

The Role of Space Design in Safer Queer Spaces: A Comparative Study of Independent Bookstores in Japan and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the meaning of a space being considered “safer” for queer individuals, placing particular emphasis on the complex relationship between spatial configurations and the subjective experience of safety. I argue that the concept of safety goes beyond merely providing a physical location; it is deeply intertwined with opportunities for social inclusion, community building, and the free expression of diverse identities. Drawing on interviews conducted by the author with independent bookshop owners in Japan and the United Kingdom, as well as detailed analyses of zines and other privately published materials, this study investigates how bookshops serve as dynamic cultural spaces that foster expression and connection. Through practices such as zine production, community event organization, and the thoughtful curation of books and displays, these spaces cultivate a sense of comfort, accessibility, and belonging for queer individuals who may otherwise feel marginalized. By examining these interactions, I seek to clarify the specific conditions under which spaces are perceived as welcoming and affirming by queer communities. Furthermore, I discuss the broader socio-cultural significance of spaces intentionally designed to support queer presence, visibility, and well-being—not only in terms of their physical aspects but also through their roles in facilitating social interaction and emotional resonance.

Keywords: queer, bookstore, space

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Introduction

This paper investigates how independent bookstores in Japan and the United Kingdom contribute to the creation of “safer spaces” for queer people. Although “queer” was historically used as a slur, it has been reclaimed since the late twentieth century and is used here as an inclusive term encompassing LGBT identities and others who do not fit neatly within that acronym.

Recent scholarship notes that queer spaces have emerged, and continue to emerge, in diverse forms shaped by the specific needs, communities, and cultural contexts of queer people across different regions and historical moments. These studies emphasize that each queer space is grounded in particular narratives, urban and architectural conditions, aesthetics, and challenges, and underline the importance of recognising the varied voices of the people who operate these spaces, including their preferred uses of queer acronyms. At the same time, scholars point out that growing up queer often entails confronting the destabilising absence of an accessible queer history—especially regarding the spatial design practices that have shaped queer life (Furman, 2022). This absence suggests the need for closer examination of how queer histories are materially and spatially produced, sustained, and made accessible in everyday settings. In this context, independent bookstores offer a particularly revealing site through which to examine how queer histories and practices are translated into spatial design and everyday experience.

Building on this discussion, the central aim of this study is to understand how spatial design—both physical and symbolic—shapes experiences of comfort, accessibility, and psychological safety within independent bookstores. Independent bookstores, operating outside corporate structures, have increasingly become cultural and communal hubs that provide visibility for marginalized voices and generate spaces in which community-building can occur.

This study focuses on three guiding questions: what “being safer” means for queer individuals in contemporary Japan and the United Kingdom; how independent bookstores enact safety through spatial design, curatorial decision-making, and community engagement; and what broader social and cultural roles these safer spaces perform.

Independent Bookstores and Queer Safer Spaces

Independent bookstores curate their collections according to the values and political commitments of their owners. In both Japan and the United Kingdom, they circulate zines, independently published works, and queer literature that often lie outside mainstream distribution. These bookstores also serve as third places where reading groups, workshops, and informal gatherings facilitate interpersonal connection and shared learning.

In the United Kingdom, the number of independent bookstores has increased since 2016, accompanied by the emergence of radical bookstores connected with networks such as the Alliance of Radical Booksellers. These shops serve as localized sites of activism, social inquiry, and community participation. In Japan, despite the general decline in the number of bookstores since the early 2000s, independently operated shops have grown in the past decade, actively challenging mainstream publishing norms by foregrounding marginalized voices.

The sociopolitical context for queer individuals varies between the two countries. In the United Kingdom, the legalization of same-sex marriage and the expansion of protections coexist with

everyday discrimination. In Japan, the Act on Promotion of Understanding of LGBT People has been criticized for its vagueness and limited protections in 2025, and despite court rulings identifying the unconstitutionality of banning same-sex marriage, queer individuals continue to experience outing, harassment, and violence. These conditions underscore the need for safer everyday spaces. Against this backdrop, it becomes crucial to rethink safety not as a fixed condition guaranteed by law or policy, but as an ongoing practice embedded in everyday spaces. To conceptualize safer spaces, this paper draws on Katada's (2023) argument that absolute safety is unattainable, yet communities must continually strive to make spaces safer. Safer spaces are not fixed locations but ongoing, collective practices of reducing harm and affirming diverse identities.

Case Studies and Spatial Practices in Safer Space Design

The independent bookstores examined in this study illustrate how spatial design and everyday practices collaborate to produce safer environments for queer communities. In order to investigate these dynamics, four independent bookstores were selected—two in Japan and two in the United Kingdom—based on the following criteria: (1) the explicit articulation of a safer-space policy, or (2) the sustained engagement in community-oriented activities that align with safer-space principles. These bookstores were analyzed through a comparative approach drawing on publications, publicly available materials, website information, and, where possible, on-site observation.

Bookstore lighthouse in Chiba identifies itself explicitly as “Books(tore) as a Safer Space.” It refuses to stock hate publications and hosts gatherings for queer individuals and allies. The store's spatial layout enhances visitors' sense of comfort; while shelves provide enough height to block intrusive gazes, they remain accessible, and a stepping stool supports autonomy. According to owner Sekiguchi, bookstores can make historically excluded perspectives visible, and safer spaces emerge from the interaction between curation and the presence of visitors (Sekiguchi, 2023). In his published diary, Sekiguchi writes that maintaining shared standards of behavior—rather than uncritical indulgence toward children or customers—is essential to sustaining the bookstore as a space of mutual respect and belonging (Sekiguchi, 2024).

Bookstore Megaphone, originally based in Gifu Prefecture, adopted the motto “amplifying small voices,” as stated on its website. The store curates literature related to minority and political issues, produces zines, and organizes reading groups, including those focusing on Palestine-related works. The store articulated a safer space policy that affirmed diverse backgrounds, prohibited harassment, and encouraged awareness of one's potential to cause harm (Wada, 2024). The bookstore later relocated to Kyoto Prefecture and continues to operate an online store and host pop-up events, demonstrating that the creation of safer spaces does not depend solely on a fixed architectural site. In a zine produced by the store, the owner reflects that both running a bookstore and creating zines were, for him, necessary practices for surviving within contemporary society rather than optional cultural activities (Wada, 2023).

Gay's The Word in London, established in 1979, functions as a longstanding hub of queer community life. From its website (<https://www.gaystheword.co.uk>), the bookstore hosts a range of reading groups, including those for lesbians, Black lesbians, and ace/aro communities. These groups provide spaces for shared reading and open conversation. Pride flags, thematic displays, and other visual cues communicate the store's commitments and create a sense of reassurance for visitors.

Category Is Books in Glasgow similarly identifies as a queer bookstore. According to its website (<https://www.categoryisbooks.com>), it communicates accessibility information clearly and organizes activities such as writing clubs, reading sessions, and craft workshops. Through these initiatives, the store fosters community networks that extend beyond the commercial function of bookselling. It also visualizes its support for queer people visible.

Across these examples, independent bookstores emphasize accessibility, articulate their values transparently, refuse discriminatory materials, and cultivate community through sustained programming. They also employ visual and symbolic cues that signal belonging and safety. At the same time, not all visitors prefer overt displays; subtle or ambiguous markers can serve as protective signals recognizable primarily to those who seek them. This interplay between visibility and ambiguity illustrates the complexity of designing queer-friendly environments and suggests areas for further research.

These cases demonstrate not only the practical strategies through which independent bookstores cultivate safer environments, but also the tensions, limits, and unexpected forms of vulnerability that accompany such efforts. The observations above suggest that safer space making cannot be understood merely as a matter of design choices or community programming; rather, it is an ongoing relational process shaped by the ways people encounter one another within these environments. It is from this standpoint that the following section turns to the underlying dynamics at the core of safer spaces.

The Core of Safer Spaces

While independent bookstores hold significant potential as safer spaces, this potential also reveals the possibility that someone may already be excluded. The creation of safer spaces is therefore neither simple nor unidirectional; it involves ongoing negotiation and the risk of reproducing new forms of marginality. Katada (2023) emphasizes that safer spaces are practices aimed at transforming entire environments. In examining what constitutes a safer space—and how exclusion can occur even in places designed to be inclusive—it is essential to consider the question of “gazing.” What kinds of gazes do we direct toward others, and how do these gazes shape the space around us? Such gazes extend from past to present and into the future, and this continuity may, in fact, be understood as central to the essence of books—and of bookstores as relational spaces (Sekiguchi, 2023).

Gazing, however, is not merely an act of looking; it is a mode of positioning oneself in relation to others. Queer theorists have long noted that the gaze can wound, surveil, or discipline, but it can also affirm, recognize, and create openings for relationality. In the context of independent bookstores, the gaze is mediated by shelves, displays, pathways, signage, and the presence—or absence—of other visitors. A bookshelf that shields a browsing customer from unsolicited observation, for example, can soften the disciplinary force of the gaze, while a conspicuously placed *Pride* display may invite certain forms of recognition but deter those who fear being seen engaging with queer content. Thus, spatial design does not eliminate the gaze but modulates its intensity, directionality, and social consequences.

At the same time, visitors themselves bring multiple gazes into the space: gazes shaped by personal histories, cultural norms, geopolitical contexts, and varying degrees of familiarity with queer communities. A bookstore’s safer space policy may articulate the expectation of mutual respect, yet visitors inevitably interpret and perform these norms differently. This interaction between institutionalized expectations and individualized interpretations produces a dynamic

site of relational negotiation. In this sense, safer spaces are not stable havens, but contingent and emergent formations shaped by the interplay of material design, symbolic cues, and the embodied practices of those who inhabit them.

Recognizing this complexity allows us to understand why safer spaces can never be fully realized or completed. Even well-intentioned design decisions may inadvertently generate new forms of exclusion—by privileging certain identities, knowledges, or ways of being over others. Visibility can empower, but it can also expose; ambiguity can protect, but it can also obscure. The challenge for independent bookstores, therefore, lies in sustaining a space that remains open to continual adjustment, responsive to shifting community needs, and mindful of the relational labor required to maintain safety.

Ultimately, the core of safer spaces lies not in achieving a static condition of non-harm but in cultivating an ethic of ongoing attentiveness. Independent bookstores illustrate how safety is built through iterative gestures—greeting a hesitant visitor, rearranging shelves to enhance comfort, reconsidering the framing of displays, or revising policies as new issues arise. Safer spaces emerge not from the absence of risk, but from the willingness to confront and negotiate it collectively. It is precisely this relational and unfinished character that makes them meaningful sites for queer world-making.

Conclusion

Independent bookstores in Japan and the United Kingdom play an important role in generating safer spaces for queer individuals. Their spatial layouts, curatorial practices, and community activities collectively shape environments that foster visibility, connection, and reassurance. Safer space, as this study has shown, is not a static architectural solution but an ongoing practice grounded in everyday interactions.

In conclusion, the independent bookstores examined in this study demonstrate that safer spaces are neither predetermined nor guaranteed by architectural form alone. Rather, they emerge through the ongoing interplay between spatial design, curatorial choices, and the everyday practices of those who inhabit the space. As Yamamoto (2015) argues, architecture cannot be understood merely as a functional response to social needs but must be shaped by the intentions of those who live in and sustain the space. The bookstores discussed here exemplify this principle: by foregrounding marginalized voices, mediating the dynamics of the gaze, and cultivating environments in which visitors can negotiate visibility on their own terms, they offer an important model of relational safety in contemporary queer life.

The significance of these spaces lies not in their perfection, but in their continual becoming—an active and collective commitment to minimizing harm and expanding the possibilities of belonging. As communities and social conditions evolve, so too must the spatial and relational practices through which safer spaces are sustained. Future research will benefit from further exploring how such practices take shape across different cultural contexts and how they may inform broader conversations about inclusivity in the design of everyday environments.

Moreover, the practices surrounding safer spaces extend beyond the physical boundaries of the bookstores themselves and connect deeply with the surrounding community and urban fabric. As Boland (2021) observes, independent bookshops often assume multiple social functions such as cafés, meditation spaces, community projects, or even informal tourist hubs, shaped by their local contexts, the history of the buildings they occupy, and the particular passions of their

owners and booksellers (p. 8). The presence of such bookstores enhances queer visibility within local neighborhoods and has the potential to reshape the conditions under which public discourse occurs. In this sense, independent bookstores may be understood as a kind of cultural infrastructure—sites that support not only individual well-being but also broader processes of community formation and cultural transformation.

Future research should not only examine spatial practices in queer-friendly environments in greater detail but also consider how subtle or ambiguous design elements may offer protective functions. Furthermore, it is necessary to investigate how the principles of safer space intersect with architectural design, urban planning, and evolving forms of publicness and collectivity. Such inquiries can provide a foundation for imagining more inclusive spaces within societies where people of diverse backgrounds coexist.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that ChatGPT was used only to correct minor typographical and spelling errors. No AI tools were used to generate, revise, or edit the intellectual content of this manuscript. All ideas, analyses, and arguments are entirely the author's own.

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