

Commentary

Re-Orienting Planning Practice

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Abstract

This commentary reflects on the articles in the thematic issue on queering urban planning and municipal governance and the ways that they suggest that planning practice must be re-oriented to be more inclusive and incorporate more insurgent perspectives. Planning practice is susceptible to capture by neo-liberal corporate interests that marginalize vulnerable queer populations. More insurgent planning approaches are needed to resist the corporate take-over of queer spaces by empowering the voices of LGBTQ+ people.

Keywords

insurgent planning; LGBTQ+ planning; queer spaces

Issue

This commentary is part of the issue “Queer(ing) Urban Planning and Municipal Governance” edited by Alison L. Bain (Utrecht University) and Julie A. Podmore (John Abbott College / Concordia University).

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In the West, urban planning is often seen as a modernist tool for improving cities through interventions at the local and municipal level. Unfortunately, many such efforts have had “unintended” consequences for low income and other marginalized communities (Thomas, 1994). When planners and municipal decision-makers seek to establish “City Beautiful” style improvements, the results may be attractive for some of the population, and disastrous for others. Urban renewal destroyed many low-income African American communities when attempts to “clean up the slums” tore down existing housing and replaced it with more expensive apartments or other urban land uses, like highways and parks. Paul Davidoff (1965) highlighted the failures of urban renewal that was driven by top-down urban planning and called for advocacy planning in which planners were encouraged to be advocates for marginalized populations.

Unfortunately, the LGBTQ+ community is often treated in similar fashion by planners and local officials whose actions are colored by heterosexist bias (Frisch, 2002). Too often planning practices fail to seek input from queer populations about whether redevelopment plans are needed and if so what types of reforms might be of greatest use to those communities (Doan & Higgins, 2011). In the face of outright bias, advocacy is necessary but clearly not sufficient. A reframing of planning

practice is required to overcome heteronormative biases (Doan, 2011). There are important lessons to be learned from the struggles to overcome the colonial legacy of planning across the global South where planning was a tool used by colonizers to control of urban spaces. The failure of colonial planning authority to consider indigenous populations as citizens with valuable input effectively silencing their voices in the planning process has led to what some have called insurgent planning (Miraftab, 2009). The articles in this collection illustrate the importance of re-orienting planning towards a model of practice that not only recognizes LGBTQ+ populations, but makes them central to the process.

The first two articles in the collection deal with the issue of housing which can be challenging for LGBTQ households in the context of traditional heteronormative expectations of family structure. Forsyth’s (2001) review of planning issues for non-conformist populations highlights the importance of housing for LGBTQ families in the US context. The housing articles in this collection add a global dimension to this understanding by including case material from South Asia and Southern Africa. The article by Chan Arun-Pina (2023) explores the difficulties of LGBTQ+ higher education students in Mumbai to find adequate housing. The author describes the growth of the Deonar Campus of the Tata Institute for Social

Sciences in Mumbai that has led to increasing studentification, resulting tensions between town and gown. These struggles between traditional family householders and increasing numbers of young unmarried students cause special difficulties for LGBTQ+ identified students forced to rent rooms and apartments from more conservative families in the surrounding area who are resistant to this community. Housing for students is a kind of in-between zone between the parental home and the presumed marital home of adulthood, but for LGBTQ+ identified students this pathway is much more convoluted. The author also suggests that planning could be substantially improved with a greater focus on listening to the stories of queer community members as a means of gaining greater understanding of the difficulties that they face.

In the Southern Africa context, the second housing article by Delgado et al. (2023) explores the nature of housing policy and its impact on the queer population in Namibia. They highlight Sylvia Tamale's concept of coloniality in which the persistence of colonial power structures is ensured by the knowledge production processes created by those ex-colonial authorities. This patriarchal framework influences housing policy in Namibia because policy-makers are unable to grasp the critical needs of queer individuals for housing not based on traditional family structures. In the city of Walvis Bay they find that queer people must hide themselves to survive, and housing is essential to these strategies, providing essential safe spaces for the community. The authors also note that their informants consider that supportive human relationships are essential for ensuring safety. In short, the authors argue that queer decolonial thinking is critical in challenging modernist planning assumptions that have enabled such long standing patterns of discrimination in housing.

LGBTQ+ bars are often a source of noise complaints and loci of concern from gentrifying neighbors about trash on the ground as well as the "trashy people" who go there. Loud gay bars are NOT beautiful, but they are a critical element in queer spaces. Community centers that attract queer youth of color displaying a wide range of gender expressions are not creating "an attractive nuisance," but serve as insurgent spaces for organizing and building activist community. Sarah Gelbard (2023) provides an insightful analysis of the overlap between punk spaces and queer spaces, arguing that in spite of popular conceptions of punk as dominated by young white males, queer women and queers of color may find acceptance in punk venues. However, just like some gay bars, punk venues are often loud and grungy and neo-liberal gentrifiers often attempt to erase them. In the case of the Ottawa Music Strategy, the requirement that music venues feel safe for all people was problematic for punk places that are coded by outsiders as crumbling and decrepit environments, even though this ambiance is what makes the place feel punk.

In the next article, Karine Duplan (2023) explores the question of whether LGBTQ+ identified individuals

can influence policy from within. In this piece Duplan interviews LGBTQ+ staff in Geneva, Switzerland in the municipal and regional levels of government to explore whether they are able to transcend "pink-washing" and make meaningful contributions to improving the lives of the wider LGBTQ+ community. She argues that her informants played a kind of in-between role that was both difficult for them, but also at times was a kind of Trojan Horse in one informant's words through which these insiders could use their ties to community groups and act as undercover lobbyists for progressive policy changes.

Trans individuals, especially trans people of color, are among the most highly marginalized groups in the city (Doan, 2007). Smith et al. (2023) suggest that most planning activities in Brighton and Hove in the UK use a kind of choreographing approach that although it makes trans people more intelligible to the wider population, also results in policies that fail to grasp the innumerable sources of heteronormative harm to trans individuals. The idea of planners trying to choreograph a community as variable as the trans and gender diverse community provides useful insights. While some drag routines can be carefully choreographed, the idea of a single dance routine working for the wide range of identities sheltering under the transgender umbrella (Doan & Johnston, 2022) is frankly ludicrous and might be more accurately conceptualized as a wild dance party in which each person's individual display of gender adds to the glorious swirl of identities. Trying to choreograph any part of this vibrant and yet marginalized group seems doomed to fail in terms of grasping the realities of discrimination faced by many trans and gender diverse people.

The article by Julie Podmore and Alison Bain (2023) uses the concepts of civic "rainbowization" and "festivalization" to describe the ways that suburban municipalities in the Vancouver metro area attempt to make neighborhoods more aesthetically pleasing and serve as advertisements for inclusivity, but in reality do little to provide more than face value recognition. Rainbows can be readily co-opted by neo-liberal developers in urban and suburban areas with a focus on revitalizing commercial areas and creating spaces for public festivals. These token efforts at recognition often fail to address critical needs of LGBTQ+ people. Painting rainbow crosswalks is not a sufficient means of planning for a broad range of LGBTQ+ community members. In fact, for many queer folks a grittier city may allow the diversity of community to gather and heal from the twin traumas of heteronormativity and homonormativity.

Tiffany Muller Myrdahl (2023) provides a contrasting framework for trans inclusion policies in the City of Vancouver, finding that a careful focus on equity over equality results in a more effective strategic framework. A critical element in this approach was the explicit inclusion of trans community members in a group called the Trans and Gender Diverse Two Spirit Working Group (TGD2S) that produced a working paper and provided input on a variety of policies of concern to the broader

community. Muller Myrdahl finds that the local planning effort revolved around a co-design process with trans community members that addressed issues such as accessible washrooms, training of municipal staff, and a rethinking of the ways that the city collected data on this diverse community.

In another article in this collection, Daniel Hess and Alex Bitterman (2023) analyze the importance of LGBTQ+ community groups in sustaining LGBTQ+ spaces. Their contribution examines the wide variety of community service organizations that are critical elements in reaching out to LGBTQ+ residents and providing them with needed services. They develop a typology (the Hess-Bitterman taxonomy) of LGBTQ+ organizations that seems useful for planning agencies wishing to connect with this marginalized community. The 227 community service organizations from across North America reach an estimated 40,000 LGBTQ+ clients every week suggesting that these groups are a very important pathway to at least some of the hard to reach LGBTQ+ community.

In his article on queer urban space in Acapulco, Mexico, William Payne (2023) provides a useful historical analysis of the evolution of municipal governance and its support of international tourism. While Acapulco's reputation as a place for the Hollywood jet set did generate significant economic and associated urban growth, it has also developed a reputation for violence due to the rise of organized crime and narco-trafficking that falls more heavily on the spontaneous settlements around the fringe of the more developed downtown near the famous beaches. At the same time, the city's planing focus on making a place attractive for tourism, also created a city that happened to be equally attractive to both LGBTQ+ tourists as well as LGBTQ+ Mexicans. Unfortunately, these planning policies were explicitly oriented to the LGBTQ+ persons with the result that a number of the LGBTQ+ individuals interviewed in this article reported increasing levels of vulnerability and economic instability suggesting that overall, tourism has not been helpful to this community.

In the final article, Marisa Turesky and Jonathan Jae-an Crisman (2023) explore how the radical and insurgent potential of traditional Pride parades has been transformed into neo-liberal corporatization. They describe the healing and restorative nature of early Pride marches as spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals suffering from the trauma of discrimination and exclusion to experience a kind of "queer joy." The authors argue in fact that it is the "ritualesque" nature of some of the more overtly queer symbols and images that disrupt the status quo and allow healing from the traumas of discrimination and exclusion. They argue that a more radical planning practice is needed that centers "affective experience, joyful expression, and emotional labor in meaningful ways" (Turesky & Crisman, 2023, p. 273) allowing for a realignment of planning with movements to heal those harmed by policing and red-lining practices in poor neighborhoods. They call for a radical planning praxis that seeks

to disrupt efforts to co-opt planning and use the police power to undermine efforts by marginalized groups to be seen and recognized by municipal decision-makers.

Traditional planning practice does not adequately serve the LGBTQ+ community. The authors of the articles in this collection provide detailed evidence of the need for a more activist and engaged planning practice that seeks out and identifies marginalized individuals from the LGBTQ+ community, and then actively incorporates those voices into an authentic co-design planning process. Only by ensuring more meaningful engagement with a broad range of LGBTQ+ people can planning hope to promote positive change on issues that are of central concern to this community.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author



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