Lesbian and gay residential patterns are shifting today. A recent flurry of media reports captures popular anxieties that urban enclaves long considered “gay neighborhoods”—places with a visible clustering of gay residents and tourists; gay and gay-friendly commercial establishments; and gay community symbols such as the rainbow flag—are disappearing as more straights move in and fewer gays express interest in residing in or relocating to them. The story reported, “With more families moving in and longtime residents moving out, some say Boystown [the informal moniker of Chicago’s gayborhood] is losing its gay flavor… Some residents and activists welcome the gay migration, saying it’s a sign of greater equality, while others say Boystown is losing its identity.”

The social forces contributing to this gay outmigration (and replacement by straights) stretch beyond the Windy City. San Diego’s Hillcrest, Houston’s Montrose, Atlanta’s Midtown, Miami’s South Beach, D.C.’s Dupont Circle, Boston’s South End—each is an example of a traditional American gay neighborhood, and each seems to be on a list of endangered urban species.

It’s quixotic to think that gay neighborhoods have always been around and will never change. Neighborhoods and the cities that surround them are organic, continuously evolving places. But neither should we sing a requiem for the death and life of great gay villages, as some media reports presage. Thinking within this binary box isn’t sociologically productive. We might instead ask why gay neighborhoods initially formed, and what factors explain the changes we’re witnessing now. With these questions as our guide, we can use media attention to understand the relationship between sexuality, residential choice, and urban forms.

Like the cities around them, gay neighborhoods are organic, continuously evolving places.

World War II was pivotal in the formation of gay territories. Many men and women were dishonorably discharged from the military for their homosexual-
The closet era (think pre-World War II) gave rise to discrete locales where individuals with same-sex desires could find each other. The coming out era (World War II to 1997, but especially after the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York), in contrast, witnessed the development of formal urban gay enclaves like the Castro. And finally, the post-gay era (1998 to today) impacts these gay neighborhoods by potentially unraveling them and rendering them “passé,” as the New York Times characterized them in October 2007. The Advocate remarked that same year, “As the country opens its arms to openly gay and lesbian people, the places we call home have grown beyond urban gay ghettos. The Advocate welcomes you to this new American landscape.” When the magazine polled its readers, asking if they “prefer to live in an integrated neighborhood rather than a distinct gay ghetto,” 69 percent said yes.

One year later in an Advocate article titled “Where the Gays Are,” UCLA demographer Gary J. Gates reported that, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, “Same-sex couples live virtually everywhere in the country,” and their numbers are “increasing in some of the most conservative parts of the country.” Gates’s research shows that “same-sex unmarried partners”—the only category the Census included in 2000 to count lesbians and gay men and one that clearly ignores single people—were present in 99.3 percent of all U.S. counties. Why do post-gay gays tend to think outside the gayborhood box?

We have to look at the factors driving the transition to today’s putatively post-gay era, notably the role of assimilation, or the social process of absorbing people (in this case, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people) into mainstream society. The assimilation of American gays has generated feelings of acceptance, integration, and safety, which is reversing an earlier propensity of lesbians and gay men to concentrate in discrete urban enclaves. This new sociopsychological profile works in two ways. First, assimilation contributes to an overextension of the gay residential imagination. As Don Romesburg, co-chairman of the GLBT Historical Society of Northern California, told the Washington Post in 2007, “What I’ve heard from some people is, ‘We don’t need the Castro anymore because essentially San Francisco is our Castro.’” The pattern persists in smaller cities, too. Consider Northampton, Massachusetts: “There are gay enclaves, but there’s no place I know where the gay population is so integrated into the community,” said Julie Pokela, a local business owner and former head of the Chamber of Commerce. Some people have dubbed her entire city “Lesbianville, USA.”

Although very different, San Francisco and Northampton both show how assimilation has broadened the spatial positioning of homosexuality from the specific streets of a gay enclave to an entire city itself. But here we encounter a contradiction: if an entire city is a gay village, then no particular neighborhood is uniquely so. San Francisco-as-our-Castro looks and feels different from the Castro as a discrete gay urban entity. Thus, assimilation may expand a gay person’s horizon of residential possibilities, but it also shrinks the situating of homosexuality in urban space.

Second, assimilation motivates some gays to think of their sexuality as indistinguishable from straights, and this compels them to select residences outside of traditional gay villages. As an example, a 2004 New York Times story interviewed a lesbian couple that had relocated to a New Jersey suburb. Neither woman considered herself “any sort of activist,” and both wanted “a suburban family life that is almost boringly normal.” But why not relocate to a place like Asbury Park with its visible concentration of gay residents? “We’re specifically not moving into gay neighborhoods here. Within the state of New Jersey, we feel comfortable living...
anywhere,” said one woman. Her partner added, “Here, we’re just part of a neighborhood. We weren’t the gay girls next door; we were just neighbors. We were able to blend in, which is what you want to do, rather than have the scarlet letter on our heads.” It seems that post-gay residential choice comes with a desire to deemphasize the differences between gay and straight. “There is a portion of our community that wants to be separatist, to have a queer culture, but most of us want to be treated like everyone is,” Dick Dadey, executive director of Empire State Pride Agenda told the Times in 1994. “We want to be the neighbors next door, not the lesbian or gay couple next door.”

Straights are on board, too. A 2010 Gallup poll found that, for the first time in history, the percentage of Americans who find gay and lesbian relations morally acceptable crossed the symbolic fifty-percent threshold. In fact, many straight women who live in gayborhoods say they feel safer in them. But why would straight men move there? Sociologist Michael Kimmel told New York Times columnist Charles M. Blow that “men have gotten increasingly comfortable with the presence of, and relative equality of, ‘the other.’” If they respond to gay identity disclosure today with “Gay? Whatever, Dude” (as Blow titled his piece), then a gay neighborhood is hardly out-of-bounds. Crossing the symbolic moral threshold, along with the preference structure of many single straight women, has resulted in a ratio of single heterosexual women to men that makes gayborhoods especially attractive to the latter—minus all the baggage that comes with homophobia.

So, what should we make of media cries like “There goes the gayborhood”? The transition to a post-gay era is generating a particular attitude and corresponding behavior: gays are deselecting traditional gay neighborhoods and straights are selecting them as a place of residence. Assimilation is expanding the gay urban imagination and residential repertoire at the same time that it’s erasing the identifiable location of gays in place. This post-gay effect manifests in big cities and small towns alike. Gays in both places seek neighborhoods that are demographically diverse and where their sexual orientation adds to an already lively mix. But recall that 31 percent of Advocate readers still preferred to live in “a distinct gay ghetto.” The post-gay trend, in other words, is uneven and incomplete—and there is no compelling reason to believe that it signals the definitive end of American gayborhoods, as some media reports predict. A sociological approach shows that it’s not a zero-sum game.

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cache me if you can

by jeremy freese and eszter hargittai

From where we sit, the closest one is disguised as a switch plate on the back of a utility box. Next is a fake stone in some bushes in front of the headquarters of an international humanitarian organization. After that is one disguised as a piece of a planter next to a park bench; then a small magnet stuck to a sprinkler; then a jar hidden among the rocks on the lake. Nearby also is one at the train station that you can only find if you answer questions about the mosaic there, as well as one that requires you to calculate where the lake shore would have been 11,000 years ago.

These hidden treasures are called geocaches, and there are now over a million of them worldwide. You are just as likely to find one—we have—in a small rural Iowa town as you are in New York’s Central Park, on the Strip in Vegas, or overlooking the Danube in Budapest. If you find one, it will have a paper log inside for you to sign. Perhaps it will also contain some trinkets: stickers, key chains, toys, a mini compass, or whatever else those who found it before felt like leaving. You are welcome to take one of these as a trophy of your success, but you are expected to leave something of your own in return.

Other kinds of collective treasure hunts predate geocaching, but nothing with so many participants and so many objects to find. Geocaching began when the US government allowed civilian access to accurate GPS signals in 2000. Ever since, people have been hiding caches and making their locations public by specifying their GPS coordinates. The largest of the various websites that moderate and catalog these treasures is geocaching.com. Each cache has a separate webpage with GPS coordinates, a map of its location, a description left by the person who hid it, and notes from other “cachers” who have hunted it. You can either print out this information or use a smartphone or GPS device to bring the information with you on the trail.

Coordinates will get you within a