



Who's right, what right, and where's that right?

Thomas Aquilina, Senior Associate, We Made That
01 February 2025

Every street corner is inscribed with seen and unseen rights. Who holds these rights? What do they look like? And where do they manifest most powerfully? Between my roles in both practice and academia, I've been thinking - and walking with colleagues - through some of these questions, and trying to find the language that translates pedagogical theory into project delivery. Asking the right questions, especially the most difficult ones, becomes essential for a project to deliver justice.

We Made That's work is foundationally about spatial justice. This sometimes contentious term can be approached through a specific understanding and foregrounding of rights. It isn't just about recognising rights but embedding them into the fabric of projects at a range of scales. A right to a city view? A right to shape your own community? A right to just be?

Sometimes we need to remind ourselves of the most basic rights. A right to fresh air? This wasn't afforded nine-year-old Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah living in Lewisham - the first person in the world to have air pollution listed as a cause of death. This landmark coroner ruling highlighted the racialised impact of London's toxic air, with communities of colour disproportionately exposed to pollution.

A right to feel safe? Safety in public space is another fundamental right, yet many women, girls and gender-diverse

people still feel unsafe in their everyday environments. They are unfairly restricted in movement and limited in their participation in city streets. By revealing these lived experiences, our Women's Safety Audit Pilot offers a methodology to guide new strategic planning and development frameworks.

A right to difference? Reeves Corner in Croydon is a nondescript fenced-off intersection, but was the symbolic site of the London 2011 Riots. The riots revealed the cycles of youth disenfranchisement and racist policing, again being felt most acutely in places of marginalised communities. Our recent citizen-based research on Culture and Community Spaces at Risk identified a series of social infrastructure sites in Croydon providing critical services for diverse local communities. These are everyday spaces such as a community cafe, a faith space, a barbershop - all requiring protection and preservation.

A right to a living room? Against the context of the longstanding lack of available housing, loss of social rent accommodation and overcrowding, community infrastructures are required to fulfil domestic spaces. The 'Walworth Living Room' in Southwark offers a social wellbeing centre that is intended to be public and yet familiar to encourage a multitude of activities. The kind of room made for community belonging.

A right to determine value? By engaging with the specific dynamics of the local, projects should reflect the values held - and projected - of a particular place. In Bilston in the West Midlands, our Cultural Infrastructure Micro Plan is an attempt at enabling the community to self-determine its own future and to sustain long-term cultural growth by utilising underused buildings and public spaces.

“Sometimes we need to remind ourselves of the most basic rights. A right to fresh air? A right to feel safe? A right to difference? A right to a stable home? This incomplete list of ‘rights to place’ is not about meeting basic standards but about making clear demands for collective rights.”

Spatialising justice needs political and policy imagination. It might also involve simple tools that intervene in our everyday lives. The Golders Green Public Realm Design Framework prioritised air quality within the principles of 'healthy streets', shaping the strategy for all new public realm improvements in the town centre. While its proposal for a real-time air pollution

monitor would make injustice evident - a graphic public display much like a civic clock.

Making justice visible requires the long-term tracking of funding distribution. In Croydon, one of our community partners Turf Projects, a homegrown art-space, received early funding from a meanwhile toolkit, which itself was paid for by regeneration funding allocated because of the riots. But distribution of resources is often uneven coupled with threats of displacement. Turf Projects currently occupy retail units in the Whitgift Centre, now subject to major regeneration proposals. A right to a stable home?

To practice a rights-based design approach is an attempt at finding a common language to understand spatial justice. This incomplete list of 'rights to place' is not about meeting basic standards but about making clear demands for collective rights. Urban spaces are never neutral. Rights are negotiated on who is there to claim them, and how the city's infrastructure, policies, and economic forces choose to shape or erase them.

Thomas Aquilina is a senior associate at We Made That. He is also an associate professor and co-director of Spatial Justice at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL.

Share on LinkedIn →
Share via email →

Related