

4. Planning for Nocturnal Cultural Encounters

Marion Roberts

Abstract: This chapter springs from a project which examines the interrelation between night studies and urban design in England and Wales. Guidance for urban design mainly ignores black and ethnic minority experiences of exclusion in the time/space of the urban night. This omission illustrates the normative thinking that underpins urban planning for new urban extensions and regeneration projects. A striking exception comes from London with its Night Time Enterprise Zones which take inclusion, particularly for black and minority ethnic groups, seriously. Using secondary sources, this chapter discusses the potentials for and barriers to planning for cultural nocturnal encounters in the UK context of neoliberal governmentality, issues with policing, an economic crisis and post Brexit labour shortages.

Keywords: Urban design, Enterprise zones, Night, Exclusion

Introduction

London's status as a "world city" is jealously guarded by its mayor and advisers and the diversity of its population is seen as a cause of celebration. The significance of the night-time economy as a component of London's prosperity rose up the mayor's agenda in the period prior to the election of Sadiq Khan as Mayor in 2016. Following the election, in a bid to retain London's cultural status, new policies were put in place and existing ones revised. Urban planning and urban design policies play a part in sustaining cultural encounters, through the provision of welcoming and functional urban spaces and cultural premises and venues. This chapter suggests that London's approach to facilitating diversity

at night is progressive, especially when compared to the nostalgic and normative scope of national design and planning policies. Nevertheless, the difficulties posed by London's context cannot be ignored, particularly with regard to property development and policing. The chapter concludes that there are substantial barriers to be overcome before the mayor's ambitions for a world beating night-time culture can be achieved (Greater London Authority 2017).

Methods

The research for this chapter is drawn from a project that brings together insights from studies of the urban night with contemporary urban design theory and practice.¹ In the course of examining design guidance and planning documents, London's progress had to be acknowledged. The commentary that follows in the chapter is based primarily on these secondary sources. It is important to point out, though, that the author of this paper has had over twenty years of experience in living in inner London, working in central London and research on the urban night in London.²

Urban Design, National Policy and the Night

A simple way of describing urban design is that it is about the organization of the urban landscape, operating as a kind of three-dimensional urban planning, with a primary focus on public space and the public realm (Cuthbert 2017). In regulatory terms, urban design policies form a sub-set to the quasi-legal system of urban planning. The "cultural turn" has long been a preoccupation of planning (Harvey 1991) but the interaction of urban design in terms of spatial design strategies and frameworks and the evening and night-time economy has received less attention (Van den Nouweland and Steinmetz 2013; Tiesdell and Slater 2006).

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2 Two direct contacts with Mayor's office and the Greater London Authority (GLA) need to be declared. The first was as a researcher investigating whether over-regulation was having a depressing impact on nightlife, a study commissioned by the GLA (Roberts, Eldridge, Osborn and Flacks 2020) and the second was as an adviser to the Research and Data Sub-Committee for London's Night Time Commission. Involvement with the GLA ended in 2018 and the scrutiny of the policy documents is therefore independent of any official influence.

With regard to the night-time economy, past national policies have been little short of disastrous, first by allowing the creation of large retail parks which undercut traditional high streets, then by championing retail over other land uses in town centres, meaning that night-time economy uses have been relegated to “secondary” streets with a lesser footfall. Planning policies in the 1990s and early 2000s sought to mitigate the negative impacts of an expansion in the numbers of licensed venues, facilitated by government, by encouraging local councils to impose “cumulative impact policies,” limiting the size of clusters of pubs, clubs and takeaways. While concerns about the negative impacts of concentrations of licensed premises remain (MCHLG 2021), greater attention is now being paid to the importance of providing a mix of land-uses and the promotion of the experience economy. This aims to ameliorate/solve the “crisis on the high street,” which is caused by a high number of vacancies in high streets devoted to shopping (Carmona 2022).

Planning practice guidance issued by the government suggests that “evening and nighttime uses have the potential to increase economic activity within town centres and provide additional employment opportunities” (DLUHC 2019).

In a move to reverse developers’ preferences for peripheral and fringe development, town centre policies support the provision of major cultural and leisure facilities through a “sequential test.” This means that proposals for cultural and leisure facilities over a certain floor area have to demonstrate that there are no suitable sites within town centres before planning permission can be determined in their favour. Although there may be no causal connection or association, prior to the pandemic one of the private organizations providing data sources for the hospitality industry reported a trend for night and late-night venues to close down in smaller towns and urban centres with those in major centres and medium sized urban centres remaining open. Meanwhile design guidance for neighbourhoods focuses on housing, with images of sun-drenched residential schemes in bright daylight (MCHLG 2019). Little mention is made of any social or community facilities, other than a cafe, restaurant, or pub and possibly a community hall in a neighbourhood centre. More detailed design guidance offered by quasi-governmental organizations frequently refers to cafes and pubs as focal points for social interaction in urban centres (Airey, Wales & Scruton 2020). Pubs are referred to as desirable in design guidance for new-build housing neighbourhoods too, which—while a laudable intention with regard to social interaction—ignores evidence which suggests that older people and people with particular minority ethnic backgrounds find them exclusionary, with barriers that need to be overcome to fulfil their potential as social hubs

(Valentine, Jayne and Holloway 2010; Booth and Mohdin 2018; Thurnell-Read 2021). The number of pubs (public houses), a peculiarly national institution, have been in a process of steady decline since the mid-twentieth century, according to the British Beer and Pub Association's website. Furthermore, most cafes and coffee shops in England close around 5 p.m. or 6 p.m.

London and the London Plan

London suffers from central/periphery issues as regards the night too. London has a population of 8.8 million people and a much greater level of diversity than the majority of English cities. 54 per cent of Londoners belong to white groups compared to 87.9 per cent in England and Wales, and of the most dominant ethnic groups, 21 per cent of Londoners identify as Asian and 14 per cent black compared to 9.3 per cent and 2.5 per cent respectively (UK Gov 2022; GLA City Intelligence Unit 2022). Similarly, London has approximately 1 per cent more people, or 88,000 individuals, who identify as LGB than England and Wales (ONS 2023). The West End, which occupies a small area in central London, accommodates an intensive concentration of night-time and late-night venues. Focus group research showed that London residents would like more venues and activities locally. While this finding might appear surprising, the background was that in the period 2007–2017, London lost more than half its nightclubs and more than a third of its live music venues (GLA Economics 2018, 7).

The research by GLA Economics was part of a suite of actions undertaken by the Mayor of London and the Greater London Authority in the four years preceding the pandemic. Pressure had been growing from stakeholders in culture, hospitality and entertainment, alarmed at venue closures. Sadiq Khan has a background which lends itself to taking night working and night-time issues seriously since his father had been a bus driver and his father-in-law a ticket collector (MEND 2009). On taking office Khan set up a Night Time Commission with a secretariat, commissioned the research to support it and appointed a night-time advisor, a “Night Czar,” Amy Lamé. With his support, she created a new committee with local councillors acting as night-time “champions” from each of London’s thirty-two boroughs.

One of the first gains was a crucial change to national planning policy. The “agent of change” principle, first introduced by the Mayor of London in London wide planning policy and eventually, was included in the National Planning Policy Framework. The policy requires developers who are building new residential properties near to existing music or performance venues to

provide soundproofing, rather than placing this burden on the venue itself. This change is significant, because it reverses a general planning principle which is that the “polluter pays” (Donnelly 2019).

Meanwhile the process of spatial planning continued with an update to the London Plan. The planning system in the UK is hierarchical, such that in London, local plans have to be in accordance with national planning policy and with London’s Plan. The process of plan production takes years and requires consultation with the boroughs, other stakeholders and the wider community and involves detailed negotiations. The *London Plan 2021* differs from its predecessors in the weight of policies it includes for the night, defined as occupying the time span between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. (Mayor of London 2021).

Planning for a 24-Hour City

The ambition to make London a 24-hour city, comparable to other capitals such as New York, Sydney and Tokyo, was spelt out in a forty-plus page full-colour document, *From Good Night to Great Night*. This document emphasised the importance of the night to London’s prosperity (GLA 2017). Kolioulis (2018) has commented on its “city boosterist” ambition, aiming to attract tourism, and make night-time London “a hub of investment and entrepreneurship” (18). The overall message of the document is that London is a world city and has a world-class evening and night-time economy, encompassing many cultural activities.

London’s Night Time Commission, which drew heavily on research conducted by the GLA’s internal research arm, GLA Economics, finished its work and published a report in 2019 which widened the definition of night-time activities. The research found that, at night the numbers of workers in health-related occupations was higher than those working in culture and leisure, 191,000 versus 168,000 (London Night Time Commission 2017, 7). The report was illustrated with images of hospitals, markets, refuse workers and public spaces rather than musicians and clubbers. It drew away from the strident world city message of the 2017 document and suggested that more could be done to entice a wider diversity of Londoners out at night by increasing the “richness” of the offer of activities, “especially low and no cost activities” (London Night Time Commission 2017, 74).

Following on from a broader take on the night, the definition of culture is extended in the 2021 London Plan to include public spaces, community facilities and faith buildings such as churches and mosques as cultural places:

[P]remises for cultural production and consumption such as performing and visual arts studios, creative industries workspace, museums, theatres, cinemas, libraries, music, spectator sports, and other entertainment or performance venues, including pubs and night clubs. Although primarily serving other functions, the public realm, community facilities, places of worship, parks and skate-parks can provide important settings for a wide range of arts and cultural activities. (Mayor of London 2021, 300)

The plan devotes a complete policy section to supporting the night-time economy and a further section to supporting pubs. Rather than attracting residents to an already over-crowded centre, London's spatial plan designates a hierarchy of town centres with regard to night-time culture, entertainment and hospitality in its "strong town centres first approach" (Mayor of London 2021, 89). This approach is to enhance cultural and social interchange in London's town centres and high streets in addition to augmenting their local economies. The significance of buildings and facilities that support cultural activities is emphasised and local planners are encouraged to identify existing or potential clusters and designating them as "Cultural Quarters."

The appointment of Amy Lamé as Night Czar championed LGBTQ+ rights and women's rights. Lamé helped venues to resist closure, most famously with the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, where she herself ran club nights. The GLA's cultural strategy commented on the white domination of the music industry and recommended that boroughs assist in providing suitable facilities for cultural production by black and minority ethnic (BAME) creatives. "BAME" is not universally liked as an acronym but is used in GLA documents. The London Plan also took up cultural consumption and recommended that boroughs are encouraged to consider "how the cultural offer serves different groups of people," such as young people, BAME groups and the LGBTQ+ community, to identify gaps in provision and to protect premises and activities, "especially facilities that are used in the evening and night time" (Mayor of London 2021, 300).

Inclusion is taken forward in a separate document providing detailed guidance on strategies and design for the night. Boroughs are encouraged to set up night-time forums and to balance representation from their diversity of residents to include people from minority groups and to "ensure inclusive balanced and intergenerational representation" (Mayor of London 2020, 8). Authorities are encouraged to seek the views of all demographics and night workers in formulating their strategy. The guidance suggests that one of the key indicators of a strategy's success is the extent to which it ensures

both a diversity of people participating in night-time activities as well as a diversity of activities.

This ambition includes people on a low income—a category which was omitted from the UK's Equalities Act 2010. The document cites survey findings which identified five key priorities for a night-time strategy. Four of these are: to have better street lighting, improved night-time transport, more free and low-cost activities and increased access to services, such as banks, doctors' surgeries and libraries. The fifth, more police visible at night, raises issues which are discussed further on in this chapter (Mayor of London 2020).

The detailed recommendations for design look to reducing the barriers for a diverse population to feel comfortable about going out at night, whether to run errands, enjoy nightlife, work, study or visit friends. Because of London's super-diversity, an increase in participation in this sense reinforces a recognition of "otherness." Planning and design can facilitate what Wessendorf (2014) calls a "civility" towards diversity by making public spaces welcoming for people from different ethnic backgrounds and heritages, and other markers of difference. The guidance recommends sophisticated improvements to lighting, public realm improvements to enhance perceptions of safety and well-designed provision of street amenities such as benches and rubbish bins. It reinforces and amplifies encouragement to local councils to protect existing cultural premises and activities which serve minority audiences and to promote new venues and initiatives. Boroughs are recommended to undertake a detailed mapping of existing land-uses and opening times to identify clusters of nightlife uses. A detailed action plan would protect these clusters, possibly even form new ones with cultural "anchors" and facilitate walking between them. The clusters could be augmented by permitting "pop up" or temporary uses in vacant premises through allowing a flexibility of use in planning and licensing permissions.

The discussion of "clusters" of nightlife venues in local neighbourhoods raises questions about mixing and segregation. Activities and premises may be segmented by a number of different factors, ranging from income and social status to age, ethnicity, particular kinds of experience or musical preferences, such as whether they are "mainstream" or "alternative" (Measham and Hadfield 2009; Crivello 2011). While in major urban centres such segregation offers choice without necessarily implying exclusion, the situation for local centres is different. Their smaller size and catchment areas mean that for local residents, and especially those on low incomes with limited free time, exclusion is a more important factor. This is one of the barriers that the Night Time Enterprise Zones are challenged to overcome.

Night Time Enterprise Zones

London's Night Time Commission recommended that Night Time Enterprise Zones (NTEZ) be set up to help save London's local high streets from decline. The first NTEZ was announced in September 2019 in the outer London borough of Waltham Forest. The borough as a whole has a median level of diversity within London, with 52.8 per cent of its population identifying as white British with the next largest ethnic group identifying as Asian, at 19.5 per cent. Just over 5 per cent of the borough's population identify as LGBTQ+ (London Borough of Waltham Forest 2023). The information that follows is taken from an evaluation report, which appears to have been commissioned by the local authority with input from the stakeholders involved in the project and an independent consultancy (LB Waltham Forest 2020). The NTEZ set out to boost the town centre, to encourage footfall on the High Street after 6 p.m. and to improve access to shops and services within the parameters of the Mayor's policies for a 24-hour city. The programme offered a fund of £75,000 match funded by the local authority.

There were seven different proposals in the NTEZ programme which ran from October 2019 to January 2020. There were consultation and stakeholder events, such as walkabouts and focus groups, which were targeted at different demographic groups, coupled with an online web survey. Asian seniors were consulted as well as young adults and young people with learning disabilities. A design charette was held with to generate creative ideas for the high street. Small numbers of people from different groups were involved in the face-to-face activities; the difficulty of reaching a diverse demographic was illustrated by the online survey. Overall, a higher proportion of responses came from white people (70 per cent) and a lower proportion from Asians (8 per cent) than in the borough as a whole.

Detailed mapping of the High Street revealed that the majority of it was taken up with small shops, with approximately a fifth of the businesses being dedicated to food and beverages. Many of the businesses were closed by 6 p.m. and nearly all by 8 p.m. Only five stayed open late: a convenience store, a fast-food restaurant, a gym and a commercial leisure outlet. A cinema provided a "cultural anchor" at one end and the Council was in the process of providing a second one at the other end, creating a performance space. The shops were encouraged to stay open later, and a council-owned premise was re-purposed to provide business advice and promotions. An event was run one night a week for seven weeks, in partnership with local education institutions, for young people to have an alcohol-free bar and to showcase their musical and performance talents. One big event took place

one evening in the High Street and Town Square where an arts company, together with local people, hosted a range of different activities.

The evaluation of the programme declared it a success. Footfall along the High Street increased by 22 per cent, 64 per cent of businesses reported seeing new customers and these together with all the measures were reported to have created a more welcoming and inclusive high street. Post pandemic, the programme's success inspired the institution/designation of three new NTEZs. Two are located in outer London boroughs. The third, in Lambeth—where the Royal Vauxhall Tavern is located—aims to connect up and enhance different clusters of activity. The funding for each of the three new NTEZs has increased to £130,000 from the GLA, match funded by the boroughs (Mayor of London 2022).

Barriers to Inclusion

The difficulties that such programmes face in achieving a more longstanding boost to cultural diversity is exemplified by the fate of one of the NTEZ pilot projects, the Jellied Eel Bar. This was a “pop up” tapas and cocktail bar which operated on Friday and Saturday nights, located in a traditional London pie and mash “shop,” a café catering for a white working-class clientele on the High Street. The shop had a historic interior, which was conservation listed. Although the bar seemed to be a commercial success, it had to close down in 2020 (Richards 2020). This closure was followed in March 2022 by the pie and mash shop itself. The business owner blamed a changing customer base as the area gentrified, describing their gastronomic preferences as “fads.” The premises have since been taken over by a chain of Japanese restaurants (Coghlan 2022).

The impacts of gentrification on London's nightlife have been tracked with regard to grass roots music venues and LGBTQ+ venues (Campkin and Marshall 2017). The GLA's Cultural Infrastructure Action Plan noted that hikes in land values threatened cultural venues, but that although planning policy and legislation offer the means to combat the loss of some buildings, national planning policy can also work against it. To explain, generally developers can benefit from London's high housing and land prices, giving them an incentive to replace pubs, clubs and shops with blocks of flats. To compound this further, in particular circumstances, developers can claim “permitted development rights” which prevents local councils from opposing conversions to residential uses (Mayor of London 2019).

Information about closures of live music venues, nightclubs and club nights which attract a black audience is more incidental and anecdotal.

Issues about racism are frequently raised in the media, from gigs by BAME artists being cancelled without reason and some BAME groups being denied to certain night clubs on the basis of the skin colour (GLA Economics, 7–8). From a scholarly perspective, Talbot's study of "Southview," an area in South London provides a vivid account of how black-owned drinking and music venues were gradually eclipsed by white dominated corporates (Talbot 2007; Talbot & Bose 2007). Talbot's study was carried out in the early 2000s, but the status of London's black artists and musicians has changed since then. Wicks (2022) updates Talbot's findings, pointing out that musicians such as Stormzy, who was born and brought up in a deprived part of south London, have achieved international recognition by the mainstream. She reports: "Black individuals are no longer a risk to profit accumulation but are a potential source of profit-making for venues—with 'urban nights' strategically used as part of venue manager's efforts to remain popular among the mainstream" (Wicks 2022, 27).

Racism—and in particular, racism on the part of the Metropolitan Police—has formed a discordant note within the narrative of harmonious multiculturalism promoted by London authorities. *From Good Night to Great Night* has an image of a black musician on its cover and the full-colour images used to illustrate the document are representative of London's ethnic diversity. However, relationships between London's police force (the Metropolitan Police or the "Met") and young black Londoners fracture around the issue of "stop and search," a legal power which gives the police the right to stop and search people for offensive weapons and illegal drugs. London had the highest stop and search rates for all ethnic groups in the period 2021–2022 and generally in England. Black people in England were five times more likely to be stopped and searched than their white counterparts (HM Government 2022). Deaths either in police custody or as part of police investigations sparked off major riots in London in 1985 and 2011. More recently, peaceful demonstrations were held to protest against the 2022 fatal police shooting of an unarmed young black rapper, which took place in South London (IOPC 2022).

Previous research by the author and colleagues found the manager of an independent music venue in a south London borough complaining that the police would not approve a Temporary Events Notice (TEN) for a night when certain types of "urban" music would be played (Roberts, Eldridge, Flacks and Osborn 2020). The Mayor and Night Mayor subsequently took action to ensure that TEN's would not be issued in a prejudicial way. Prejudice against black audiences and black artists is not the only barrier, however, as the ownership of property also needs to be diversified (Bernard 2018; Pratt 2018).

The extent to which planning and urban design can overcome the barriers to nocturnal cultural encounters is limited. The neoliberal framing of national planning policies prevents a more radical approach to combatting high land prices (Allmendinger 2016). A gloomy assessment of the London Plan 2021 and associated night-time initiatives to promote inclusion leads to the conclusion they are but small boats rocked in a sea of much mightier forces.

Concluding Comments

This chapter has argued that the GLA and the Mayor made considerable efforts, in the period 2016–2022, to formulate planning and design policies that seriously address night-time activities. These policies contrast favourably with national design policies and design guidance in their efforts to support nocturnal cultural activities for London's "superdiverse" demographic, which has a higher proportion of people who identify as BAME and LGBTQ+ than the rest of England and Wales. The GLA's remit is limited in several ways. While, as a regional authority, the GLA can set an overall framework for planning which the boroughs are required to conform to, it cannot pro-actively produce local plans for them. The authority's detailed design guidance for a night-time strategy is significant, but again, provides encouragement rather than prescription. Although the Night Time Enterprise Zones are a novel attempt to kick-start a more inclusive approach to reviving the night-time high street, their scope is limited too.

The background of gentrification throughout London places great pressure on nightlife venues, particularly those which reach beyond a mainstream clientele or offer services to local communities. The relationship between the Metropolitan Police and the black community has a long legacy of problems and remains a live issue. The dynamic of gentrification and the night-time economy means that Talbot's (2007) trailblazing study needs to be updated with a more comprehensive geographical scope that extends to the entire Greater London area. More independent and empirically robust research is needed on the nocturnal cultural experiences of black Londoners, as producers, consumers, owners and workers.

In the foreword to the vision for London as a 24-hour city, the Mayor comments that the vision is for a "world class night time culture" (GLA 2017, 6). With regard to planning and design, the London Plan, the night-time strategy and the NTEZ's are steps towards that. Whatever their limitations, such attempts to facilitate nocturnal cultural encounters deserve to be applauded.

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About the Author

Marion Roberts is Emeritus Professor of Urban Design at the University of Westminster. She qualified as an architect and worked in practice before completing her PhD at Cardiff University. Marion has authored and co-authored many publications on the urban night, urban design and gender issues.