

Queering Public Space

Exploring the relationship between queer communities and public spaces.



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Why queering public space?

In *Queering Public Space*, a collaboration between Arup and the University of Westminster, we explore the relationship between queer communities and public spaces. As an outcome of this research, we launch this report, in addition to a video project with the same title as a different way to communicate our findings.

This short report sums up some of the themes we have explored in 2020-2021. We ask: what are the key characteristics that contribute to queering public space? How do we protect what remains of queer memory in our cities? And how do we move beyond the gayborhood towards creating public spaces for all?

At present, we are conscious that legal regimes around the world limit the applicability of our findings in many settings. In 71 countries same-sex relations between men are criminalised and 43 criminalise lesbian relations as well. In these jurisdictions, necessarily the only queer spaces are private ones. Nonetheless, we hope that, where possible, this research will contribute towards the design of a more welcoming and inclusive public realm.

In this report queerness is used in two ways. First, it is used to convey a range of gender identities and sexual orientations which do not conform to heteronormative constructions. Second, importantly, it also connotes a questioning and subverting of the exclusionary consequences of these social constructions, and of the structures of power and authority which underpin them.



LGBTQ+ people 'switch' or hide their identities in order to feel safe in the majority of public spaces.

Introduction

Public space is not always, well, public. In this report LGBTQ+ is used to designate people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, pansexual, asexual or otherwise gender or sexual identity non-conforming, many of whom are acutely aware of the hostile nature of public space. A 2019 survey showed that 50% of the British public recognise that these groups generally modify how they present in public space to avoid being targeted.

Less well-known is that some, trans people in particular, avoid whole areas altogether. Nor are they the only minority who can feel this vulnerability, a vulnerability reinforced by a steady rise in misogynistic attacks, hate crimes and incidents also directed against disabled people and religious and ethnic minorities in the UK in recent years. Our use of the term 'queering' in this report is not just about rethinking how public space can be made more inclusive for gender and sexual orientation non-conforming people, but for all those groups who currently feel excluded or threatened in such spaces. This report accordingly offers some recommendations for queering the exclusionary nature of too much public space - often during the day as well as after dark - in order to make it much more inclusive and welcoming for all.

Despite the emergence of queer enclaves in many cities across the world in recent decades, there is an urgent need today to rethink public spaces and create more inclusive, welcoming and hospitable environments for all members of our communities.

This inclusivity is particularly needed for our LGBTQ+ communities, who are often absent, underrepresented, or invisible in the urban fabric and whose needs are frequently overlooked in the planning processes of cities. This is despite the emergence from the 1950s of gayborhoods or gay villages, anchored by bars, restaurants, bookshops and community centres and - though in the UK less so - residential areas (for instance Soho in London, or the Gay Village in Manchester). These created a sense of queer place where LGBTQ+ identities could be expressed. Yet beyond these gayborhoods many LGBTQ+ people 'switch' or hide their identities in order to feel safe in the majority of public spaces.

Cosmopolitan cities - such as Barcelona, Berlin, San Francisco or Sydney - have become the home for gayborhoods that evolved during recent decades. But despite the visibility of queer urban spaces in many cities, there are fears and concerns about their structural decline and disappearance. They may have attracted tourists in major cities. But they also attracted property developers and investors who have found economic opportunities. Through gentrification and urban renewals, layers of memory are erased. Many of these spaces have become unaffordable to the queer communities who shaped them.

Our approach

The growing interest in creating inclusive public space and the rise in hate crime in recent years indicates a need for interventions which increase the inclusion and acceptance of marginalised groups, not least LGBTQ+ people. Through our approach we explore how LGBTQ+ people can feel more safe and included beyond enclaves in urban public spaces, to establish a set of recommendations to address this deficiency.

Our approach to this had four main elements. First, although design characteristics were rarely central to the existing literature, an extensive search enabled us to identify both positive and negative design features from the public spaces analysed therein.

Second, we followed this up with two workshops and a number of one-to-one interviews with leading figures in the field of queer geographies and architecture, and with experts on the nature and location of hate crimes and incidents. These enabled us to test out and refine our developing ideas on the relationship between design, safety and inclusivity. This was supplemented by analysis, as far as possible given the limited data available, of the statistics and reports that illuminate the generally overlooked relationship between locations and hate incidents.

Third, we also concurrently held three workshops for practitioners within Arup. These enabled us to map current awareness of and examples of a range of approaches to inclusive design, as well as to explore in more depth particular facets such as the impact of soundscapes.

Fourth, we conducted some surveys of the lived experience of LGBTQ+ people in London and their interaction with public spaces, using this to test hypotheses derived from the existing literature. The result was a rich variety of information about how design facets can contribute to safer, more inclusive public spaces.

Key recommendations

Rethinking the gayborhood.

Planners should think beyond the gayborhood and move inclusive practice towards LGBTQ+ people beyond preserving queer places. They need to incorporate LGBTQ+ inclusion and safety in public space into their use of devices such as equality impact assessments and into the practical application of Statements of Community Involvement by consulting with LGBTQ+ groups. The needs of such groups also should be a requirement, particularly when there is potential loss of amenities for them, in the planning application process.

Inclusive practice.

Planning, building and project management guidelines (BS8300 and ISO21500) need to be updated to take into consideration the requirement for a fuller understanding of inclusive design. Inclusive design in public space and all the publicly accessed facilities therein goes beyond access and mobility issues and should also fully incorporate considerations of poverty, deprivation, and lived experiences, not least of those with protected characteristics under the 2010 Equality Act. This approach should be supplemented by encouraging social enterprises to manage anchor businesses in sustainable ways, such as by making it easier for them to acquire freeholds. Planners should also try to provide opportunity for organic development and diversity with support from the Community Infrastructure Levy.

Preserving queer heritage

Another important means of including LGBTQ+ people in public space is by preserving their heritage. This should include encouragement to interventions by local LGBTQ+ communities to mark their own heritage in public space, enabling new layers of memory and meaning to emerge organically in these locations. Helping

to preserve the character of sites through listing and requirements built into planning guidance would help LGBTQ+ people to recognise themselves in the built environment. Additionally, getting the public in general to understand that, despite persecution, LGBTQ+ people have always existed and have a history – marginalised though it has been – may help to undermine the hostility and misunderstanding that is still widely expressed towards them in the present.

Designing in desistance and diversity.

Good design should contribute to the desistance of hate crime and incidents. Designing in diversity can also help to usualise marginalised and disempowered groups like LGBTQ+ people, promoting their inclusion in public space. Ways to do this include attention to the scale and mass of buildings, rooflines, colours and facades; the addition of curvilinear aspects; varied sightlines and the break-up of space; the softening of soundscapes and visual environments through choice of surfaces, greenery and water features; the encouragement of footfall and pedestrian flow of a varied kind; design interventions that undermines dominant narratives; the nature, intensity, quality and positioning of lighting.

Diversify workforces and engage better

There is a need to diversify workforces and engage with LGBTQ+ communities when planning and designing spaces in our cities to better understand the challenges, needs, aspirations and hopes of LGBTQ+ communities. Active community engagement and consideration of lived experiences of the users of the space should be integrated into the design. The more diversity people see, the less they feel threatened by it - if it is not felt to undermine their own sense of identity - and therefore the more they are likely to accept it.

Queer Heritage in Public Space

Cities grow and morph historically, with the past constantly being repurposed in the present. As a result, we make sense of our cities through the layers of memory that tell the story of the past and the people who shaped it.

1 of 5

statues in the UK
are of women, only.

Through memorials, statues, monuments, ruins, symbols, commemorative plaques, names of streets, buildings and neighbourhoods, the past is spatially and physically brought to our everyday urban life. This public memory in space indicates what a society chooses to remember as significant. These memory layers, however, are selective. Whilst some of them are picked up to be celebrated, listed and highlighted, others are silenced, hidden or erased. What gets preserved is heavily influenced by those who exercise power over the planning and architecture of our cities. People in authority determine who to remember and where in our public spaces. For instance, only one out of five statues in the UK are of women; often nameless, semi-naked, and there for the male gaze.

This is more than simply a selective misrepresentation of history, distorting the narrative told in public space about a society's past. In particular, this story often neglects and excludes the history and struggle of LGBTQ+ communities, creating geographies of absence and silence that mutes, erases and - most damaging of all - denies the very existence of a history which, despite persecution, is as long as humanity itself. This erasure reinforces both the lack of awareness of LGBTQ+ lives and histories and the continuing marginality of LGBTQ+ people in contemporary society. It also denies LGBTQ+ people physical representation through which they can recognise themselves and their history in public space. With the absence of tangible queer memory in

our cities, and the erasure of queer spaces, how can we protect what remains? And how do we queer public spaces through telling the story of queer communities who lived there in the past?

The story of Bloomsbury

Interventions in the public realm do not always address this erasure: indeed, some may contribute to it. Bloomsbury, for example, has a small bust of the bisexual writer Virginia Woolf in a corner of Tavistock Square Gardens. Nearby is a blue plaque to Woolf on one of her former residences. At the entrance of adjacent Gordon Square a sign refers to the Bloomsbury Group of early twentieth-century intellectuals (of whom Woolf and painter Duncan Grant were prominent members), which was known for its open and varied sexual relationships. Yet, although her sexuality was central to Woolf's work, it is nowhere acknowledged in any of these memorialisations.

Bloomsbury is also the home of the oldest LGBTQ+ book shop in the UK, Gay's the Word. Above it, a blue plaque to AIDS campaigner and international gay rights activist Mark Ashton marks the history of queer communities in and beyond the neighbourhood. It is an area where same-sex couples are regularly seen holding hands, in contrast to much of the rest of London. The story that Bloomsbury tells its residents and visitors today is a history of openness and inclusivity which helps to shape the present, and the future of this diverse neighbourhood. It blends elements of history with the present, as these fragments of

the past are visualised spatially to contribute to the neighbourhood's narrative; a narrative that is unknown to many London residents. Several walking tours have emerged recently in the neighbourhood to retell this story of queer heritage. Similar exercises in reclaiming queer heritage have also become increasingly visible in other cities around the UK and elsewhere in the world.



A bust of Virginia Woolf in a corner of Tavistock Square Garden, London.



A blue plaque of Virginia Woolf in Fitzroy Square, London. There are several blue plaques which mention her around London, but none of these acknowledge her sexuality.

New narratives through monuments

Monuments contribute to building narratives in the city, either by commemorating or obscuring. We are witnessing now more critical thinking about the representativeness and diversity of these monuments across the world. And it is only in recent decades that a growing number of LGBTQ+ monuments have begun to appear. In Manchester, a small Alan Turing Memorial was unveiled in the Gay Village in 2001, whilst another 2-Dimensional steel statue of him now stands near Paddington in London. In Berlin, the memorial to homosexuals persecuted under Nazism was opened in 2008. Before these, in Amsterdam the Homomonument was opened in 1987, whilst the Gay Liberation Monument in New York was unveiled in 1992. These statues and monuments bring to our public spaces new narratives of communities and experiences that have often in history been marginalised, denied or neglected. They unveil the story of decades and centuries of struggle to queer communities.

It is only since 2015 that queer heritage began to receive official, and so far limited, recognition in the UK starting with the listing of the Royal Vauxhall Tavern by English Heritage.

Much memorialisation in public space remains the temporary and ephemeral contribution of volunteers, such as the annual Trans Day of Remembrance for those trans people killed globally over the previous year. For the struggle continues today in many countries. In Poland, attempts to create a monument for LGBTQ+ communities have been challenged. The rainbow sculpture in Warsaw's Savior Square was burned down six times. In 2013, it was taken down indefinitely.

Highlighting and celebrating history

As an act of resistance DIY urban practices have recently emerged to reclaim the history of queer communities in cities. For instance, a temporary plaque to trans bandleader and composer Angela Morley was installed by Leeds Civic Trust on the BBC Building in the city in 2018. Commemorating in this way a figure like Morley, whose work is familiar to millions through her film and radio work on shows like *The Goons*, helps to usualise awareness of the existence and history of LGBTQ+ people. Furthermore, together with Leeds LGBTQ+ Community Hub, Leeds Civic Trust worked to prepare a Rainbow Plaque Trail in Leeds in 2018 to highlight and celebrate the history, events and people who shaped the LGBTQ+ heritage of the city. These forms of interventions might seem temporary and ephemeral, yet they also serve to reclaim LGBTQ+ pasts and open an ongoing and dynamic debate about this history.

“Queering public space, to me, means an ongoing commitment to challenging the norms, especially heteropatriarchy, which govern our everyday lives. This is also embodied by architecture and public artwork, where the majority of sculptures that can be found in public space represent a white heteronormativity. Monuments, in particular, are a testimony to the powers that control public spaces. That said, a permanent queer monument could remind generations of people of those who have been underrepresented, persecuted, marginalised, and oppressed throughout history.”

Dr Martin Zebracki

Associate Professor of Critical Human Geography,
University of Leeds

Dr Kit Heyam, a Leeds-based transgender awareness trainer, academic researcher and activist states that: “One fantastic thing we found with running the DIY Rainbow Plaque Project workshops, is that many of these histories that people use plaques to commemorate draw on ephemeral queer community knowledge. So they mark buildings which have layers of historical significance that are completely invisible outside the queer community. The queerness of public spaces is often subjective, often individual, often contingent on lots of different contextual factors.

The plaques pop up for 24 hours around the city: the ephemerality allows people to take risks. It allows people to play around with speculation, with commemorating what a building means to them as opposed to what happened in the past.

The reaction we have had both from participants and people who saw them suggests there is an emotional impact of this practice of queering a space. Interestingly people conceptualise the rainbow plaques in terms of making visible or recovering the existing queerness of a space, rather than creating a queer space anew. The commemoration of queer history makes them feel not newly connected to a space, but they have always been connected to that space, just haven't known it, or been allowed to access that knowledge.”



Rainbow plaque to composer and bandleader Angela Morley.



At the entrance of Gordon Square, London a sign refers to the Bloomsbury Group.



The Royal Vauxhall Tavern in London, the first site of queer heritage to be officially listed for preservation by English Heritage

The importance of Queering Public Spaces

As Jos Boys has observed, when the feminist Matrix Architectural Collective emerged in London in 1980, it was still widely - if erroneously - believed that architecture and design was neutral. Assumptions and exclusions encoded into the planning and design of the built environment only gradually began to be more widely questioned from the early 1980s by pioneering analyses that sought to map out queer and feminist geographies, while too often overlooking ethnic minority ones. By the mid-1990s, this literature had developed two important strands: analyses of discrimination, exclusion and hate crimes and incidents in public and private spaces; and accounts of the emergence of queer enclaves increasingly described as 'gayborhoods'.

As more recent work has shown, these latter are often problematic spaces: they are overly structured around gay white males, sometimes to the exclusion of trans and gender nonconforming people (TGNCP) and LGBTQ+ people of colour; reflexive of income inequalities; too often attract homophobes to where they can readily find their targets; frequently only accessible for poorer LGBTQ+ people through using potentially dangerous transport networks; and vulnerable to gentrification and decline. They may provide concentrations of queer businesses, but not all LGBTQ+ people want to live in these places, even if they can afford them. In any case, gentrification in areas where residential property tends to be rented all too easily prices LGBTQ+ people out of the gayborhood. It also fosters a heterosexual colonisation of these spaces. This is deeply problematic for groups who have few places where they can comfortably be themselves in public space. Queer places found in these locales - bars, bookstores, dance venues - are therefore certainly important for LGBTQ+ identities. We are in no way arguing that the concept of the gayborhood is outdated, though

it does need to become both safer and more inclusive.

While these enclaves furnish some important examples of how design features can contribute to such goals, we need also to think 'beyond the gayborhood' to explore how to produce safer, more welcoming, and inclusive public spaces in general.

This needs to think beyond the frameworks of existing work was also apparent with the growing literature that began to appear in the twenty-first century on the exclusionary assumptions that shaped much planning policy. Important work has drawn attention to the resulting impacts upon LGBTQ+ people. Yet it became clear from our research that we needed to move beyond queering planning outcomes to thinking about how to apply the resulting insights more thoroughly into queering planning practice in a way that incorporates it into overall design considerations.

Alongside these developments, building codes were being redrawn in response to disability discrimination legislation in the 1990s, culminating in the UK in the guidance for inclusive design contained in BS8300 in 2001. This, however, continued mostly to reflect the mobility requirements for disabled people of predecessor documents going back to the late 1970s. Its latest update in 2018 still largely focuses on mobility issues. Our extensive review of the literature made clear that it was time to incorporate the accumulating evidence of diminished access to and safety in public spaces experienced by vulnerable groups, not least LGBTQ+ people, into thinking about what makes for inclusive design.

Authorised Public Space Discourse

Public space is not controlled by the public or accessed evenly by its members. It is designed by an architecture profession which in Britain remains overwhelmingly male and white. That a declining number of British LGBTQ+ architects feel able to be out at work and 39% of them in the most recent survey in 2017 reported discrimination and homophobia from colleagues demonstrates that there is a need for a more inclusive approach to architecture in the workplace as well as in public space.

This public space is organised spatially by planners whose approaches to zoning developed in the twentieth century to encode assumptions about gendered use of space, the heteronormative nature of housing estates and suburbia, and that homes are for heterosexual nuclear families. It reflects a historic ideological framing of heterosexuality as the norm which marginalises and vilifies those who do not conform. Sometimes these planners have nonetheless valued gayborhoods, if only so they can be exoticised and commodified as sites of (often heterosexual) tourism and spectacle, processes that both objectify and price out LGBTQ+ residents. Sometimes they have simply expunged them through redevelopment.

Activities within public space are regulated by public bodies who manage the public realm and license the events which take place within it. Spaces are policed in ways which often actively target non-heterosexual activities, accommodating heterosexual desire and romantic encounters while interdicting others. Access to gendered space is monitored in ways which not only exclude TGNC, but also those, such as butch lesbians, whose bodies do not conform to the binary gendered ideals imagined by heteronormative society. The spread of Live Facial Recognition Technology as part of the surveillance culture of contemporary society - given the way in which it is constructed around

white, idealised binary identities - will only exacerbate this problem. Rough sleepers are harassed and moved on by local authorities: this process differentially affects LGBTQ+ young people who, because they too often experience violence, rejection and abuse from their families at home, constitute up to 24% of youth homelessness in the UK. Supposedly non-discriminatory language using terms like 'public safety' is deployed to justify policing and surveillance which focuses on marginalised groups and reinforces the sense that they should not stray into heteronormative, middle-class, white spaces. Security lighting is used - as it is designed to - to intimidate and exclude. And income inequalities ensure that lesbian spaces are even more vulnerable to changes in market conditions than gay male ones.

39%

of British LGBTQ+ architects reported discrimination and homophobia from colleagues in a 2017 survey.

The neighbourhood effect

Public bodies and private businesses own, oversee, license or control access to or activities in public space. Today public bodies may also record the many and various types of hate crimes and incidents committed against LGBTQ+ people in these spaces, which is a form of authoritative recognition of danger and exclusion. Even though these records invariably underrepresent the number and severity of these incidents, they do nonetheless indicate the extent to which LGBTQ+ people are marginalised in these spaces. To encroach on them is to lay yourself vulnerable to abuse. This is even more the case for lesbians and TGNC. Whereas gay men are predominantly attacked in known gay locations, considerable research testifies to the risks inherent in falling

subject to the male gaze within the generality of public space. Normative expectations about masculinities and how they are expressed, particularly in groups of men, can lead to the objectification and sexualisation of women, the hostility often shown to people who do not conform to social assumptions about masculinity and/or gender, and the unwanted harassment that frequently results. Existing literature suggests that there is a neighbourhood effect shaping this: that perpetrators of hate incidents are often people who recognise their victims as local but out-of-place, challenging their reading of their heteronormative imagined space. We also know that hate events - both because of this often local dimension and because they deliberately target a group as well as a person's identity - have a much greater psychological impact than other types of crime, and not just on the immediate victim.

Privacy in public

In consequence, paradoxically, all too often LGBTQ+ people need more privacy in public space, rather than having to self-police by avoiding eye-contact or other behaviours which might draw aggressive heterosexual male attention. The risk of acts taken for granted by heterosexuals, such as holding hands with a partner, are carefully assessed according to various situational or locational factors. Wide thoroughfares – with their increased visibility and echoing soundscapes – are among the points where self-censorship occurs. Particularly vulnerable groups, such as TGNC, are known to avoid whole areas because of calculations of vulnerability. For most public spaces are male spaces. It is men who do the looking in such spaces and whose voices carry and dominate their soundscapes, while marginalised groups tend to seek invisibility within these spaces or avoid them altogether.

Authorised Public Space Discourse

The concept of Authorised Public Space Discourse is thus not just about how spaces are controlled but also the way in which they facilitate this male domination of them. Our view is that this also reflects design features which increase the visibility and thus the vulnerability of marginalised groups. Much

public space in the UK was designed and built in the nineteenth century and reflects the increasingly rigid sexual mores and binary gender assumptions of that era. Victorian public squares frequently reference military parade-grounds in their design. Meanwhile, the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries also saw the reconfiguration of urban space towards wide, straight boulevards with enhanced sightlines - generally for the purpose of controlling public order - and opportunities for public spectacle. Organic spaces were replaced by highly designed ones in townscapes with often rigid use distinctions. The resulting spaces – frequently rectilinear, enclosed, undifferentiated and monumental – and the sightlines and soundscapes they created, fostered more male-dominated open spaces in which homophobes, who tend to act in packs, can easily intimidate. These male-dominated spaces become even more so at night.

Their monuments and street furniture also speak of the maleness of public space. Benches are aligned to facilitate gazing into the distance, rather than face-to-face interactions. Public memorials and statues in Britain frequently merely celebrate - rather than contextualise - an often sanguinary military and imperial past. And relatively few of these spaces contain the 'cosy corners' mentioned by our LGBTQ+ respondents, providing much needed privacy in public space, where they can see but not be seen. Design decisions, in other words, have contributed to the male dominance of what is imagined as heteronormative, rather than all-inclusive, space. This is Authorised Public Space Discourse, that web of assumptions and decisions made by those with power about who public space is or is not designed and managed for. We argue that public space needs to be queered if LGBTQ+ people, and other marginalised groups, are to find these spaces accessible, safer and more inclusive. This is not taking away anything from anyone; it is a process of integrating and usualising the historically marginalised and disempowered, from which the whole of society can gain.

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Designing in Safety and Inclusivity

Usualising is about understanding and accepting humanity in all its rich diversity. In terms of LGBTQ+ people in public space, this will be achieved when they no longer are targeted for being different – because usualising is about accepting all the differences rather than trying to impose some kind of normativity to which people either do or do not conform. Usualising in public space is about designing in this acceptance of diversity. Evidence suggests that most perpetrators of hate incidents can be desisted, and our aim here is to suggest ways of designing in a diversity which facilitates desistance.

For exclusion or inclusion is not just about prejudiced behaviour among the public, but is also facilitated by the nature, regulation and features of the space. For example, licensing regimes that produce monocultures of certain types of businesses serving a mainly heterosexual male clientele, particularly at night, will tend to deter others from the streets. Studies have indicated that marginalised groups like LGBTQ+ people are particularly affected by nighttime vulnerability. This vulnerability is increased by poor design characteristics. Poorly lit, badly maintained and confined spaces can all convey a sense of danger. So, for marginalised groups, can harsh lighting.

Design to foster belonging

It is not just particular environments that require attention. Planners should also aim to move away from inherited twentieth-century assumptions of heteronormative suburbs and instead provide more diverse, organic, and affordable types of living space. In other words, diversity and inclusion needs to be signalled at the intersection of private and public space in order to desist neighbourhood hate crimes and incidents directed against those who are felt not to conform on identikit estates of family homes.

This can be addressed by attention to the scale and aspects of the dwelling units, as well as their design features.

Similarly, our research identified monotonous streetscapes of regimented buildings in designated commercial areas are perceived as positively anti-queer spaces. These spaces - both residential and business - were seen by many of our respondents as over-designed, reflecting the aesthetic of the designer and not those who have to inhabit the space. It has often been noted that the design of space can either foster or – as in these cases – inhibit a sense of belonging. LGBTQ+ people, understandably, generally seek to be anonymous in public space. However, streetscapes which are themselves anonymous tend, paradoxically, to make those who do not conform or look like they belong there even more frighteningly visible. Like bright colours against a dull, monochrome background, they stand out.

In contrast, how is inclusion designed in? After all, as one respondent put it: ‘Protected characteristics under the 2010 Equality Act are not directly considered in planning’. BS8300 and the guidance on project management provided by ISO21500 needs to be updated to cover these considerations. Planners are nonetheless already starting to utilise equality impact assessment tools to assess the effects of their work, though it is important that their staff are appropriately trained for such tasks. Planners should not expect marginalised groups to do yet another piece of emotional labour to explain the problems of particular top-down designs.

Collaborate and co-create with LGBTQ+

Planning authorities are also beginning to consult with those user groups who might be especially affected by changes to the built environment and to appreciate, for instance,

the distinctive needs of older LGBTQ+ people. Tower Hamlets in 2017 became the first planning authority in Britain to specify that a development had to include an LGBTQ+ pub in response to the campaign run by the Friends of the Joiners Arms to replace this lost venue and reverse the decline of queer places in the capital. Soaring property prices, compounded by the fact that LGBTQ+ businesses and social enterprises rarely own the freehold of their premises - a problem replicated in gayborhoods around the world - has meant that 58% of London's LGBTQ+ venues closed in the previous ten years. Two years later, the Planning Inspectorate turned down a redevelopment scheme in which the preservation of an important LGBTQ+ venue was not guaranteed.

Nevertheless, when planners do take LGBTQ+ issues into account, it is often only in the context of such venues, and these decisions have not solved the problem either locally or across London. Existing equality assessment tools are similarly deficient, focusing on queer places and not on queer living or access to public spaces. Furthermore, only 26% of local Statements of Community Involvement in London indicate awareness of how to reach particular groups, and just 3% include a commitment to collaborate or co-create with such groups. These processes, moreover, do not invariably include local LGBTQ+ groups. Extending these consultations to do so would clearly contribute to inclusivity. So, would greater recognition of queer heritage in public space. This is not just so LGBTQ+ people can see themselves represented in public space. As a rule, the more diversity people see, the less they feel threatened by it - as long as it is not felt to undermine their own sense of identity - and therefore the more they are likely to accept it. This is something strict organisation of residential areas along property value, social class or ethnic lines has historically militated against.

Over-planning and over-designing

At the same time, planners should avoid overplanning. As one of our respondents put it, 'Queer space needs organic freedom to grow'. There should be 'Less constraints on use of spaces...to allow this organic process to thrive'.

Planning authorities could think about using devices such as the Community Infrastructure Levy to facilitate this.

Avoiding over-designing spaces was something of a theme both in the literature and in the comments of our respondents. Design should be on a human scale as one respondent put it, but not a scale which sees the default human as male, heterosexual, cisgendered, middle-class and white. Instead, examples of spaces regarded as queer-inclusive were ones which had a diverse feel to them. These were not uniform in terms of scale and mass of buildings, rooflines, colour or facades. They were not rectilinear and offered a range of sightlines through spaces which were punctuated by features. Their soundscapes were softened by greenery or bodies of water, rather than harshened by hard surfaces. Space was not open and intimidating but broken up and intimate.

Streets with high footfall support more social capital. Daytime activities, such as cafes, enhance this social capital and diversity. In turn, these activities require the wide pavements and opportunities for a flow of people mentioned by a number of respondents. Such settings are necessarily more inclusive than ones in towns dominated by motor traffic, where to be a pedestrian is to stand out. The faster the traffic, the less the footfall. 'Curvy roads' have instead been cited as a feature of queer-inclusive spaces.



Queering the authorised public space discourse in a quirky way in Bristol.

Micro-interventions

Finally, there are micro-interventions in design that can exclude or include. Research has shown that women prefer street furniture to allow intimacy, and our evidence suggests that many LGBTQ+ people would similarly prefer benches that face each other rather than the vista – hence the reference earlier to ‘cosy corners’. Symbols, such as rainbow crossings, signal inclusion to LGBTQ+ people and help to usualise their presence. Care should be taken, however, to avoid such interventions becoming tokenistic clichés, so thinking about images which speak of diversity and inclusion for all may be a better solution. Public art can be a way to achieve this. It can also break up space and provide colour, as well as adding to diversity in representation. Artistic lighting can do the same.

Inclusive lighting

Much public lighting is for the benefit of motorists, not pedestrians. Indeed, for the latter, this lighting can create puddles of light and dark. Lighting should indicate that space is designed for all members of society. Softer, more ambient lighting can be much safer than harsh bright lights. Thought therefore needs to be given to the nature of the lighting of public space and how this varies according to: its brightness; the context and layers of light – the human perception of light levels including light bouncing off surfaces; and the quality of light which enables the viewer to distinguish colours, contrast and shapes. More thought also needs to go into where it is positioned and the way in which it impacts upon its users.

Designing in diversity

It may seem that much of the foregoing is simply about good public realm design. That, surely, is the point. Addressing these design features would benefit all sections of the community, rather than simply LGBTQ+ people.

By designing in diversity and creating environments that include rather than exclude, it should also help to make public spaces more accessible to all marginalised and disempowered groups, and to usualise their presence therein.

This diagram indicates all the ways in which the nature of lighting can contribute to safety and inclusion in public spaces.

Source: Hoa Yang, Arup, Australia.

Context

Lighting the surrounding context such as trees, sculptural or architectural elements to create an ambience will create a sense of character and atmosphere conducive to feeling safer.

Passive Surveillance

An ambient glow of light from shopfronts creates a sense of the presence of others and provides an atmosphere of community.

Brightness and Light Quality

An increased level of brightness will not automatically make a space feel safer. Lighting output and quality should be designed with biodiversity in mind. Consider the brightness and quality of the light output in context of the surrounding areas.

Lighting type and technique

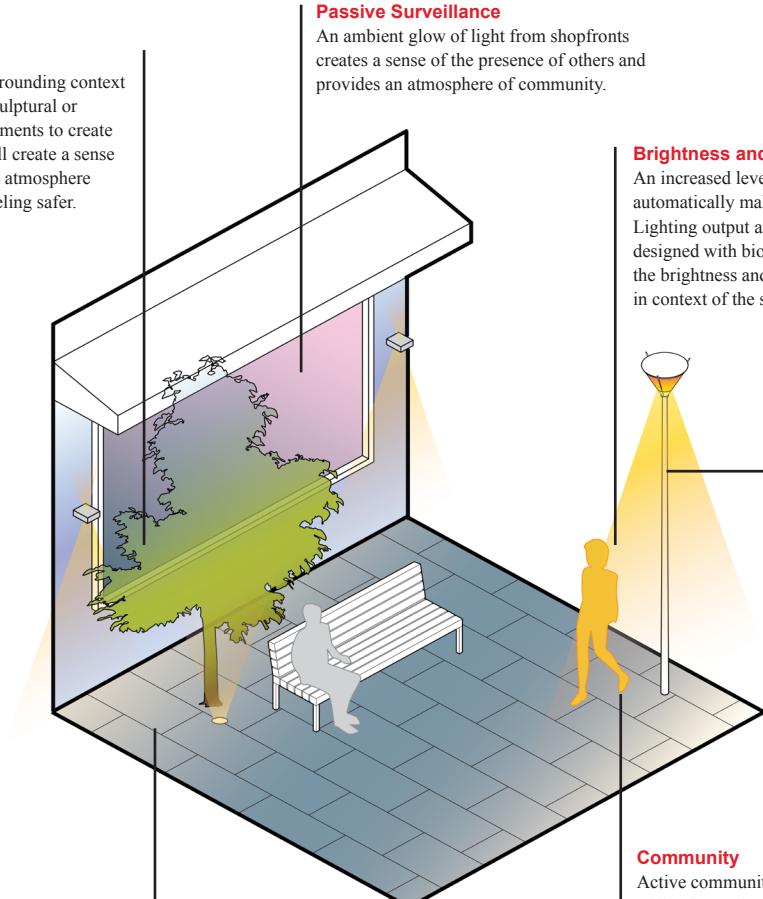
The type of light and where the light source is located can influence the lit environment. A light that is aimed at the facade or surrounding street furniture will feel different from a street light that is casting light straight down.

Community

Active community engagement and consideration of lived experiences of the users of the space should be integrated into the design. To gain a better understanding of the residents' needs, increasing ownership and use at night time.

Materials

The colour and finish of surfaces being lit can affect perceptions of brightness and sense of safety. Different atmospheres can be created with glossy/matte or black/white surfaces.



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