**Planning for and with Women and LGBTQ+ Communities: Strategies for Solidarities**

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By Heather Mclean

When I was a planning student in the late 1990’s, women activists contesting patriarchal city building with Women Plan Toronto (WPT) sparked my interest in planning for women and 2SLGBTQ communities. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, WPT encouraged public sector planners and policy makers to plan women-friendly neighbourhoods that included accessible and affordable housing and public spaces and parks amenable to children, seniors and people with disabilities. WPT also advocated practical alternatives to address women’s planning concerns, including strategies for designing public transportation suitable for wheelchairs and strollers and ensuring women’s and children’s safety in urban design. Moreover, by facilitating non-hierarchical and participatory workshops, WPT encouraged refugee women, older women, single moms and lesbians to rely on their embodied knowledge while engaging in planning meetings. Through these activities, WPT unsettled paternalistic planning practice that often celebrates white male urban experts while ignoring the experiences of women and 2SLGBTQ communities.

However, I have learned from experience as a planner and community development researcher over the past two decades that my perspective as a white, able-bodied and cis-gendered woman working within the privileged university and community development sectors is undoubtedly limited and limiting. If I want to co-create healthy and socially just cities for all women and 2SLGBTQ people, my only way forward is to practice planning from an intersectional standpoint, one that takes seriously the ways in which class, race, sexuality, ability, colonialism, citizenship status and other hierarchies of power are interconnected and impact those marginalized in society. I was also born and raised an unwelcome yet grateful guest in land belonging to the Tk’emlúps te Secwe̓pemc, in a place named British Columbia. Working with a context of ongoing settler colonialism, I need to keep learning from and centering the voices and experiences of women of colour (including Black and Latinx women) and Indigenous activists, community workers and planners fighting for housing and food justice, contesting the privatization of public services, and envisioning and enacting anti-racist and decolonial alternatives in a time of climate change. I am committed to planning for more socially just communities, as best as I am able and being cognizant of all the pitfalls it entails and all the mistakes I will surely make and have made.

There is so much to learn from Indigenous women and women of colour activists and LGBTQ communities of colour and 2-spirited[[1]](#footnote-1) activists who have always practiced community building on their own terms. In her book As *We Have Always Done:* *Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* Nishnaabeg artist and theorist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes how women and 2-spirited people in her community collectively engage in planning by “hunting, fishing, harvesting rice and medicines, making maple syrup, parenting, and storytelling.” By practicing these place-based activities, community members share cultural memories and governance protocols, foster food security, maintain housing, and promote well-being. At the same time, Black and Latinx women and LGBTQ residents oppressed by white supremacist and colonial planning in the United States continue to establish food, transportation, and housing cooperatives, strategies that catalyze radical, grassroots and anti-colonial community organising. For decades women across the so-called Global North and South have practiced radical and inclusive community planning out of necessity by establishing solidarity economies and cooperatives, community kitchens, and urban gardens

Intersectional, anti-colonial and anti-racist feminist activists and community planners also point out how, over the past two decades, the neoliberalisation of planning has undermined grassroots efforts to forefront the needs and experiences of women and LGBTQ communities. Since the mid 1990’s city officials and private sector planners have reconfigured the physical and social infrastructure of cities with policies that cut back public sector safety nets and promote pro-market planning policies. Accelerating the privatization of city services, the contracting out of formerly unionized municipal jobs, and the abandonment of publicly-owned and affordable housing and transportation, such policies privilege capital accumulation and market competitiveness at the expense of public sector services.

Fifteen years ago, Punam Khosla (2004) argued that low-income women of colour facing barriers to well paid, full time jobs were hit hardest by the privatization of public housing and schools, and the contracting out of unionized labour. Her Toronto-based research showed how women of colour were most likely to be employed in precarious, low-paid work, often situated in office parks and industrial sites in areas underserved by public transportation.

Khosla and other feminist activists globally demonstrate how urban revitalization planning involving the demolition of public housing neighbourhoods in favour of ‘socially mixed’ planning designed to attract middle class and professional home-buyers disproportionately displaces women and LGBTQ communities. Often these projects result in the loss of affordable housing options for single mothers, women with disabilities and low-income women, and LGBTQ residents of colour. Moreover, replacing public housing neighbourhoods with more upscale shops and services displaces affordable spaces, everyday places where residents hang out and forge friendships and communities.

Feminist planning researchers and activists also charge that policies promoting competition amongst community planning groups puts women and LGBTQ communities particularly at risk. For example, as Brenda Parker (2017) argues in her book *Masculinities and Markets*, contemporary neoliberal strategies follow a masculinist myth of choice and responsibility, the idea that individuals and individual organizations naturally choose entrepreneurial competition for resources over more collective approaches to social challenges. Ensnared within a constant race for dwindling grants and resources, what Indigenous writers refer to as a colonial “scarcity mentality,” grassroots community planners and advocates find themselves too overwhelmed competing for funding to spend much time investing in projects for women and LGBTQ communities.

Meanwhile, as planners cut back transportation they place women and LGBTQ communities reliant on these services at risk. Indigenous activists living near Highway 16 in North-West British Columbia, a route renamed the “highway of tears,” show the connections between violence against women and transportation disinvestment. They contend that the lack of public transportation connecting remote communities in this area combined with the large population of transitory men working in the extractive industries has contributed to a high number of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Indigenous women water defenders fighting fracking and pipeline development in this region also point out how the violence of extractive industries and gender-based violence are deeply entwined.

At the same time, neoliberal planning models can be tricky as they often appear-to-offer progressive and liberal alternatives. Planners and planning consultants often claim that neighbourhood revitalization initiatives are progressive strategies that foster ethnic diversity and celebrate creative and trendy urban design. However, within a neoliberal context, planning initiatives celebrating diversity often reinforce gendered, classed and raced hierarchies. As John Paul Catungal (2016) warns, planning strategies promoting diversity often gloss over racialized structural inequalities and “reduce people of colour and their cultures to spices” to attract investors and homebuyers.

Contemporary revitalization initiatives designed to attract gay and lesbian professionals also reinforce exclusionary power dynamics. As neighbourhoods become increasingly expensive, trans women, queer youth of colour, 2-Spirited people and politicized gender-queer activists engaged in radical, anti-racist, anti-capitalist and migrant justice projects are pushed out. The gentrification of San Francisco’s LGBTQ neighbourhoods provides a powerful example of how these exclusionary dynamics are playing out. Over the past ten years, planners and developers have marketed the city’s Black and Latinx queer neighbourhoods as edgy, artsy and “ethnic” spaces amenable to Silicon Valley’s tech workers. However as middle-class (and disproportionately white) professionals working in this industry have moved into these areas, they have displaced communities built from decades of activism and struggle. In many cases, affluent gentrifiers, including gay and lesbian gentrifiers, in San Francisco and the Bay Area have worked with local law enforcement and Business Improvement Association organizations to increase police presence. As a result, there has been an increase in violence towards LGBTQ communities of colour, especially trans women and sex workers.

Used to being pushed to and working from the margins, women and LGBTQ activists and community advocates keep carving out spaces for hopeful, collectivist, anti-capitalist and anti-colonial alternatives to planning for socially and ecologically just communities. Currently collectives including Sisters Uncut in the UK and Black Lives Matter are fighting for housing, childcare, public transportation and safe and secure employment for all women and all LGBTQ people. Working cross-sectorally these activists are envisioning and enacting queer and feminist alternatives to planning historically meant for a privileged few.

To conclude, a subway stop away from where I am writing this in Glasgow, feminist and LGBTQ activists and community organisers meet regularly in Kinning Park Complex (KPC), a community-led social centre that exists because a group of moms occupied the building in the mid-1990’s when city council cut its funding. Currently, KPC supports itself with funding from the third sector and various social enterprise projects and programs a range of grassroots neighbourhood planning projects for the disinvested Kinning Park neighbourhood. While KPC hosts a range of grassroots programs including community kitchens, gardens and upcycling programs, it also provides affordable space for a range of grassroots feminist and LGBTQ activist campaigns. As a result, alternative and radical planning projects are continually emerging from the space.

For example, last summer, housing activists who regularly hold meetings in KPC converged with a broad network of migrant justice activists to resist Serco when it announced that it planned to evict 300 asylum-seeking families. Serco is a private sector company that the UK government hires to house refugees and asylum seekers across the UK. In response, activists including Afghani hunger strikers and women from Ubuntu, a grassroots night shelter program led by and for women who have experienced the violent UK detention centre system, rallied together in large-scale public protests in Glasgow’s city centre. In response, Serco backed down and halted the violent evictions.

Because it provides such a multi-faceted convergence space for community members to learn about housing and food activism, KPC exemplifies the generative potential of planning for and with women and LGBTQ communities. As state-led planning institutions continue to forge public-private partnerships and contract out to private sector organisations like Serco, community-led spaces like KPC point to radical spaces for envisioning and building anti-racist and de-colonial cities for women, children and LGBTQ communities.

**References:**

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1. “Two-**spirit**” refers to a person who identifies as having both a masculine and a feminine **spirit** and is used by some Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)