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Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CX, Number 34, 17 October 1985 — St. Mark's bathhouse tries to play it safe
[ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

St. Mark's bathhouse tries to play it safe

By O'PATRICK WILSON

It is anonymous from the outside.

“Six St. Mark's Place” read the small white letters on the green entrance of a building located in the East Village. Outside, street peddlers sell T-shirts, sunglasses and earrings, while area residents with punk haircuts parade nearby.

Inside St. Mark's, they sell darkness, anonymity and the possibility of sex with a stranger—and students get a cut rate.

The interior is dim. Up a short flight of steps, a man behind black bars accepts money, places valuables in an envelope, and hands out towels. The dense air smells of sex.

The St. Mark's Baths is one of the 10 bathhouses in New York City where gay men can meet for anonymous sex with multiple partners. St. Mark's is considered to be one of the “safer” establishments of its kind: it promotes “safe sex,” as defined by the Gay Men's Health Crisis guidelines.

The Coalition for Sexual Responsibility, a New York City gay activist group, says only two of the 10 bathhouses in Manhattan comply with the “safe sex” guidelines.

The bathhouses have recently become a center of controversy in the AIDS crisis. Public Health officials say bathhouses like St. Mark's encourage the sexual activity that spreads Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, and should be closed as a health precaution.

Others argue that the bathhouses can be used to educate the very segment of the gay community most at risk of contracting the fatal disease.

The St. Mark's Baths consists of 150 rooms on three floors with a sauna, steam room, hot tub, pool and one “orgy room.” Patrons can rent just a locker for about \$7, or pay about \$12 to use a private cubicle for up to eight hours. Students pay about one-third less.

Last Saturday afternoon, the bathhouse was teeming with nude men, cruising the halls and showers for partners. Most stayed for several hours, then left hurriedly. Few were willing to speak to a reporter.

Although non-patrons are not allowed in upstairs rooms, regular patrons say a sex free-for-all is really what goes on

in the baths.

“The upstairs room reeks of sex, and because it’s dark, you don’t know who you’re fucking,” said Paul Sullivan, 25, a waiter at Tavern on the Green restaurant. Sullivan said he used to go to St. Mark’s Baths, but now has a steady lover and hasn’t been back in two and a half years.

According to a frequent customer, St. Mark’s is often “70 to 80 percent full.” Its owner, Bruce Mailman, said there has been a 50 percent decline in attendance since 1982. Yet last Saturday some 500 patrons were reported to have entered the St. Mark’s bathhouse.

Michael Benjamin, 38, is a weekly patron of St. Mark’s, but thinks the bathhouses should be closed.

“It hurts me to say that, but we’re dealing with people who can’t exercise sufficient self-control,” said Benjamin, a slight man with a gaunt face and translucent complexion. Benjamin says he is bisexual and only practices “safe sex.”

The bathhouses are good places to educate people about “safe sex,” said Lori Berman, director of public information at Gay Men’s Health Crisis. The GMHC has no official position on whether the bathhouses should be closed, but the organization distributes leaflets on “safe sex” in the baths.

Warnings about AIDS are hard to miss at the St. Mark’s bathhouse. Before paying for admission, patrons must sign a promise to follow the “safe sex” guidelines advocated by the GMHC.

All patrons are given a pamphlet entitled “Your Health Is Our Concern.” Attached is a small envelope which reads “The contents of this envelope could save your life.” Inside is a condom.

Masturbation, kissing with no exchange of saliva, and voyeurism are considered safe. Anal sex using a condom, and oral sex if no semen is swallowed, are possibly safe. Anal sex without a condom is unsafe, as is “rimming” (oral-anal sex,) and “fisting” (penetration of the anus with the hand.)

But regular patrons say most bathhouse clients ignore the warnings.

“Despite all the ‘safe sex’ warnings, people don’t practice safe sex,” says John Smith, 26, a 6-foot-3-inch unemployed Brooklyn man.

Many gays resent outside interference in their private lives.

“People get excited [about closing the bathhouses], and it’s not their business,” said James, 23, as he left St. Mark’s last Saturday.

“I don’t tell others how to live. They shouldn’t tell me.”

Larry Kramer, author of “The Normal Heart,” a play dealing with AIDS that is playing at The Public Theatre, says that before the advent of the disease, the baths were socially acceptable in the gay community. Bathhouses de-terrorized sex for gays and made it an ordinary part of life, like eating and sleeping, Kramer said.

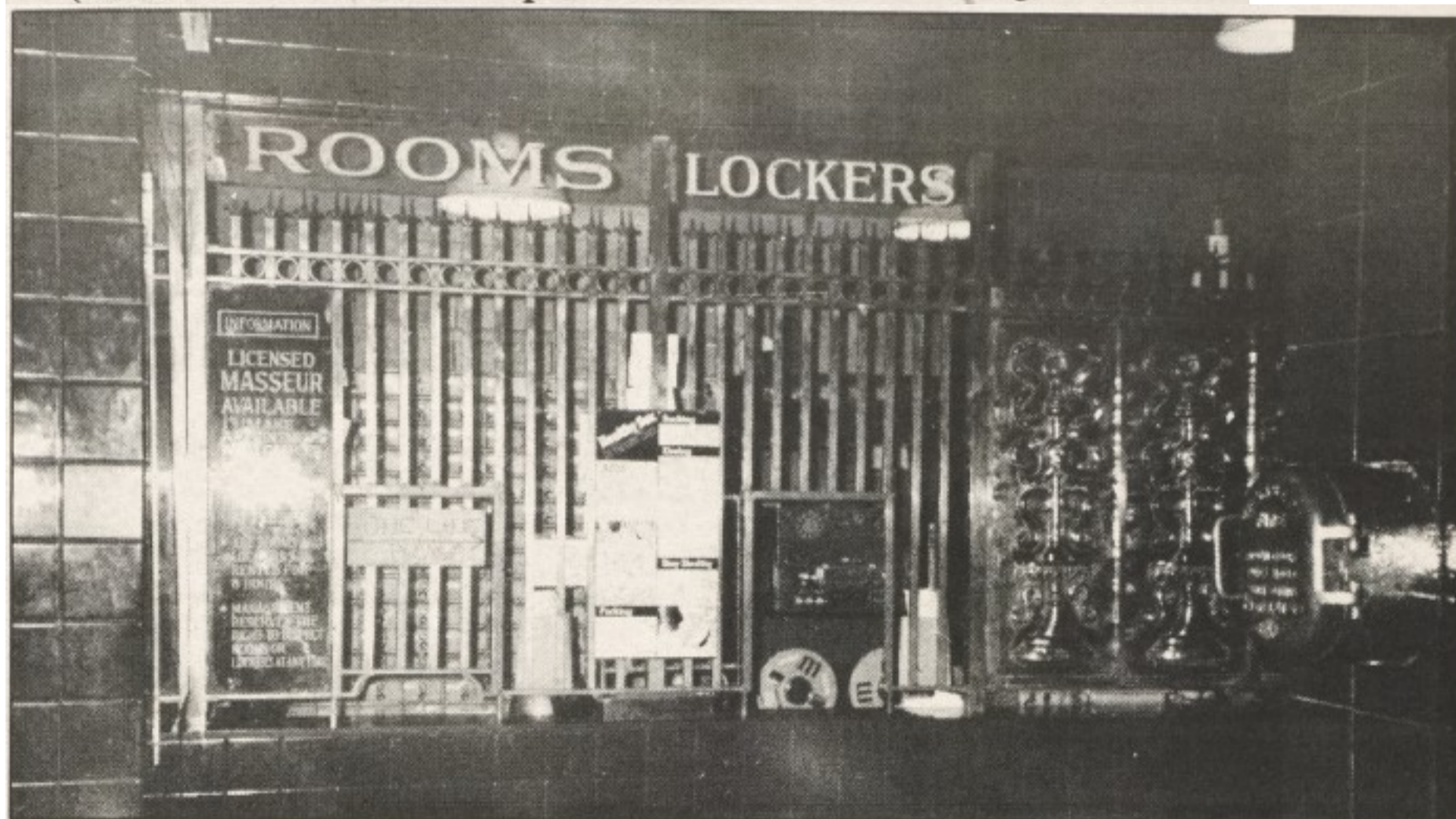
“I used to go to the baths a lot, because if I felt horny it was a place for immediate sex,” said Smith. “In bars you have to play games—who needs it?”

Smith says if the bathhouses close, gays will get more involved with monogamous relationships and maybe join masturbation clubs. Personal advertisements in the *New York Native* and other gay publications are already filled with notices of “J/O” or “jerk-off” clubs.

Kramer and others say switching to such alternatives is necessary to keep gays alive. Kramer strongly believes the bathhouses should be closed.

“They were useful in their day, but now they’re filled with death,” he said.

(Names of bathhouse patrons have been changed.)



SPECTATOR/O'PATRICK WILSON

INSIDE A BATHHOUSE: The St. Mark's Baths, shown here, is one of 10 bathhouses in N.Y.C. where gay men can go to have sex