



Open Letter

Street lighting and increased undercover police numbers will not overturn misogyny and racism



The Developer, 2021

This opinion piece was written by Zoë Berman and published by The Developer Magazine.

Part W is appalled by the murder of Sarah Everard. As an action group of women working in the built environment, we're heartbroken by the seemingly casual attitudes of many in society towards the safety of women and girls in cities, and the failure to bring about change.

We're disgusted by the London Metropolitan Police's violent treatment of those peacefully mourning Everard's death – a woman killed by a member of the police force. We acknowledge the pattern of misogyny revealed by 594 sexual abuse complaints, including rape, made against Met employees between 2012 and 2018, and the disrespect of police officers who took selfies with murdered sisters Nicole Smallman, 27 and Bibaa Henry, 46, discovered in a Wembley park.

The £25m funding for street lighting, CCTV and undercover police announced by government will not overturn misogyny and racism rooted in public organisations. We stand in solidarity with all those drawing attention to this fact – and we propose steps for the built environment sector to make a better contribution to making spaces safe and inclusive for all.

Every single woman should be able to walk through any city, day or night, confident in knowing she will not be attacked by men. Yet as we have tragically been reminded, on a daily basis those who self-identify as female are threatened, abused and violently murdered simply because of their gender.

We have seen too, as happened on Clapham Common in London, when women join together in peaceful vigil, their grief is trampled on, their bodies assaulted, their quiet chants blasted through by police violence and their sorrow met with aggression. This Government is pushing through legislation to expand powers of surveillance – yet time and again we see institutionalised systems of oppression that target women and marginalised groups.

“The Government’s pledge to spend £25m on public lighting and undercover surveillance will not address the roots of systematic misogyny and xenophobia played out in public spaces”

The public’s response to this tragedy brought into sharp focus the fact that the deaths of many Black women, non-white women, transgender and non-cis persons, as well as the underreported but horrifyingly high femicide rates of the over 60s, have not received an equal outpouring of grief. In particular, those of us who are white must acknowledge this fact and face up to the deeply problematic meanings of this truth.

The Government’s pledge to expand undercover surveillance will not address the roots of systematic misogyny and xenophobia played out in public and private spaces. Increasing police numbers puts additional funding into an institution that has variously looked away from, shielded and continued to employ men known to have perpetrated violence against women and girls, as the spy-cops scandal’s public inquiry is revealing.

Instead, government funding must be invested in deeply engaging with and listening to women and marginalised groups, rather than funding systems of oppression.

We stand in solidarity with Sisters Uncut, commemorating 194 women killed by police and prison violence since 2010. We remind ourselves that the extraordinary and essential Black Lives Matter movement was borne out of protests against police brutality, and we stand hand in hand with all those action groups campaigning for systematic change.

We believe the built environment and all those who work in the sector, have a role to play in bringing about constructive change. As an industry, we have the potential to make places more safe, accessible and inclusive.

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The members of Part W have the opportunity to make lasting and positive change to how spaces and places are designed and delivered. Working variously across architecture, transport, planning, education and design journalism, we have a front row seat on the extent to which those in positions of power continually disregard the needs of women and girls and, through design, ignore the needs of underrepresented groups.

Inequality is manifested in the failure of streetscapes, public parks, travel hubs, places of leisure, places of work and homes to support, enable and make better the lives of women.

No design strategy, revised brief, Building Regulation – nor spending on public realm – will halt the underlying root causes in society that leads to violence against women. However, our industry can make a positive contribution and we are putting forward some suggestions in the wider jigsaw of the many changes that are desperately needed.

“No design strategy, revised brief, Building Regulation – nor spending on streetlighting - will alone halt the underlying root causes in society that leads to violence against women”

Sexism against women is not created by women. For centuries the men who have governed the built environment sector have defined, designed and delivered places and spaces that at the least overlook the needs of women - and at the worst contribute towards them being unsafe.

The majority of decision makers in the UK’s built environment sector are male. As the Colour of Power Index 2020 revealed, the majority of those in seats of power, who make influential decisions in government, policy, culture and the arts - are male, and mostly white men.

At this very moment leading figures in the architectural industry are seeking to bring advancements in equality to a grinding halt, promoting “30 year plans” that will stall progress and keep white men in their seats of power, preventing underrepresented groups from having their voices heard and their needs taken into account.

The coordinated failure to give a seat at the table to diverse groups means that the lived experience, the knowledge and the needs of all who self-identify as women, Black women, women of colour, members of the LGBTQ+ community and women who have diverse religious beliefs, are missed out when it comes to designing cities.

For too long men have failed to speak out and jointly stand up for the rights of women. We invite all others to join with us – in mourning, and in hope – in calling for:

- *Statutory legislation that requires all those working in the built environment to demonstrate the impact projects have on women and girls*
- *The swift formation of a Gender Equality in the Built Environment Commission that puts a legal obligation on public bodies to consider the long-term impacts of design, placemaking and planning decisions on women and for that Commission to have authority to call in schemes for formal review*
- *Support for groups campaigning for systematic change and stronger alliance across the built environment ensuring underrepresented groups are given a voice in policymaking, investment and safer placemaking*

There is a notion that supporting women is a fringe area of interest. We must recognise that making the built environment well-suited to the needs of women benefits everyone.

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