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QUEERYING URBAN PLANNING: FROM GENDER GEOGRAPHIES TO INCLUSIVE CITIES

QUEERYING URBAN PLANNING: DAS GEOGRAFIAS DE GÉNERO ÀS CIDADES INCLUSIVAS

Anna MAROCCO
La Sapienza - University of Rome & IGOT
Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning - University of Lisbon
anna.marocco@uniroma1.it

Resumo

No contexto de um projeto de investigação de doutoramento em curso, este trabalho emprega uma abordagem interseccional para examinar questões de justiça sócio-espacial relativas a minorias sexuais e de género, com um enfoque na defesa de uma maior inclusão e representação social no planeamento urbano. Apesar da longa história dos estudos geográficos feministas e queer que desafiam os pressupostos heteronormativos no domínio do planeamento urbano, a integração da inclusão social das minorias sexuais no planeamento urbano, nas políticas e nos processos de governação continua a ser uma questão crítica e não resolvida. Este artigo sublinha especificamente a importância vital e o potencial impacto da integração das perspectivas queer no planeamento e conceção urbanos, propondo estratégias práticas para que os decisores políticos e planeadores promovam um urbanismo transformador e expansivo. Estas estratégias têm o potencial de desempenhar um papel significativo na promoção de cidades mais inclusivas e justas, onde todos os residentes, independentemente da sua identidade de género ou orientação sexual, se sintam apreciados e apoiados no seu ambiente urbano e sejam capazes de realizar todo o seu potencial. O objetivo final deste documento é ajudar a colmatar a lacuna no campo do planeamento e promover o desenvolvimento de espaços queer estimulando o debate em curso sobre o urbanismo queer e a investigação futura nesta área.

Palavras-chave: Geografias de gênero, planeamento urbano, urbanismo queer, justiça socioespacial.

Abstract

In the context of an ongoing doctoral research project, this work employs an intersectional approach to examine issues of socio-spatial justice concerning gender and sexual minorities, with a focus on advocating for greater social inclusion and representation in urban planning. Despite the long history of feminist and queer geographical studies challenging heteronormative assumptions within city planning, the integration of social inclusion for sexual minorities into urban planning, policies, and governance processes remains a critical and unresolved issue. This article specifically emphasises the vital importance and potential impact of incorporating queer perspectives into urban planning and design by proposing practical strategies for policymakers and planners to promote transformative and inclusive urbanism. These strategies could play a significant role in fostering more equitable cities where all residents, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation, feel valued and supported in their urban environment, and are able to realise their full potential. The ultimate aim of this paper is to help bridge the gap in the planning field and promote the development of queer spaces. Additionally, it seeks to ignite the ongoing debate on queer urbanism and encourage further research in this area.

keywords: Gender Geographies, Urban Planning, Queer Urbanism, Socio-spatial Justice.

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1 - Introduction

It is widely recognized that the design of a city defines, to a large extent, the activities that take place within it by determining which actors can actively participate in them. Hence, urban planning is traditionally considered a social project, “a conscious effort to direct social processes to attain goals", oriented towards pursuing the common good (Fainstein & Fainstein, 1996, 265-66). Nevertheless, since the 1960s, several critical works have shed light on the darker side of planning, revealing that it can be used to reflect existing power relations and strengthen inequalities rather than foster positive social change (Jacobs, 1961; Harvey, 1985). Similarly, more recent works highlighted how planning could also be seen as a rational output produced by the exercise of power (Flyvbjerg, 1998), a tool that facilitates capital accumulation, often to the detriment of the working class (Flyvbjerg, 1998); a process of social control applied to people along many possible intersections, including class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation (Yiftachel, 1998) and a heterosexist project (Frisch, 2002).



Figure 1 -The first rainbow crosswalk ever in Taylor Square in Sydney, image by Bidgee.

Indeed, feminist scholars have widely delved into the hetero-patriarcal aspect of planning, examining its implications in urban design (Hayden, 1981), zoning policies (Ritzdorf, 1986), and even planning theory itself (Sandercock and Forsyth, 1992). These significant contributions have led to the widespread recognition that urban planning has traditionally been a male-dominated and top-down process, often excluding gender and sexual minorities from meaningful participation. Historically, European cities were primarily designed and planned by civil engineers, architects, and public health experts, sectors dominated by men. By considering the able-bodied, working man as a “neutral” user of the city, male planners and designers - intentionally or unintentionally - created urban spaces that

met their needs, reflecting and perpetuating the patriarchal gender norms of their society: a norm that designated men as income producers, with full access to the public sphere, land and housing, and women as caregivers, relegated to the private sphere of the family and deprived of landed property (Fainstein & Servon, 2005; Moser, 1993). Therefore, the lack of gender competence in urban planning inevitably produces and reproduces serious disadvantages for different categories of people: women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities of all ages and abilities, excluding them from the active public and productive urban realm. In the following paragraphs, we will take a closer look at how this reflection developed inside geographical studies and how a gender approach in planning could help to achieve the goal of a more inclusive, equal, and supportive urban space by integrating a gender perspective and plural competencies into all stages of planning, policy-making, and spatial design.

2 - Gender geographies: from unequal to plural spaces

Gender geographies identify an academic perspective and interdisciplinary field of study within human geography that focuses on the relationships and intersections between gender identities concerning spaces, places and socio-spatial interactions. This perspective emerges as a critical approach to the domain of traditional theories and research that often ignored or downplayed the experiences and perspectives of women and other minorities and subaltern subjectivities in the production of geographical and spatial knowledge.

2.1 - Feminist geographies and methodologies

Feminist engagement with spatial and geographical disciplines consolidated in the early 1980s in the Anglo-American academic context in the wake of second-wave feminism and radical geography. Many early contributions aimed to promote the legitimacy of a feminist perspective within a geographical discipline strongly influenced by the patriarchal, hierarchical structure and a masculinist view of the world (Borghi & Rondinone, 2009). *On Not Excluding Half of the Human in human geography*, published in 1982 in the United States is one of the first articles to conceptually and methodologically problematise the indifference of geographical research to feminist contributions already operative in other disciplinary contexts such as sociology and anthropology, identifying ways in which a non-sexist geography could emerge (Monk & Hanson, 1982, 11) British geographer Gillian Rose, on the other hand, was one of the first to formalise a critique of the “transparent space” of masculinist, white, bourgeois and heterosexual geographical knowledge production that “structured the way geography claims to know space, place and landscape” (Rose, 1993, 137). These research programmes have worked to identify and analyse gender-based spatial inequalities, the power dynamics that influence the construction of and access to spaces, and the complex intersections between gender, race, social class and other dimensions of identities, often adopting an intersectional perspective. As Kimberlé Crenshaw points out, these analytical tools allow us to observe not only the connections between race, class, gender and sexuality in the processes of production and reproduction of spatial interactions but also and especially how structures make specific identities the consequence and vehicle of vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1993).

Some comparative studies have highlighted how women's socio-spatial behaviours and opportunities differ significantly from men's, suggesting a relativistic and distorted dimension of physical space as a function of time, costs and gendered social expectations (Kwan, 1999). In particular, it is evident to urban scholars that the dichotomous and hierarchical separation between the public and productive, male-dominated space and the private reproductive, female and unpaid (or at least feminised, racialised and poorly paid) space is problematic and represents one of the fulcrum nodes to address in a redistributive perspective (Hayden, 1980; Federici, 2012).

On the epistemological and methodological level, Donna Haraway's (1988) orientations on the situated, embodied and partial nature of all knowledge have resonated strongly among geographers. In particular, the critical contributions of *standpoint epistemologies,* with a Marxist matrix, deal with how power relations shape, determine and influence knowledge production by asserting the importance of interpellating corporealities (Grosz, 1993), including the experiences of subaltern groups (Spivak, 1988; Harding, 2004) by integrating the critical ethical and political questions raised by anti-racist and indigenous perspectives on the production of predominantly Western and white academic knowledge (Smith, 2012). These epistemological shifts produce a proliferation of qualitative practices and methods considered closer to the direct experience of people and communities, stimulating the development of collaborative and participatory research and re-discussing what can count as data and the ethical implications in knowledge production (Peake, 2017).

2.2 - Queer geographies and urban spaces

Within the field of gender geographies, the strand of queer geographies identifies an area of study that develops from the critical intersections between human geography and queer theories. This field of research focuses on understanding spatial experiences, gender identities and sexualities beyond dominant social and cultural norms. In particular, queer geographies explore how LGBTQ+ people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other non-normative subjectivities) experience, shape, and interact with space, how these spaces are socially constructed, and how they can be redefined or contested. Several studies analyse the socio-spatial dynamics of queer communities, their *space-making* practices, the challenges they face in particular places and the strategies of resistance and empowerment they elaborate. “The goal [...] is to employ ‘place’ as a conceptual framework to analyse LGBTQ+ urban actions across ‘the middle’, drawing attention to their vernacular worldings and critical continuities through local case studies of remembering, being and doing that strive to rupture analytical segregations in urban theory” (Bain & Podmore, 2021, 1307). Even though this is a newly defined and still arduous field of study to delimit, we can, however, identify specific thematic axes that guide its research:

- Space and Identity: which reflects on how LGBTQ+ people negotiate and express their identity in urban, suburban or rural spatial contexts (e.g., analysis of the formation of LGBTQ+ neighbourhoods and “queer spaces” such as bars, clubs and community centres);

● Space-making and Activism: looking at how LGBTQ+ communities organise, promote and create inclusive and safe spaces within cities and neighbourhoods;

● Gender and Queer Urbanism: which focuses on the interactions between sexuality, gender and urban planning (e.g., analysis of the impact of gentrification on LGBTQ+ communities, design of inclusive public spaces and accessibility of services);

● Migration and Mobility: exploring the mobility and migration experiences of LGBTQ+ people (e.g., challenges, strategies, impact on the sense of belonging);

● Transgender Geographies: which investigates how trans and non-binary identities interact with space and place (e.g., the analysis of access to gender healthcare, the design of inclusive public spaces, and the spatial dimensions of transphobia).

Queer urban geography studies, in particular, offer rich accounts and reconnaissance of contemporary city spaces affected by profound processes of transformation that can significantly contribute to reconsidering the dynamics of urban social reproduction and the restructuring of policies and governance to promote inclusion and equality. These “epistemology of multiplicity” can also have essential spin-offs in the approach to urban planning (Olcuire, 2023, 192). However, it is difficult to identify consistent examples of their systematic translation into operational models in our Southern European research context (Perrone, 2010). However, several authors, including Leonie Sandercock in *Towards Cosmopolis* (1998), identify in the concept of responsibility or co-responsibility a methodological and operational lens functional to overcoming the paternalistic dimension of planning and affirming its participatory and pluralistic value (Jacobs, 1961; Sandercock, 1998; Fainstein, 2000).

3 - Queer(ing) urban planning: from gender mainstreaming to queer urbanism

As we have previously introduced, the heterosexist assumptions embedded in planning and design theory and practice were not acknowledged and challenged significantly until the 1980s when feminist scholars in the United States and Europe began analysing how planning and design had excluded women's needs (Fainstein & Servon, 2005). In the following two decades, planning and urban design theory developments helped shed light on gender gaps in the built environment. Scholars such as Dolores Hayden, Gerda Werkerle and Gwendoline Wright published numerous articles and studies on gender inequalities constructed in the urban environment, studying issues of mobility, security, land ownership and access to services and employment. Although some cities have made considerable progress in addressing gender bias in the built environment over the past three decades, much work remains to be done to understand how the urban environment works for sexual and gender minorities (Forsyth, 2001; Doan, 2016) and to overcome the assumption that gender inclusion means ‘women's

issues' - without taking into account gender relations or the cumulative impacts of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, income, class, ability and age. In addition to their severe under-representation in the planning and design professions, these subjectivities are systematically excluded from community planning and design processes. This absence happens for various reasons, many related to deficiencies in the urban environment. More generally, these groups are cut out due to economic pressures and social norms, both external and internalised, which often cause them to withdraw rather than participate in participatory planning processes (Moser, 1993). As a result of this lack of representation, women, girls and sexual and gender minorities of all ages and abilities struggle to have their voices heard and their priorities asserted in planning and design decisions around the world. The impact of this historical and systemic bias on planning and design decision-makers is far-reaching and ends up affecting almost all aspects of these groups' daily lives, limiting their socio-spatial opportunities compared to normal, cisgender and heterosexual men. In the following, we will consider some of the tools we have at our disposal to bridge this participation and representation gap with the intention of fuelling a virtuous debate on the promotion of socio-spatial justice.

3.1 - Gender inclusive urban planning

Being interested in addressing gender and sexuality issues in the built environment, we already have at our disposal some powerful references such as Gender Mainstreaming Planning which was formally recognized in 1995 at the UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing. Gender Mainstreaming Planning identifies a strategy and process aimed at integrating a gender perspective into all stages of planning, policy-making, and implementation to promote gender equality. It involves systematically considering the different needs, experiences, and impacts on individuals of all genders to create more equitable and inclusive outcomes. This approach seeks to ensure that gender inequalities are addressed and that all people despite their sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation benefit equally from planning initiatives. In fact, as gender mainstreaming tells us, the lack of gender expertise in planning can lead to substantial disadvantages for gender and sexual minorities of all ages and abilities, limiting their spatial and socio-economic opportunities (UN-HABITAT, 2014; EIGE, 2019; World Bank, 2020). The World Bank (2020) identifies six thematic problem areas in the built environment that intersect with gender inequality by limiting the agency of women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities and on which integrated action is needed (see Figure 2):

- Access: being able to use public services and spaces without constraints and barriers;
- Mobility: moving around the city safely, easily, and conveniently.
- Safety and freedom from violence: to be free from real and perceived dangers in both public and private spheres.
- Health and hygiene: maintaining an active lifestyle free from health hazards in the built environment.
- Climate resilience: the ability to prepare for, respond to, and cope with both the immediate and long-term impacts of environmental disasters.

● Security of tenure: access to and ownership of land and housing to live, work, build wealth, and exercise agency.

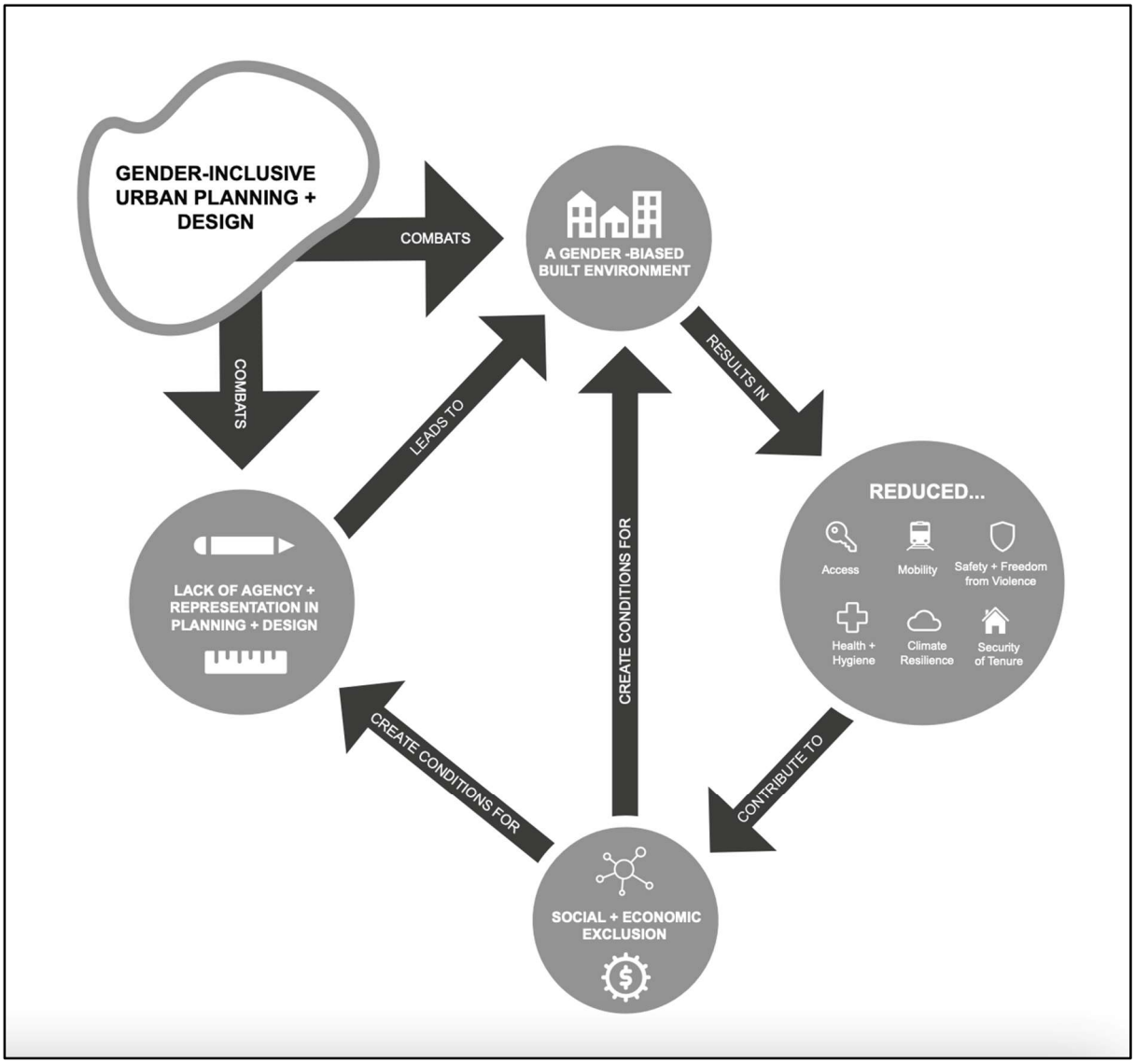


Figure 2 - Conceptual framework of gender and the built environment in World Bank Handbook for Gender-Inclusive Urban Planning and Design (2020, 33).

Seemingly, we could understand why heteronormative infrastructures and planning procedures exclude and can even endanger queer people, especially those who are trans and BIPOC (black, indigenous, and People of Colour). Indeed, statistics show that over a third of LGBTQ+ people face discrimination in their daily lives in areas such as education (15%), healthcare (14%), housing (12%), and social life (17%) especially in areas where LGBTIQ+ people are not protected from discrimination by the EU law in force (FRA, 2024,18). This is why in recent past decades queer urban scholars are promoting the development of a queer eye on urban planning, namely an approach to urban development that actively incorporates the needs, perspectives, and experiences of LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other) communities into the planning, design, and management

of urban spaces (Greiner, 2023). This practice aims to create cities that are inclusive, safe, and supportive of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. It involves rethinking traditional planning paradigms to ensure that urban environments are equitable and reflective of all inhabitants.

3.2 - Toolkit for planners and policymakers to integrate a spatial queer perspective

This final paragraph aims to outline and discuss some key tools and strategies for planners and policymakers that could help to incorporate LGBTQ+ concerns into mainstream planning and urban policies.

- *Data Collection and Analysis*

The collection and analysis of data disaggregated by gender and sexual orientation is crucial for understanding the specific needs and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. By breaking down the data in this way, we can gain deeper insights into the experiences of different groups within the LGBTQ+ community and tailor our support and resources accordingly. In addition, collective GIS (Geographic Information System) or participatory mapping allows us to map out LGBTQ+ demographics, spaces, and resources in the city. This mapping helps us identify areas where support and resources are lacking and opportunities for improvement. By visually representing this information, we can better understand the geographical distribution of LGBTQ+ individuals and the availability of support services.

- *Community Engagement and Participation*

When promoting inclusion and participation, it is essential to actively involve LGBTQ+ individuals and organisations in decision-making processes. Public consultations and workshops offer valuable opportunities for gathering input and encouraging dialogue. By actively engaging LGBTQ+ communities, we can ensure their voices are heard and their perspectives considered. Furthermore, surveys and focus groups aimed at LGBTQ+ communities can provide detailed insights into their specific needs and experiences. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the challenges and concerns faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, enabling us to design our initiatives to support them more effectively.

- Inclusive Policy Frameworks

The development and enforcement of non-discrimination policies, which prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity across various sectors of society, are vital for promoting inclusivity and fairness. These policies play a crucial role in ensuring that LGBTQ+ individuals have equal access to housing, public spaces, education, and services without facing discrimination. Furthermore, conducting equity impact assessments to evaluate the potential effects of proposed policies and plans on LGBTQ+ communities is essential. By carefully

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assessing how these initiatives may affect different groups within the LGBTQ+ community, we can work towards fostering inclusivity and addressing any potential disparities. This approach ensures that policies are designed and implemented in a way that upholds the principles of equity and inclusivity for all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

● *Training and Capacity Building*

Queer urban researchers emphasise the importance of training and capacity building in relation to LGBTQ+ issues. This includes providing cultural competence training for planners, policymakers, and service providers to help them better understand and effectively address the needs of LGBTQ+ individuals. Furthermore, developing and sharing best practices and guidelines for inclusive planning that incorporate queer perspectives is essential for fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment. These efforts are vital in promoting understanding, acceptance, and equality for the LGBTQ+ community.

● *Partnerships and Collaborations*

In today's world, partnerships and collaborations are vital in tackling significant social issues. When addressing LGBTQ+ concerns, working with LGBTQ+ organisations and fostering interdepartmental cooperation are essential components of promoting inclusivity and equality. Collaborating with LGBTQ+ advocacy and community groups can offer valuable insights and backing for community-led initiatives. By engaging closely with these organisations, businesses and government agencies can ensure that policies and plans genuinely include and serve the diverse needs of the LGBTQ+ community. This collaborative approach not only facilitates the sharing of knowledge and resources but also helps build trust and understanding among different entities. Moreover, interdepartmental cooperation is crucial for addressing LGBTQ+ issues comprehensively. By enabling communication and joint efforts between various government departments and agencies, a more unified and effective approach to LGBTQ+ rights and advocacy can be achieved. This ensures that initiatives are not isolated within a single department but are integrated and supported across different areas of governance.

● *Inclusive Design Principles*

Inclusive design principles are vital in creating welcoming and safe environments for everyone, including LGBTQ+ individuals. A key element of inclusive design involves creating safe and accessible spaces. This means designing public areas and facilities in a way that guarantees safety and accessibility for LGBTQ+ people, considering factors like protection from harassment and violence. One practical approach is incorporating gender-neutral facilities in public buildings and spaces. Providing gender-neutral restrooms and changing rooms can help foster an environment where people of all gender identities feel secure and comfortable. This straightforward yet impactful step significantly promotes inclusivity and respect for diversity within

our communities. By adopting these inclusive design principles, we can cultivate a sense of belonging and safety for LGBTQ+ individuals, ensuring our public spaces are genuinely welcoming for everyone.

● *Monitoring and Evaluating*

Monitoring and assessing policies and programmes to ensure they meet the needs of LGBTQ+ individuals is a vital part of fostering inclusivity and equality. By establishing mechanisms for regular oversight, organisations can track the success of their initiatives and make well-informed decisions based on data. This method enables prompt adjustments and enhancements to better suit the changing needs of the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, creating feedback channels directly linked to LGBTQ+ communities is crucial for ensuring their voices are heard and appreciated. By setting up ongoing feedback avenues, organisations can gain valuable insights and perspectives, which can then be used to continuously refine policies and services. This approach not only encourages inclusivity but also affirms a genuine dedication to addressing the specific needs and concerns of LGBTQ+ individuals.

4 - Conclusion

This contribution not only outlines the theoretical framework in which a gender approach to spatial analysis and planning developed in the 1980s but also proposes some powerful tools that could significantly influence the future of policy and planning, fostering truly inclusive urban areas and more equitable policies. Specifically, geography has cultivated a rich subfield within the geographies of sex and gender, examining spaces and the diverse non-heteronormative populations that inhabit them. A substantial body of literature demonstrates how non-normative LGBTQ+ subjectivities face limited access and visibility in public space and services, often due to discrimination stemming from society's heterosexist norms, interaction patterns, and spatial design. Traditional planning practices have largely overlooked the urgent needs of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender community for safe urban spaces in which to live, work, and express themselves. Addressing this requires socio-economic and spatial opportunities for these marginalised groups, demanding immediate attention and action from spatial disciplines. In recent decades, urban researchers have increasingly promoted the development of a queer approach to planning and the development of queer spaces. It is vital that we actively work to close the gap and eliminate resistance within the planning profession to integrating gay and lesbian concerns into mainstream planning. In conclusion, to provide practical tools and valuable strategies for advancing inclusivity and equality, we present guidelines highlighting key features of a queer approach to planning, which can help foster debate as well as future research and interventions.

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