expansive compound consists of a line of apartments, a courtyard, the home of the owner of Babylon, and a seven-story building. The first two floors of the building are part of the so-called "Babylon sauna" complex and accessible to the public, the third floor is made up of massage rooms that are only occupied if a Babylon patron takes the massage services of the sauna, and the rest of the building is the "Babylon Barracks" hotel. Other than the first two floors of the building, "Babylon sauna" also has several facilities connected to the building and open to the sauna patrons/customers such as the gym, a pool, an atrium, a cross bar which serves as a restaurant and café, a courtyard, and a two-story structure connected to the building by way of the atrium.



Babylon fitness center

The two-story structure consists of the wet and dry saunas, steam rooms, cubicles, disco, tele-viewing area, and a basement. These segments of the structure are opened at different times of the day: the saunas, steam rooms, and a section of the cubicles at six in the evening; and the disco, televiewing area, basement, and the rest of the section of cubicles near the televiewing area at invariable times between seven to nine pm in the evening. The entrance to the two - story structure from the courtyard is greeted by a staircase that leads to the second floor and a dry sauna that features pornographic video in one corner. The rest of the ground floor is occupied by a stream of serpentine- mosaic- tiled communal shower area. The steam rooms and Jacuzzi are found at the corner behind the shower area. The second floor is composed of small rooms with rectangular sofa beds. The basement is a fantasy area that replicates the public cruising toilets in the US with holes on the cubicle dividers by which oral sex can be performed between men inside the conjoined cubicles, and which also function as peeping holes by which men can view other men having sex in the cubicles. The rest of the basement is a maze made up of wooden walls and steel chain curtains, another fantasy replication of sado-masochist sex clubs in San Francisco.

The tables and chairs in the atrium face a podium that bears the name Babylon that is embossly carved from the stone wall. At the opposite ends of the podium stand two stone sculptures of an Egyptian-looking soldier with a hyper masculine built. There is a cocktail bar at one side of the atrium where men order wine or other drinks and socialize with other men.

To illustrate a typical activity in Babylon I include here an entry from my field notes:

It is Wednesday afternoon and I had made an appointment to meet Keen in Silom. He invited me to visit Babylon because there was an underwear party at nine in the evening. Being the middle of the week, the managers of the saunas frequently come up with promotions to encourage their patrons to enter their establishments. At the entrance of Babylon is a courtyard with beautifully manicured plants. Inside,

the place resembles an exclusive and high-class health club. It is centrally air-conditioned with sweet music in the background and soft pin lights. It is mid afternoon and the number of men arriving keeps increasing. There are as many foreigners as Asians.

We pay two hundred and fifty baht each and deposit our bags at the counter. A series of small television screens that capture every area of the Babylon complex such as the gym, pool, atrium, changing area allows us to estimate the number of customers inside. On the second floor we catch a glimpse of men in light brown towels everywhere - walking, standing by the walls, sitting in a magazine corner near the swimming pool, lounging around in the long benches, or watching a movie in the restaurant. The men in these areas seem to be in a leisurely mood.

When I went to the atrium I met Keen. He was sipping wine with his other friend. I sat at their table and Keen told me he had met a cute guy in the steam room with whom he had sex. We decided to stay in the atrium and wait for the kathoey show at six o'clock. Tonight the show was a mixture of different production numbers, including a Korean song and a Bette Medler impersonator.

Keen and I decided to have dinner. Inside the restaurant, the men who were eating were being serenaded by a Filipino and American jazz singers with a band accompaniment. Naked men with only a towel for cover were dining in a romantic ambience of glass walls and beautiful chairs and tables. The waiters were *kathoey*⁹ dressed in a campy black outfit that parodies the nannies in American comedy television shows.

It was already seven in the evening when we finished our meal and we agreed to meet again in the disco after two hours. In the sauna area, where most of the men were, people were engaged in different stages of sexual activities. By this time the other section of the dark area was opened and more men were standing outside the dark rooms. There was a wide screen beside the staircase leading to the basement featuring Kylie Minogue.

At nine o'clock I met Keen and his other friends in the disco. Keen was with a Thai guy whom he introduced him to us. After some time Keen's partner left to join his own friends. We decided to stay another hour. The number of men had decreased and were walking more briskly. Keen explained that as it gets closer to closing time customers become less choosy in picking partners. In the changing area, men were getting ready to leave. Outside, the sky was still dark and there were taxis waiting for the customers of Babylon.

Babylon culture

Babylon is viewed as a *gay* theme park, a luxurious complex of facilities with an expansive parking lot situated beside the complex for its patrons. According to Atkins (2005) it is considered as one of the first few saunas that began to work on "form" rather than "function". Although Babylon sauna does not screen its patrons and restrict the place to a particular group of *gay* men it is evident that it targets upper middle class local Thai men and foreigners. Evidently, a large number of Babylon customers are Caucasian men, and most of the Thai customers of Babylon project symbols of wealth. Thai *gay* men who go there are generally dressed in fashionable clothes and shoes, have automobiles, and carry expensive cellphones.

Apart from the international service standard that Babylon offers and its cosmopolitan clientele, Babylon has the virtual qualities of Disneyland because it is both a fantasy world and a business operation. The hybrid textures and details of Babylon bring to mind the marriage of different cultures and civilizations calling into place a Disney-like theme park that displaces local practices and customs of urban Bangkok. All these materials that are drawn from different worlds are coalesced and harmonized in projecting the *gay* persona, a persona that complements both masculine and feminine attributes. Whether Babylon is global or local is inessential because the elements of the place are harmoniously combined in projecting the supposed attributes of *gayness*.

The owner of Babylon chose the name of his sauna from the biblical Tower of Babel to mean a conglomeration of different worlds and nationalities. Indeed, the sauna projects the image of a global site and makes an effort to be an establishment of international taste and standards. According to Atkins (2005), it is in the interiors and materials from which the complex is made up that show how truly global Babylon is. The materials and even themes in the sections of the complex are taken from different cultures. The complex includes traditional Thai architecture with Egyptian sphinxes, giant phalluses and other Mediterranean themes. The effect is sophisticated but hybrid sexuality. At the same time, the feeling that one gets when one enters the enclosed compound is similar to that of entering an airport where objects, artifacts, and services are distinctly foreign. Like airports and malls, Babylon evokes the sense of foreignness and globality distinct from the local culture. However, while both airports and shopping malls express the blending of many cultures, they are, unlike Babylon, globally replicated (Hannerz 1996). Babylon represents foreignness but does not replicate itself in other parts of the world and is paradoxically unique. While the experience of Babylon includes the foreign, among Thai *gay* men it is also simultaneously local. Babylon represents and expresses glocality.

Farose man pen sokapro te sanuuk tii sut
(Dirty Farose but the best in town)

In contrast to Babylon, Farose is located in a semi-urban location not usually explored by tourists and attracts a mostly local clientele. All my informants take the view that it is for low class *gay* men. Keen says, "I don't go to Farose. Farose is really dirty. It is open until six AM, and most of the guys who are in the bar head off there after the dancing is finished."

Unlike Babylon, Farose does not have a parking lot and is conspicuously lacking in its interior design. While Babylon has several wide semi-private areas where patrons can lounge and relax, Farose is mainly composed of small tightly packed rooms next to one another. It is

located in a secluded residential area in a row of apartments. Farose consists of two three-storey apartments connected through the rooftop patio. The interiors of Farose are rather dilapidated, with poorly painted walls, broken mirrors and a neglected shower room.



The staircase at Farose

When entering the massive wooden doors of Farose one sees a counter with a television monitor. The monitor is connected to a camera screening the men about to enter the sauna. Another room leads to a Jacuzzi, dry sauna, steam room, shower area, and a mirror room. The stairway to the second floor has a middle landing with a miniature gym. Customers beyond this point have to remove their towels. The first floor of Farose is the only section that functions as a sauna. The rest of Farose consists of a narrow maze of small rooms.

The rooftop has several benches with tables shaded by vines. There are food and drinks that are openly served. Not far from where the food and drinks are located there is an open doorway that leads to the second

adjoining apartment of the sauna. This second apartment has an attendant that ensures that customers remove their underwear before entering.

The three floors of the second apartment are similar to the second and third floors of the first apartment and contain rooms with small windows on the doors. Some rooms are bigger than others and do not have doors, allowing men to freely walk in and out. There are several benches placed along the corners. The second apartment has a basement with a disco and a bar serving free refreshments.

Babylon sauna may meungan Farose sauna
(Babylon is not the same as Farose)

Both Babylon and Farose are designed to enable sexual interactions between men. For Keen:

I don't think there's anything bad about going to the sauna. It's good to go there. You go there to relax, you go there with *gay* friends and you try to have a good time with them. Sometimes I go there even if I don't want to have sex but my friend is feeling horny so I accompany him. Sometimes I go there just to relax, like sleep or go to the sauna, or look around and wait and see if there's a good looking guy in the place.

For Soom:

Sauna is good. You can express what you are when you're there. It is fun. You can meet people who are the same as you. But if I already have a boyfriend I won't go there. It's too risky!

Meen provides a different perspective on why he goes to the sauna:

I think going to the sauna is not good. Because you get addicted to it and you will maybe dump your boyfriend. If my parents find out that I go there they will think that I am a nasty boy. But I go to sauna because my boyfriend had sex with me only once. He only likes to

sleep with me once. So I have sex with other guys. But I never tell my boyfriend that I go to the sauna because he will think that I'm not a good person, or I'm not the right guy for him.

Gary Atkins identifies four factors that facilitate the movements inside the sauna: a sense of arrival, a sense of agreement, a sense of meeting, and a sense of place. One gets a sense of arrival because the sauna feels like a home to its customers. It is a place where one feels that one can pursue homoerotic desires without social restrictions. The sense of agreement refers to the understanding of what the sauna is and the agreed upon rules of how one should behave. It also refers to the common agreement regarding how a *gay* place should look and how men should move in the place. The sense of meeting involves the experience when one enters the sauna and becomes exposed to different sensations. Finally the sense of place is how the sauna becomes a specific locational site allowing homoeroticism and the performance of a *gay* identity. These factors overarch and overcome the idiosyncratic personalities and characters of the participants in the sauna setting.

Interestingly, while these two saunas serve the same major purpose they are also pronouncedly different. Their differences are indicated by their respective reputations. *Gay* men often describe how "proper" they are or other men based on which sauna they go to. Babylon and Farose host different cultures embedded in their architectures and the performances of the bodies of men in each location. The atmosphere of sophistication and class that is evident in Babylon intimates not only a culture of taste and fashion but also an equation of homoeroticism with beauty, an aesthetics of sexuality. In Babylon, cruising for sex is strongly based on body and skin beauty, including the association with indices of class. Keen and his friends seek sexual pleasure in Babylon while sipping wine, having dinner and watching a drag performance. Babylon is part of a social activity in the life of a Thai *gay* man. In contrast, Farose is experienced not as part of the social activities of the day but as a

separate world. It only operates at night, when the whole of Bangkok is asleep. Its low maintenance and the absence of an interior aesthetic render the physical structure as symbolically meaningless. It is basically a collection of small rooms divided by plywood. During the day, Farose looks like an abandoned warehouse. It is in the use and practice of the place that it becomes Farose. The absence of any physical aesthetics directs attention to the exclusive pursuit of sexual pleasure. Bacchanalian debauchery is the theme of Farose, informing all bodily movements in the sauna. Men of all shapes, sizes and looks display their bodies wantonly within confined spaces of Farose that offers limitless sexual possibilities and experimentation. Because sexual behavior is isolated from other social settings and becomes the main focal point of interactions, it is performed with "abandon" since its context suggests possibilities otherwise hitherto impossible and unavailable (Tattelman 1999).

The behavior inside the sauna is determined by the particular cultural knowledge about the sauna. Because sexual contact and pleasure are the main purpose of the sauna, all the elements are significations of these ends: the water, the towels, the communal bathrooms, the underwear and nude sections, etc. When participating in the sauna, one automatically assumes a different persona, taking up the role of a sauna patron who follows the unspoken rules that govern interactions. The meaning of a particular behavior is coded by location and posture, are understood and followed, thereby creating coherence in the movements in the sauna. The agreement that it is a place where sexual interaction between men and experimentation are possible assist how these men perform in the said location. It is a culture of seeing without touching and touching without seeing. It is also a theatrical experience where sight is altered by the different visuals presented in the sauna. And because the theatrical experience of the sauna is a fantasy, it offers a complex set of relationships and roles between men (Tattelman 1999).

Claiming and transforming *gay* spaces

The various interactions that take place in the sauna and other *gay* sites can be read as practices of appropriation - and transformation - of spaces. *Gay* men's encounters in these sites give them the opportunity to develop relations with other *gay* men thereby contributing to identity building. Concomitantly, they also transform the places where these interactions take place. The following example illustrates the process of altering spaces while negotiating *gay* identities. Noat, a Sino-Thai dentist, grew up as a regular client of Babylon sauna. During the latter part of the 1980s when the sauna first opened, he frequented the place and became friends with the owner. When Noat first frequented Babylon, it was located along a small alley and had a Thai design. In 2002, after spending some years in Europe, Noat visited Babylon and was surprised to see the transformation of the place. It had moved location and was now four times bigger. The interiors now resembled the *gay* bathhouses he had seen in London that include fantasy rooms such as glory holes and poles and chain curtains made of steel. The owner informed him that during the 1990s there was a sharp increase in the number of foreign patrons and younger Thai men began to take an interest in looking hyper masculine. This prompted the owner to change the interiors of Babylon to reflect a more masculine image. Ironically, Noat is not keen on these changes and longs for the old Babylon. He and his friends now prefer other sites less concerned with the youthful fascination with hyper-masculinity.

The use of sauna and other *gay* spaces differs depending on personal preferences and objectives. This can be more adequately demonstrated if we look at the sites where *gay* men interact. The *gay* saunas scattered across the metropolis all have the same basic features but *gay* men use them in different ways. For instance, GSM sauna is patronized by heavy, slightly overweight *gay* men, The Beach sauna is popular among adolescent *gays* while Cruising II sauna attracts mature men. These *gay* sites have generated diverse cultures as men strategize to maximize erotic possibilities.

Soom, a Muslim illustrates the diversity of *gay* lifestyles in Thailand. Soom goes to saunas because he does not have sex with his *gay* partner. A Muslim from Songkhla province, he works as a porter delivering products

to several marketplaces in Bangkok at four o'clock in the morning. Soom, who considers himself *khon thammada*, or ordinary person, is well built because of the physical nature of his job. Soom says that:

If I go to the sauna, I only exercise slightly. The job I do is very tough so I am already exercising my body at work. I heard that good looks and a good shape attract *gay* men. The reason *gay* men go to a fitness center is so they look good.

Although Soom has a boyfriend, he said he and his partner do not have sex regularly:

N: You have a boyfriend right? Why do you still hang around in the sauna?

S: Because we never have sex together. We could not do it, so I have to do it with others instead. The only thing we can do is kissing.

N: You love him without sex? Why can't you have sex?

S: Because... I don't know. I'm still wondering why. I think he'd prefer not to have sex with me. We can stay together longer without sex because of our love. People have a relationship not only because of sex. There are many reasons for staying together.

The transformative aspect of *gay* places is shown in the various ways *gay* men appropriate *gay* venues for private ends. While these locations are readily accessible terrains, they are also places that serve specific personal objectives, rendering them specific histories and cultures. Castells argues that places are "historical products, not only in their physical materiality but also in their cultural meaning" (Castells 1983: 302). Indeed, as the narrative of Noat would suggest, Babylon's architecture has been transformed and shaped by the men who patronize it. It has generated a space of Western *gay* identity that valorizes hyper masculinity and a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Babylon suggests, and even imposes notions of what it means to be *gay*. *Gay* men define themselves according to these images and representations by appropriating, modifying, and sometimes even rejecting them.

Conclusion

The proliferation of *gay* saunas in Bangkok increased dramatically in the last ten years. To date, there are more than twenty eight saunas scattered in the Bangkok metropolis. In many instances these saunas have become prime targets of harassment by the government. For example, in 2001 a government ordinance called the New Social Order was imposed by Interior Minister Purachai Piomsombun. In September of the same year Farose sauna was raided and ordered to close down. It continued operation and was repeatedly raided several times the following year. Babylon was raided on December 27 of 2002. The raids were usually conducted with the media, and according to news reports the sight of condoms on the floor and of a room full of nude men shocked the public. The crackdown on *gay* saunas is attributed to efforts by the government to create the impression that it is serious in keeping order in the city, so places where the so-called “unnatural” acts of sex between men occur were targeted. But owing to corruption within the police force and the lack of seriousness in actually closing down *gay* establishments – the raids are usually taken as image-boosting acts by government officials – they continue to operate.

The descriptions of Babylon and Farose saunas and the activities of men who navigate them illustrate the potentials of these places of erotic possibilities. They are constructed spaces that provide templates for shaping conceptions of *gay* sexuality as much as sites for sexual intimacies. Their physical existence defines as well as becomes defined by the men who practice these places. They constrain and convey rules of how men should behave, directing and imposing on them ideas about how *gay* men act, behave, love, or have sex. Babylon and Farose saunas and other *gay* spaces are substantive elements for the constructions of *gay* identities. They become sites for *gay* subjective performances – allowing *gay* men to constantly remodel and redefine their sexual selves through an interpellation of class/gender/race positions, the discursive Thai *gay* models of gender oppositions of *gay king* and *gay queen*, and the popular Western construct of a singular politicized *gay* identity. Having the agency to negotiate their subjective positions they are able to shape their own

multiple definitions of what it means to be *gay*. As one of my informants said, “Nobody in the office knows I’m *gay*. Maybe they do but we don’t talk about it. I can only be *gay* on weekends, in the evening when I’m out of the house and in Silom with my *gay* friends”.

At the same time, Thai *gay* men shape *gay* spaces. Farose and Babylon therefore are *not just empty spaces* but *become* Farose and Babylon *places* through the practice of their clientele (Pred, 1984). While these erotic places are generated in several sites they are at the same time uniquely defined by the peculiar and often ambivalent ways in which they are used by Thai men.

Notes

- 1 In this paper I italicize the word *gay* to caution the reader of my use the word as a provisionary term to refer to males who identify as such but whose system of gender and sexuality may not be congruent with the West; I also use the word as an adjective to refer to cultures, events, and material things that relate to male-to-male eroticism.
- 2 Far Eastern Economic Review, “Special Report: Coming Out, Cashing In Why Gay Rights Make Economic Sense”, October 28, 2004.
- 3 See for instance Spartacus, www.dreadedned.com, www.squirt.org, Men of Thailand, etc.
- 4 Silom is a famous red light district in the Bangkok metropolis where most of the flesh trade is concentrated.
- 5 Babylon is accessible from Silom and Sukhumvit roads, Bangkok’s commercial/shopping districts. Close to the major Sathon road, the area was one of the four key zones of the city that was targeted by international property consultant firms in the 1980s as potential site for developing and establishing a high-status residential and business area. See Askew (2002).
- 6 This information is based on the impressions of my informants about the composition of the neighborhoods of Babylon in recent years, as well as personal information from Filipino *gay* friends and other foreign expatriates who live in the condominiums that line the Sathon *soi* one
- 7 Obelisk sauna was the first *gay* sauna that opened in Bangkok. It opened in the early 1980s and ran for more than 10 years before closing in the mid 1990s. The old Babylon today has been transformed into a series of condominiums with a restaurant at the ground floor.
- 8 Visit <http://www.yawningbread.com>.
- 9 *Kathoei* is a term that refers to effeminate and trans-gendered homosexuals in Thailand. The term *gay* is often defined in opposition to the effeminate characteristics of *kathoei*. See Jackson (1995) and Sinnott (2004)

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