Pippa Catterall **and** Ammar Azzouz **on the urgent need to counter the historic invisibility of LGBTQ+ people in planning policy and processes**

**queerying planning policy**

Public space is not neutral. Access to it, and what you can do in it, is controlled by a range of authorities with responsibilities ranging from policing to licensing. Planners are among those who enact what in our recent report, *Queering Public Space*,1 we have labelled ‘authorised public space discourse’ through their role in determining what types of land use and structures can go where. This has shaped the development of towns and communities and the patterns of activity therein.

An example is the changes proposed in the Planning White Paper to the planning system in England. The privileging of ‘growth’ that these changes involve could lead to poorly conceived and uneven development. They also risk producing ‘loser’ groups. While this process is unlikely to be as overtly racialised as the way in which traditional African American communities continue to have their land designated for toxic industrial developments in Louisiana, it illustrates how planners can make choices or impose them upon people.2

Furthermore, assumptions internalised in the early history of planning3 have had significant legacy effects. Through the application of use classes which reflect early 20th century assumptions about economics, planning has privileged certain types of activity and marginalised others. Resulting divisions into economic and residential areas drew on contemporary ideas about masculine and feminine spaces.4 Moreover, in the view of hugely influential planning pioneers such as Patrick Geddes, residential areas were primarily sites of moral order,5 structured around the nuclear, heterosexual family. Similar thinking shaped the recommendations of the 1918 Tudor Walters report on housing and was explicitly referenced in the US Supreme Court’s *Euclid v Ambler* decision that institutionalised planning there in 1926.

It is only in recent decades that attention has increasingly turned to the long-term consequences of these fundamental assumptions on which so much planning has been based. For instance, the detrimental effects of historic transport planning on women6 are now well documented, although rarely addressed. LGBTQ+ people, whom Geddes saw as outside the ‘normal rhythms of life’, have been equally marginalised in planning policy. The emergence of what are increasingly referred to as ‘gayborhoods’ in liminal, run-down areas such as Manchester’s Canal Street7 from the 1950s owed little to planning. Yet their displacement in favour of redevelopments such as the scheme which prompted the removal of Liverpool’s gay district from Queen Square to Stanley Street in the 1970s8 was very much shaped by planning approaches that privileged businesses over people and ignored some groups of people entirely.

LGBTQ+ people’s invisibility often results in their needs being overlooked – including, for example, the need to cater for distinctive health issues9 discreetly in what can still be a very homophobic society. Yet it is only now in 2021 that the first purpose-built LGBT+ youth and community centre is about to open in Manchester’s Sidney Street.10 In a signal statement of acceptance, this new building both articulates the LGBTQ+ presence in public space and reflects an entitlement to public support, for it is the first such centre to be fully funded from the public purse anywhere in Europe.

This historic invisibility in planning processes has had other significant consequences. In housing, for example, housing estates laid out with heteronormative families in mind can be hostile places for those who do not conform. Gill Valentine’s work on lesbians in Reading11 pointed this out in the 1990s. More recently, trans friends were firebombed off a housing estate in the same town. The neighbourhood effect identified in research on hate crimes and incidents suggests that people who recognisably do not conform in such monocultural communities are unduly likely to become victims.12

Then there is the question of the provision of housing for the ageing LGBTQ+ population. Despite the work of Tonic Housing,13 they remain under-catered for, with the UK’s first LGBT+ affirming retirement community opening (in London) only in 2021. In contrast to the USA, where LGBTQ+ needs are increasingly addressed by age-appropriate housing solutions,14 too often in the UK entering supported living involves a move away from support and friendship networks and back into the closet.15

LGBTQ+ people are, of course, widely dispersed16 rather than concentrated in gayborhoods. Indeed, in the UK – in contrast to the USA or elsewhere in Europe – gayborhoods are frequently distinguished by their businesses and leisure offers rather than also being residential centres. This historic characteristic has influenced the ways in which planning practices have at last started to respond to LGBTQ+ communities’ needs. Moves to preserve the heritage of these districts commenced in the USA in 2014.17 The following year the Royal Vauxhall Tavern became one of the first buildings to be listed by Historic England because of its heritage significance for a particular community.18 Subsequently, in the face of a rapid decline in the number of such venues in London over the past decade,19 moves to specify that redevelopments have to include the preservation or replacement of such LGBTQ+ amenities have begun to appear in the capital.20

However, this is a very limited form of planning intervention. So far it has had even more limited effect, as the closure of The Black Cap in Camden21 a week after it was granted ‘asset of community value’ status testifies. Furthermore, it aims to protect certain *places*, rather than bringing the needs of LGBTQ+ people into planning practice. To achieve the latter, more action is required.

At the most basic level, LGBTQ+ people should be recognised as being among those groups historically ignored by planning processes who ought to be consulted in future. This is already happening in certain jurisdictions. In New South Wales, for instance, there is a general recommendation that minorities – including ‘people of diverse sexualities’ – should be considered in local social plans.22 Such recognition can encourage the provision of amenities such as LGBTQ+ centres. In contrast, in London only 26% of local Statements of Community Involvement even indicate awareness of how to reach particular groups, and just 3% include a commitment to collaborate or co-create with such groups.20 Diversifying the workforce in planning, as advocated by the TCPA,23 would help to address this. If more minorities are involved in the process of consultation, their voices are more likely to be understood and listened to.

Additionally, consulting such groups would enable planners to incorporate resulting objectives into local development schemes and into the planning briefs for particular developments. At a macro level, this could encourage consultation with local communities about provision of social amenities through the Community Infrastructure Levy. Such provision should not be over-planned; planning should create opportunities for the organic growth that produced gayborhoods,24 and should not be too prescriptive.

At a more micro level, consultation could facilitate small-scale interventions that signal inclusivity. This might include planning stipulations around design features such as colour schemes, lighting, public art, or greenery.25 For instance, a mixed colour palette can be used to indicate diversity in public space, while a predominance of cool colours is associated with reduced impulsiveness and aggression.

More extensive changes of approach might also be considered. One example is the way in which changing approaches to housing developments could help to reduce the neighbourhood effect of hate crime. Yet, as several architects have complained to us, too many new developments effectively remain monocultures, conceived with particular types of household in mind.26 Such developments are not necessarily sustainable or diverse.

The nascent trend among a few authorities towards housing strategies that consider diversity, including LGBTQ+ people, should be supported27 and not just because of the need to recognise changes in household formation away from the heteronormative nuclear family that Geddes thought planning ought to encourage. This is despite the lack of research, up to now, on the extent to which community diversity is itself beneficial. After all, there has been plenty of work pointing to the positive effects of diversity in the corporate sector,28 not least in creating a wider range of knowledge inputs, ideas, and insights. In contrast, there has generally been an assumption in planning, inspired by American commentator Robert Putnam,29 that diversity leads to mistrust and undermines cohesion in local communities.

However, such evidence as there is suggests that these responses are primarily triggered as a reaction to the disruption to familiar communities, spaces and identity narratives caused by diversification. But once diversification has occurred, a positive effect can be discerned.30 The hostility to those who do not fit in, reflected in the neighbourhood effect on hate crimes, diminishes.31 We avoid the term ‘normalise’ to describe these processes, because of its connotations of pressure to conform. Instead, diversity in a neighbourhood promotes ‘usualising’32 – an increasing awareness and acceptance of humanity in all its variety. Diversity thus serves to usualise hitherto marginalised groups and advance their inclusion into the wider community. In the process, this acceptance and inclusion is positively correlated with the advancement of both social and economic capital.33

A greater emphasis on embracing diversity would mark a step away from some of the assumptions that have shaped planning practice since its origins. Promoting sustainability and diversity would also help to re-focus thinking around the key planning Use Class C (dwellings) on the needs and activities of the people who occupy them. Such a move would be a significant departure – and not before time.

Of course, planning use categories in the UK are already currently undergoing what has been billed as the most radical overhaul of the system since the 1940s. However, the changes are primarily reactive, reflecting belated recognition of recent shifts in the nature of economic activity, particularly marked by the rise of online retail. Furthermore, the focus of these changes remains on property-owners and the way in which they are permitted to use their land and premises, rather than on how people use space.

Nonetheless, the introduction of the F Use Classes covering premises used by the community might provide an opportunity for new organic developments in space. Furthermore, Class F2 is intended to protect important community facilities. Hopefully, this will include those LGBTQ+ venues which have been disappearing as a consequence of rising property prices in recent years.

Although such changes might help to protect particular amenities, it is less apparent that they will sustain or preserve neighbourhoods, let alone gayborhoods. For instance, while the placing of a whole range of retail facilities into the new Class E reflects awareness of the need for flexibility on declining high streets, it also raises the spectre of even more shopping parades lined with fast-food outlets – exactly the sort of outcome that drives the mistrust and social dislocation that Putnam warned of.

An approach to usage by district rather than by use class would instead focus attention on how people and communities use space, rather than on the buildings therein. It would allow consideration of local people’s differential needs and journeys to be factored into consideration more fully. It could also help to preserve sometimes vulnerable gayborhoods. It might even enable cities to create new ones, as has happened in Arizona, where Phoenix has encouraged the emergence of a gayborhood in the Melrose district.34

People should be at the centre in planning. Too often attention is instead focused upon buildings or motor vehicles. For instance, the traffic effects of new developments are considered in the planning process. Whether permitted developments might lead to hate crimes or gender-based violence should be considered as well. Yet the community impact assessments widely used in the criminal justice system35 to consider the effect of such crimes on local communities do not seem to have been taken up by planners. Nor is it clear that the duty to apply community impact statements in local government has substantially affected the planning process.

Furthermore, why do we not have impact assessments for planning itself? Would it not be useful to review the effects of major new schemes or redevelopments to examine, for instance, whether there has been an effect on safety, hate crime or gender-based violence, so that such reviews could then inform future design?

Planners have inherited from their forebears their two principal devices of zoning and use classes. Both continue to reflect a conceptual framework for planning practice which focuses upon how land is used, primarily as an economic asset. Despite the current overhaul, this conceptual framework remains largely in place. Instead, we argue for a reconfiguration of planning around how people and communities use space. Changes such as these should help to make planning more inclusive of all communities, not least LGBTQ+ people. In the process, they should also queer (here used as a verb!) the assumptions behind the elements of authorised public space discourse inherited from the founders of the planning profession in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

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**Notes**

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***[Captions]***

**The new LGBT+ Centre in Manchester, the first purpose-built LGBT+ Centre in Europe, is due to open on Manchester’s Sidney Street in 2022**

**The Melrose arch in Phoenix – the iconic Melrose arch marks entry to Phoenix’s gayborhood, in a rare example of city planners contributing to the emergence of such a district**

*Phoenix.org*

***[Pull-out]***

**‘The nascent trend among a few authorities towards housing strategies that consider diversity, including LGBTQ+ people, should be encouraged’**