

Soho at Work

What is it like to work in a place that is both a thriving and close-knit community and a globally recognized part of the commercial sex industry? London's Soho has always been a place of complexity, contrast and change throughout its colourful history, yet urban branding, local community initiatives and licensing regulations have combined to 'clean up' Soho, arguably to the point of sanitization, and commercial over-development remains a continuing threat. In spite of all this, Soho retains its edge and remains a unique place to live, work and consume. Based on a ten-year ethnographic study of working in Soho's sex shops, combining archival material, literary sources, photographic materials and interviews with men and women employed there, Tyler draws together insights from history, geography and cultural studies to tell the unseen story of this fascinating workplace.

Melissa Tyler is a professor of Work and Organization Studies at the University of Essex. Her work on emotional, sexualized and aesthetic labour, on gender, sexuality and the body, and on place, space and workplace setting has been published in a range of international journals, authored books and edited collections.

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Pleasure and Place in Contemporary London

Melissa Tyler

University of Essex



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For Philip, Ellis and William. My greatest pleasure and place is wherever you are. By a happy coincidence, that is quite often in Soho.

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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	page viii
<i>Preface: Working Soho</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
Introduction: Pleasure and Place in Soho	1
1 Soho: London's Gilded Gutter	15
2 Putting Work in Its Place: Space, Place and Setting	47
3 Shopping for Sex: Situating Work in Soho's Sex Shops	72
4 It's a Dirty Job: Performing Abject Labour in Soho	117
5 No Place for a Lady? Un/doing Gender and Sexuality in Soho	155
Conclusion: Rhythm Is Our Business	183
<i>Participants</i>	192
<i>Notes</i>	199
<i>Index</i>	228

Illustrations

1	'Outsiders Welcome', waiter's apron, Old Compton Street	<i>page 2</i>
2	Sex shop signage indicating licensed areas, Brewer Street	68
3	Sex shop signage indicating licensed areas, Brewer Street	69
4	Signs advertising 'models' in upstairs flats next to a sex shop, Peter Street	85
5	Store manager Shirley's 'neutral' but 'edgy' style of dress	91
6	Sex shop signs and entrances in and around Walker's Court	101
7	Sex shop signs and entrances in and around Walker's Court	102
8	Sex shop signs and entrances in and around Walker's Court	103
9	Sex shop signs and entrances in and around Walker's Court	104
10	Adult cinemas, Soho	125
11	Adult cinemas, Soho	126
12	Adult cinemas, Soho	127
13	Neon sign advertising 'preview booths', Brewer Street	128
14	Private viewing booth inside a basement sex shop, Brewer Street	129
15	'I love Soho' sign on sex shop entrance, Old Compton Street	150
16	Interiors of the shop where Richard worked, Old Compton Street	158
17	Interiors of the shop where Richard worked, Old Compton Street	159
18	'Traditional' Soho sex shops, Old Compton Street	165
19	'Traditional' Soho sex shops, Old Compton Street	166

Preface: Working Soho

Writing in 1901, temperance reformer and politician Arthur Sherwell observed that ‘so far as the more intimate facts of its moral and social life are concerned, Soho remains to a very large extent a terra incognita to the outsider’.¹ Drawing on invaluable insights from the many cultural historians who have written about Soho, as well as first-hand accounts of those who work there today, this book’s aim, as far as possible, is to get to know Soho, to ‘place it’ at work.

Somewhat paradoxically, given the decidedly adult nature of the area, it was at a vaguely recalled point during my childhood that I first contracted ‘Sohoitis’.² As so many others have written about, it is the sound, smell and feel of being in Soho that I remember most poignantly. In particular, I can still sense the excitement of arriving in Soho early on a Sunday morning, ready for a day out in London with my family. My father had been a student in London in the 1960s. He knew a car park in Soho (on Brewer Street) and a family-run local cafe where we could start our day with breakfast, before exploring Covent Garden market and the West End’s relatively deserted streets and parks. To beat the (practically non-existent) traffic, we would arrive early, park and head straight into the heart of Soho. The sounds and smells of coffee machines, the (then) exoticism of freshly baked croissants and hand-pressed orange juice, and the excitement, to my childlike understanding, of so many people, dressed in feathers, sequins and leather, being up and about so early in the morning left a lasting impression. Of course, with hindsight, it was more likely that the still exuberant revellers that surrounded our quaint family gathering were not early risers at all but were at the tail end of the kind of nights out described by cultural historian Judith Walkowitz. But many were probably exhausted workers coming in for much-needed sustenance before heading to bed, having been busy in Soho’s many bars, restaurants, clubs and brothels throughout the night. The atmosphere was warm, noisy, cosy and incredibly friendly. Of course I overly romanticize (this is one of the more obvious, and troubling, symptoms of Sohoitis), but

those experiences, in those cafes, are among my fondest childhood memories.

Feeling simultaneously part of something, somehow in the thick of it, but also on the periphery, and quietly soaking in everything going on around you is both comforting and unsettling, whether you are a child in awe of a world that seems like one big party or an adult ethnographer with a notebook, camera and recorder. These Sunday morning trips to London, but particularly to Soho, were something I looked forward to more and more. To my child's eyes, they gave a glimpse into a different world. But in some ways they provided a window on a way of life that was not so far removed from the small village I grew up in. Indeed, for many who have written about Soho, it is this sense of Soho as both a close-knit community and a place 'on the edge', a small village in which everyone knows everyone else's business, in the heart of one of the world's largest and most vibrant cities, that makes Soho so compelling.

Like historical author Mike Hutton, I realized that I had been seduced by Soho from an early age. He recalls in his book *The Story of Soho* how family visits left him with a similar sense that Soho was a place of stark contradictions:

Somewhere to have fun, and yet to remain wary. Sometimes warm and welcoming, yet also mean and threatening. It walks a fine line between the exhilarating and the sordid.³

My fascination with the extremes Hutton describes, and with Soho as 'an island of entertainment and temptation',⁴ continued throughout my childhood and then waned as I moved on and moved away from my family home. It was as a young adult in the early 1990s that I rediscovered Soho, visiting again for the first time some fifteen or so years since those early encounters with Soho's partygoers, street workers and cafes. My initial sense was that Soho had changed beyond recognition; gone were many of the cafes and family-run businesses I remembered; fading was the variety of shop fronts and names. In their place, commercial sex was ubiquitous. It may well be of course that the latter was there in abundance throughout my childhood. At this point Soho was somewhere to visit for me, not a place to study. Perhaps I hadn't noticed the plethora of neon signage, plastic curtains and paper-covered windows, or the endless racks of PVC underwear and sex toys, the cards in phone boxes advertising 'models' or in doors to stairwells inviting customers in for a 'French polish'.

When I gradually began to visit Soho more and more another ten or so years later, in the mid-2000s, the place seemed to have moved on again. Sex shops and the industry more generally no longer seemed to dominate.

This role had now been taken on by high-street chains and brand names familiar on retail parks or in shopping centres in many other towns and cities across the United Kingdom and elsewhere. But, throughout all of these changes, something remained that made Soho the place it was. And it is this ‘something’ that is the focus of this book and of my ongoing love-hate relationship with Soho. I have tried to convey this in the book’s title, *Soho at Work*, to emphasize that, for me at least, and for the cultural historians, geographers and sociologists whose ideas I draw on, as well as in the first-hand accounts I weave into the narrative, this ‘something’ is largely associated with the combined effects of Soho’s working communities and the place itself – Soho is not a passive backdrop against which social action takes place: as a character in its own narrative, it *does* something.

As an academic researcher with a particular interest in emotional, aesthetic and sexualized forms of work; in gender, sexuality and the body; in sales-service work and in organizational spaces and places, I became increasingly fascinated with Soho as a workplace. It was on a cold January day in 2008, while asking for directions in one of the licensed sex shops on the edge of Soho, that I started chatting to a man called Michael who had worked there for several years. He seemed as interested in Soho as I am, and we continued a thread of email and face-to-face discussions over several weeks and then months until, prompted by him and the themes recurring in our conversations, I decided to make my interest in Soho official and embark on an ethnographic study.

And so, initially through my conversations with Michael and others he put me in touch with, I started out on a study of Soho that lasted from roughly 2009 until the present and remains ongoing. Every time I think I am ‘done’ with Soho, I am somehow drawn back to it. For the research on which this book is based, I undertook a series of interviews with people who work in Soho’s sex shops⁵; I observed them and their customers in the shops, and I walked the streets, watching, looking and listening, and photographing as I went. Without thinking about it consciously at the time, I drew in this sense on a well-established tradition of London writers, from Charles Dickens to Ian Sinclair, who have walked its streets in order to get to know its character, inspired by Parisian flâneurs and psycho-geographers. All of this combined to give me an ethnographic ‘snapshot’ of what it is like to work in this particular place, at this particular point in its history, in a sector of work for which the area continues to have a reputation well beyond its own geographical boundaries.

Soho at Work is the outcome of that study. It tells the story of contemporary Soho through its focus on this specific group of workers,

in this very distinctive setting. The story is told largely in their own words and mine, but with strong echoes of and references to the work of others along the way, especially sociologists, historians and cultural geographers. I am grateful to other writers who have produced meticulously researched accounts of Soho and its neighbouring areas on which I have been able to draw – most notably Judith Summers, whose *Soho and Its History* has been a constant source of insight and inspiration. I have also drawn heavily on Carol Walkowitz's *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London*, which explores how Soho's distinctive character has evolved through the history of its people and places, against a backdrop of theories of urban cosmopolitanism. Another invaluable source was Frank Mort's *Capital Affairs*. Focusing on London and the making of the permissive society, Mort inevitably hones in on Soho, drawing in incredible detail on the area's history and mapping out changes and continuities in what makes Soho the 'edgy' place that it was and, many argue, still is (or at least might be again). Peter Speiser's (2017) *Soho: The Heart of Bohemian London* provided a rich overview of key developments and characters in Soho's colourful past, telling the tale of 'one of London's most famous, cosmopolitan, colourful and notorious neighborhoods'.⁶ Walking his reader through Soho's streets and squares, considering those who have made (and squandered) their living there, including through the worlds of art and entertainment, Speiser's narrative is a compelling starting point for anyone who wants to get to know the area and to consider the contemporary legacy of Soho's chequered past.

Mort in particular has emphasized that the 'porousness of London's sexual cultures was encouraged by the city's extremely compressed urban layout'.⁷ But others have highlighted the significance of this too: Walkowitz begins *Nights Out* by noting how, from the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, Soho's porous geographic identity and borderlands, not to mention its doubtful commerce, politics and population, all contributed to its pre-eminence as London's cosmopolis.⁸

Aligning itself with this view, the account of Soho that will be given here tries to connect its history, geography, culture and economy to understand what makes Soho 'work' as a dynamic nexus of its materiality and the meanings with which it is associated. My hope is to show, in the pages that follow, how this combination is what makes Soho work the way it does and has, throughout its colourful history. Soho may not be perfect, but, as a working and residential community with a long and unique history, it is precious. And, as the following chapters explain, in the face of constant attempts to clean it up or to clean up on it, it is nothing if not persistent; long may it continue to be so.

Acknowledgements

As someone who enjoys sharing ideas and learning from others, single authoring is not my preferred way of working. However, many people have helped me over the course of writing this book, so that it has never really felt like a solo endeavour. This means that there are many people to thank.

First and foremost, I would like the men and women working in Soho's sex shops to know how extremely grateful I am to them for so generously sharing their time, thoughts and experiences with me. I recall many interviews undertaken at sales counters in the shops, often with hard-core porn films playing next to us as we talked. On numerous occasions I had to apologize to the transcriber for the sounds that were audible in the background of the recordings. Many of the interviews also took place in local cafes and bars; some happened in Soho Square and others on benches in St Anne's churchyard, while participants shared their lunch break, and often also their lunch, with me. A whole network of people welcomed me into their working lives and community, and without their generosity and openness I would have been adrift.

I remember doing interviews while helping to unpack stock and with participants who 'walked and talked' me around their store, and the streets around their workplace, making suggestions about what I should photograph and make notes on. I recall one particular interview, on a very rainy Monday morning, when one participant, Jason, spotted me in a cafe on Old Compton Street and invited me to have a coffee with him in the small office at the back of his shop. As we talked, and he explained why working in Soho was so important to him, his red setter dog curled up by our feet (admittedly blocking what heat was coming from the small radiator). To be recognized and welcomed in this way was greatly appreciated. As each batch of interviews and observations drew to a close, I always felt somewhat regretful at the prospect of not spending time in Soho for a while. Not only did participants share their work time and space with me; many also introduced me to people working in other shops, and for this I am also very grateful.

But I also remember how unnerved I felt the first time I interviewed Andy, when he cleaned out his nails with a Stanley knife blade throughout the hour or so in which we talked in a very quiet shop down quite a secluded alleyway. I also recall phoning my daughter's school to find out if she was having a good day, simply to reconnect, after my interview with Richard in the shop in which he worked, an unlicensed (and now closed) shop that specialized in school-girl- and 'barely legal'-themed hard-core magazines and films. As will be emphasized in the chapters throughout this book, Soho is a place of extremes, and of complexity and contradiction, welcoming and off-putting in equal measure.

My aim in writing this book was to convey some of this through the narratives of the men and women who work in its sex shops, and to produce an account of their work, and of Soho, in which they would recognize themselves; I apologize in advance to anyone for whom this isn't the case. One of the many things that, for me, makes Soho such a fascinating place is that, within its compact geography, it is multilayered and constantly changing. This makes it difficult (some might say laughably naive), to try to 'capture' this in a single study or text. And at the end of the day, the book is my own account of the myriad stories and commentaries I have encountered over a ten-year period.

As well as those who work in Soho's sex shops, many in its cafes, bars and restaurants have welcomed me as my laptop and I have spent many happy hours (alas not of the 'two-for-one' cocktail kind) writing up notes and drafting chapters. Worthy of a special mention are Bar Italia and Balans for their kindness and patience. There are many Soho 'institutions' that are not connected to the sex industry there, or at least not directly so. Two of many such places are the Algerian Coffee Stores and Gerry's Wines and Spirits, both on Old Compton Street, both of which have provided welcome comestibles at either end of the working day.

The Soho Society generously shared materials and updates and invited me to attend planning meetings, AGMs, social events and Soho Society annual fairs. This gave invaluable insight into Soho as a thriving and vibrant residential community, as well as a greater understanding of the constant struggles over planning and commercial development there. The British Library, The Photographer's Gallery, The Museum of Soho, Soho Radio, Westminster City Archives, and the planning, licensing and enforcement teams at Westminster City Council were also important sources of information and understanding. I was grateful to be consulted over the Council's review of Licensing Conditions for Sex

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Over the years in which I have been working on the book, many academic colleagues and friends have generously shared ideas, experiences and suggestions or have provided very welcome opportunities for me to talk about my research on Soho. My first thanks must go to Ruth Simpson and Natasha Slutskaya, whose ESRC seminar series on dirty work provided the initial opportunity for me to start thinking and writing about Soho back in 2008. Philip Hubbard very generously shared materials and insights with me in the early stages, and his work has been a constant reference point in the years since and continues to be so. There are many others to thank for their interest in the project and for their insight, in person and through their work, but of particular note are: Joanna Brewis, Dawn Lyon, Kathleen Riach, Katie O'Sullivan, Torkild Thanem, David Knights, Alison Pullen, Karen Dale, Gibson Burrell, Martin Parker and Irena Grugulis, as well as many other colleagues at the universities of Loughborough and Essex and at the various universities where I have presented my research on Soho, including Bristol, Brunel, Keele, Kent and Lancaster. Special thanks go to the Gender and Diversity Studies group at Radboud University, particularly to Yvonne Benschop. I am also grateful to doctoral students, particularly those in my 'Advanced Qualitative Research Methods' course at the University of Essex, for their patience over the years in putting up with constant examples from my Soho research. I am especially grateful to Alison Clarke, Sophie Hales and Louise Nash for being a source of constant inspiration and such a pleasure to work with.

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As I said, this has never been a solo project, and I am very grateful to everyone whose contributions have been invaluable along the way.