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towards Habitat III a gender perspective

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**towards Habitat III
a gender perspective**

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LGBTQ2+ Experiences of public safety: theorizing violence in the *queer* city

Jen Robertson



Fig. 1 – Neighbourhood Watch sign in Toronto's Gay Village (Robertson, 2015b).

Abstract

The following paper uses geographies of identity around visibility and passing to frame safety and violence in public spaces through an LGBTQ2+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, two-spirit, and other sexual minorities) lens. Using the City of Toronto as a case study, the paper unpacks the current state of public safety as articulated by LGBTQ2+ people. Focus groups, interviews, an online survey and secondary readings are the data sources used. This study challenges conventional feminist safety planning and the concept of normal/abnormal uses espoused by proponents of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design by bringing queer intersectionality to the forefront of

discussion. The paper puts the recommendations suggested in the collected data into conversation with LGBTQ2+ specific needs around both creating safer cities and speaking of gender outside of the strict binary of cisgender heteronormative experiences. The proposed paper puts forward the concept that a safe city for queer and trans people is a city that is not just tolerant of LGBTQ2+ communities, or commodifying a facet of their inclusivity, but instead must be a city where queerness is actively integrated into its very fabric.

KEY WORDS

Safety Planning, Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, LGBTQ, Queer, Police

LGBTQ2+ Esperienze di sicurezza pubblica: teoria della violenza nella Queer City

Il seguente articolo utilizza le geografie dell'identità riflettendo intorno alla visibilità e passando a definire la sicurezza e la violenza negli spazi pubblici attraverso le lenti dei LGBTQ2+ (lesbiche, gay, bisessuali, transgender, queer, "due spiriti" e altre minoranze sessuali). Utilizzando la città di Toronto come caso studio, il paper scompone lo stato attuale della sicurezza pubblica, e lo articola secondo il punto di vista delle persone LGBTQ2+. Focus group, interviste, un sondaggio online e altre letture secondarie costituiscono le fonti dei dati utilizzate. Questo studio sfida la pianificazione convenzionale della sicurezza femminista e il concetto di usi normali/anormali esposti dai sostenitori della prevenzione del crimine attraverso la progettazione ambientale (CPTED) portando la disaggregazione della "diversità" all'attenzione del dibattito. L'articolo pone le raccomandazioni suggerite nei dati raccolti in colloquio con le esigenze specifiche dei LGBTQ2+ sia nella creazione di città più sicure e parlando di genere al di fuori dello stretto binario delle esperienze eteronormative cisgender. L'articolo propone il concetto che una città sicura per *queer* e *trans* è una città che non è solo una città tollerante delle comunità LGBTQ2+, o mercificante un aspetto della loro inclusione, ma invece deve essere una città in cui la "diversità" è attivamente integrata nel suo stesso tessuto.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Pianificazione della sicurezza, Prevenzione del crimine mediante la progettazione ambientale, LGBTQ, Queer, Polizia

LGBTQ2+ Experiences of public safety: theorizing violence in the queer city

Jen Robertson

Introduction

How can we plan and design safe inclusive cities? Who has the right to feel safe in cities? Who are these cities made safe for? Who is excluded from safety? What role does not only gender, but also sexuality, race and class play in identifying what a safe city should look like?

Many people researching and working in some form of city building may not have considered the multiplicity of safety and diversity along the axes of intersectional experiences. Much of the research, writings and practice on planning for public safety needs in cities erases LGBTQ2+ experiences (LGBTQ2+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and two-spirit. The plus sign stands in for the multiplicity of sexual and gender identities within and outside the LGBTQ2 acronym). The existing scholarship on safety planning tends to speak to designing out crime using primarily physical interventions done through Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), which centers on concerns that the aesthetic upkeep and design of cities is integral to maintaining safety and order as per the 'Broken Windows' theory (Crowe, 2013; Kelling & Wilson, 1982). Some feminist theorists do offer critiques of CPTED's limitations in the face of patriarchy, pointing out that highest rates of violence experienced by women is taking place in the domestic sphere instead of on poorly design streetscapes (Koskela & Pain, 2000). However, neither CPTED, nor feminist critics of CPTED, offer significant considerations on the needs of LGBTQ2+ communities within the impact of non-binary gender, white supremacy and economic injustice.

The research presented in the following paper seeks to both challenge the lack of LGBTQ2+ visibility in public safety planning, as well as build upon the existing literature to unpack the multitude of violence experienced by vulnerable populations in cities. In particular, we have seen transwomen of colour face a disproportionate amount of violence and consequently disappear from our communities, as well as violence enacted in the most brutal shooting in contemporary American history at Pulse nightclub, a gay semi-public space catering to the local Latinx community in Orlando, Florida (Doan, 2007; Ennis, 2015; Harris-Perry, 2016; Thériault, 2015). The paper concludes with some recommendations on how cities can be better planned and design for LGBTQ2+ communities, which are framed by the need to address systemic barriers to equitable cities.

Methods

The paper is built upon primary data and secondary readings on planning for public safety. Toronto, Canada is the case study context for this study, due to it being the country's largest city as well as a major hub of queer community (Nash, 2014; Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2014). Members of LGBTQ2+ communities are sampled through six interviews with service providers working with queer and trans people, four focus groups held in partnership with community organizations, and an online survey with one hundred and sixty seven qualifying respondents.

The service providers interviewed represent various facets of Toronto's queer and trans communities, including organizations serving religious queer communities, youth, pre-employment programming for trans people, trans healthcare, and a collective of queer and trans black, Indigenous, and people of colour. Since little has been written on LGBTQ2+ public safety, it is essential to talk to practitioners serving queer and trans communities to get a sense of their clients' specific experiences and needs around safety.

The focus groups were formed as an offshoot of the interview stage, sampling many of the groups who were interviewed previously. Four focus groups were conducted with community members, building upon the principles espoused by METRAC, a non-profit working to make safer cities for women and youth as well as a community partner in the data collection for this research. A principle framing METRAC's practices is that everyone is the expert of their own sense of safety, affirming that safety is both autode-termined and community-based (metracadmin, 2015). When planning for underserved communities, researchers and practitioners should establish lived experience as a valid and important source of knowledge (City of Ottawa & City for All Women Initiative, 2015).

The online survey was conducted to supplement the community based knowledge drawn from the focus groups and interviews. To qualify for the survey, participants must live in Toronto, and identify as a member of the LGBTQ2+ community. Although the survey got the most responses, the story based data on negotiating safety and violence in cities discussed in the focus groups and interviews frame the richest findings from the research.

Results

Participants frame a complex negotiation of safety, violence and harassment in public spaces. Many speak to facing verbal harassment or physical violence due to their gender presentation (whether it be as feminine or gender nonconforming) and race (most notably centering on the racial profiling experienced by participants of colour) (House of Constantine, 2015; Marvelous Grounds, 2015a; Open Call, 2015). Harassment is experienced and negotiated differently depending on participant positionality.

Some participants say that they fear masculine presenting people, particularly at

night. Others say that as a transwoman of colour, they experienced being a feared man of colour and now are negotiating feeling unsafe navigating the streets as a visibly transgender woman of colour (Marvelous Grounds, 2015a; Open Call, 2015). LGBTQ2+ communities consist of diverse experiences and positionalities, meaning that not all people in queer and trans communities are impacted by these diverse forms of violence in the same way. Special attention must be paid to the unique barriers faced by the most marginalized members of queer and trans communities from an intersectional lens, particularly along the axes of class and race.

LGBTQ2+ negotiation of safety is imagined in the coding of the data collected through four interlocking conceptualization of violence (see figure 1). They are systemic, interpersonal, lateral, and acts of violence (Ciccariello-Maher, 2010; College & Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta, n.d.; Government of Newfoundland Labrador Canada, 2015). Systemic, or institutionalized, violence is related to overarching societal and institutional structures. Participants who are low income experience systemic classism which limits their options around their transportation and living situation, which directly correlates to how they experience safety (Fred Victor, 2015). Many participants sampled want to live downtown, where they feel they may blend in and face less harassment, but are left trying to negotiate rising rents and unaffordability (Fred Victor, 2015; Open Call, 2015).

Participants of colour face systemic racism in the form of being stopped by the police or security guards without just cause. Many participants cite this form of racial profiling as the principle form of harassment they experience in cities (Marvelous Grounds,

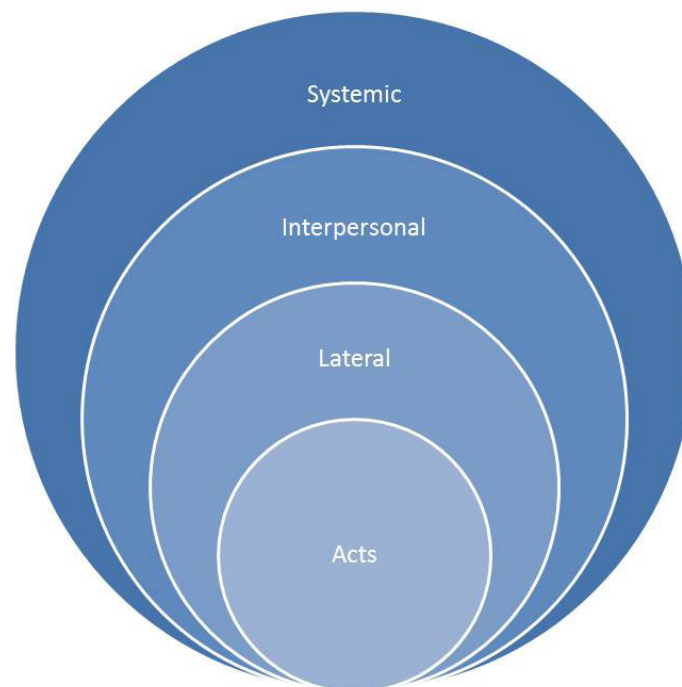


Figure 2 – Interlocking definitions of violence (Robertson, 2016b).

2015b). The racism that is institutionalized in policing disrupts the idea espoused by CPTED practitioners that spaces should be built for normal instead of abnormal users. A playground, for example, is built for normal usage by children, youth and their families. Abnormal users are those outside that catchment who may use the space regardless (Crowe, 2013). In a white supremacist society, non-white bodies are marked as more likely to be read as abnormal users in spaces (Collins, 1993; Dubrow & Sies, 2002). The conceptualization of normal and abnormal, and the subsequent assumed right for certain people to access public spaces over others, leads to the loose justifications of the murder of unarmed black men, as well as the harassment faced by the homeless and trans people reporting crimes to police (Cole, 2015; Fred Victor, 2015; House of Constantine, 2015).

Interpersonal violence occurs between two or more people and often, but not always, reflects systemic oppression. The principle difference between systemic and interpersonal violence is that systemic violence does not occur to society's most privileged, whereas interpersonal violence can feasibly occur to anyone, but often reflects oppression (Robertson, 2016b; Smith, 2011). For example, transphobia as barrier to employment and healthcare access is institutionalized violence. It becomes interpersonal when participants speak to doctors that will not serve trans people because they consider them outside their "scope of practice" (Rainbow Health Ontario, 2015). Interpersonal violence is intertwined with systemic violence, but as it is in its simplest form violence occurring between people, not all altercations will neatly occur between someone with extreme privilege and someone oppressed.

Lateral violence complicates the interplay of privilege, oppression and violence. Lateral violence occurs between peers instead of true adversaries within communities where some sort of power dynamic and a leveling force is at play. During one of the focus groups, a trans person says that they were attacked by a "group of Muslims" (Fred Victor, 2015). Muslim people, specifically immigrants from Somalia, are mentioned by focus group participants as "being the most transphobic and misogynistic" (Fred Victor, 2015). Another participant takes a taxi to work as they don't feel safe in their area because there are "lots of Muslims" (Fred Victor, 2015). The situations described by participants involve perpetrators who they read as being cisgender Muslim men of colour, who attack them as queer and trans people of various racial backgrounds due to their gender and/or sexual identity.

The situation assumes the gender, sexuality, religion and motivation of the perpetrators, as well as the intent of the attack, all of which may be untrue. Further, the complexity of oppressed groups enacting violence against each other is layered and multiple (Collins, 1993). One of the participants a focus group says that it is not uncommon for people from marginalized communities to behave oppressively towards each other. They say:

gay, straight, Black, White, mixed race, bisexual, etc ... we live in the same world as everyone else and it's not uncommon for us to internalize the same oppressive norms as everyone else, and then take it out on ourselves. (Open Call, 2015).

The participant is speaking specifically to the rampant discrimination against trans people both in the queer community and outside of the community. The analysis of lateral violence and intermingled systemic oppression holds true in a context where participants accuse Muslim people of being the most homophobic and transphobic as this claim strikingly erases the experiences and very existence of queer and trans Muslim people. This is particularly notable in the wake of the complicated analyses of the motives behind the mass shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando by a rumored to be closeted but self-proclaimed Muslim extremist, and the death of Sumaya Dalmar, a Somali transwoman who was active in Toronto's queer Muslim and Somali community (Blinder, Robles, & Pérez-Peña, 2016; Harris-Perry, 2016; Mohyeddin, 2015). Intersectionality is helpful in framing queer people being Islamophobic as a form of lateral violence as it arguably hurts queer Muslims the most intimately.

The violence model proposed in this paper concludes with acts of violence. Acts of violence specifically describe the nature of the violent incident, including physical and emotional violence, as well as sexualized violence and microaggressions. Similar to interpersonal violence, although they often reflect institutionalized oppression in their enactment, many acts of violence can seemingly disrupt the narrative of the conventional perpetrator and victim. Notably, the conventional conception of violence espoused by many feminist theorists is that of women as victims and men as perpetrators in a heterosexual context, which is not necessarily applicable to a queer context where gender is more fluid and sexuality is non-normative.

Violence is intertwined in the systemic, interpersonal, lateral and acts. Although the framework put forth in this paper seeks to unpack the way violence is experienced in cities by LGBTQ2+ communities, there is no compartmentalized form of violence, and safety is complicated by the barriers faced by participants. The various positionalities experienced by participants, and in turn the LGBTQ2+ community, complicates how harassment is experienced.

Recommendations

Bridging the gap between results and policy, a number of recommendations are drawn from the collected data from LGBTQ2+ communities (Fred Victor, 2015, 2015; House of Constantine, 2015; Marvelous Grounds, 2015b; Open Call, 2015). The recommendations apply to all members of the public, but are outside the scope of what many urban planners would consider to be a part of their daily practices. City building as a whole should be built from the community up, and an awareness of the needs of marginalized communities helps frame the practices of bureaucrats, activists and politicians everywhere (Dubrow & Sies, 2002; Frisch, 2002; Sandercock, 1998).

Firstly, participants would like to see better reporting services to go to after incidents of hate crimes, assault, harassment, microaggressions or behaviour that makes them feel unsafe. This suggestion for policy stems from par-

ticipants feeling uneasy going to the police to report incidents due to fears that they will not be taken seriously, or will be blamed for an altercation that was not their fault, or be confronted with feeling re-traumatized. An independent reporting service that is not affiliated with the Toronto Police would help get a more accurate account of perceived and experienced safety, and would offer a reporting mechanism for incidents that may not seem appropriate to bring to the attention of the police (e.g. glances and stares, or institutional neglect).

The determinants of safety least affecting feelings of safety are insufficient signage, lack of maintenance of residential property and having too many people around, despite its prevalence in CPTED and 'Broken Windows' theories of aesthetic determinants of safety (Crowe, 2013; Kelling & Wilson, 1982). Participants also generally do not respond to feeling unsafe due to a **lack of territorial demarcation between private and public spaces**, despite it being emphasized as a source of safety in CPTED, but do feel as though being familiar with a neighbourhood greatly impacts their feeling of safety (Crowe, 2013). Despite the emphasis put on territoriality, maintenance and signage in CPTED practices, it was not a significant call to action for policymakers. However, other CPTED concepts are suggested as sites of change. Participants mention **insufficient**



Fig. 3 – Despite being emphasized by CPTED theorists, 'Broken Windows' aesthetic considerations for public safety factor as a low priority for participants (Robertson, 2016a).

lighting extensively, especially in parks and on the street, as a design intervention that could be changed by municipalities. They also **dislike entrapment areas, especially on public transit**, as well as some other design interventions done around isolation on streetcars and buses.

Public bathrooms are a site of discomfort and feeling unsafe by participants who identify as transgender and/or gender non-binary. **Retrofitting bathrooms in public and private venues to be fully gender inclusive through the use of single stalls and appropriate signage is a goal strongly emphasized by participants.** The emphasis put on making the semi-private space of a public bathroom stall safer for LGBTQ2+ communities also demonstrates the slippery divide between the private and public spaces that make up urbanized life. This paper is limited by its focus on public space exclusively, as public and private is an inseparable continuum. Despite public bathrooms being largely administered by private enterprises, such as restaurants and pubs, there is the potential to mandate gender inclusive bathrooms through municipal codes and property standards.

The criminalization of participants, particularly participants of colour, participants who use illegal substances, and/or sex workers, further marginalizes them. Participants call for the **decriminalization of marijuana and sex work**. They also call for dismantling, disarming, and **simply creating better relationships with the police**. They are collectively weary of cameras and security, but want better security around their own homes and communities that look out for their interests.

Poster campaigns and sensitivity training are strongly recommended by participants. Although participants were specifically prompted to speak to the value of a poster campaign on public transit due to METRAC's interest in the topic and status as a research partner, interviewees in particular mention safer space stickers and posters in schools, organizations and community centres as being an effective visibility tool. **Sensitivity training is also mentioned in the context of policing and public transit staff needing to be more aware of LGBTQ2+ issues, anti-racism and conflict resolution**, and as one focus group participants says, we need "sensitivity training for the entire world maybe" (House of Constantine, 2015).

Organizations seeking to make safer cities already exist in health care, education, local government, policing, housing, and other institutions. It is clear through the research results that these institutions have a ways to go around becoming holistically inclusive of LGBTQ2+ communities. **Participants encourage organizations to actively promote inclusivity and invite queer and trans communities explicitly to the table when making decisions. Organizations are also encouraged to engage with communities socially by coming to their neighbourhoods and actively building relationships with them.**

Systemic barriers impact participants, and so **they call upon systemic change**. Participants want a world without homophobia, racism, sexism, gay bashing, violence and jails. They do want better access to inclusive health care, employment, better wag-

es, no student loans or lines of credit, love, peace and happiness. Participants in one of the focus groups conceptualize their version of a safer city as being framed by an ideal, returning to a world before colonization, and a goal, which is the decolonization of our institutions and practices.

Conclusion

If everywhere is potentially unsafe for LGBTQ2+ individuals in cities, the iterative utopian ideal to be worked towards is a world where every space is at least a little bit queer. In Hanhardt's (2013) *Safe Space*, she ends the book with a chapter centered on the work done by the contemporary New York City queer people of colour activist group FIERCE. FIERCE members drew up their version of what they wanted the Christopher Pier, a gentrifying area in New York, to look like on their terms. Handhardt (2013) writes that FIERCE's mapped 'Dream City' "makes distinctively gay spaces more inclusive and, in fact, imagines spaces everywhere as potentially queer, both by loosening the status of gayness as unique – and exclusive – commodity (as Gay Index proponents would have it) and by making numerous peoples and places marginalized by heteronormativity central to broad queer political imagining" (p. 215). **A safe city for queer and trans people is a city that is not just tolerant of LGBTQ2+ communities, or commodifying their superficial inclusivity, but instead must be a city where queerness is actively integrated into its very fabric.** A safer city then, as envisioned in this research, must iterate through a series of goals to make a city safer with the ideal safe city always in mind.



Fig.4 – Mural in Toronto's Gay Village (Robertson, 2015a).

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