Culture and the Nighttime Economy: A Conversation with London's Night Czar and Culture-at-Risk Officer

by Amin Ghaziani [12-11-2019]

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Amin Ghaziani describes the high closure rate of LGBTQ nighttime venues in London, and the city's recognition of these venues' intertwined economic and cultural significance.

From 2006 to 2016, the number of LGBTQ bars, pubs, and nightclubs in London declined by 58%, falling from 125 venues to 53. Figure 1 shows the spatial distribution of these closures. The impact was most acute in central London.

An audit by the Greater London Authority (GLA) found that 44% of all nightclubs, 35% of all grassroots venues, and 25% of all pubs in the capital have also closed. The rate of decline for queer spaces at 58%, however, is more dire.

The trend in London is part of an international pattern. Writing for *Bloomberg* in 2019, Richard Morgan observes, "In 1976, there were 2,500 gay bars in the United States; today, there are fewer than 1,400 worldwide." Researchers have documented declines in France, Denmark, Sweden, Amsterdam, New Zealand, Canada, and Australia (Rosser, West and Weinmeyer 2008).

**Figure 1. Loss of London's LGBTQ nighttime venues**
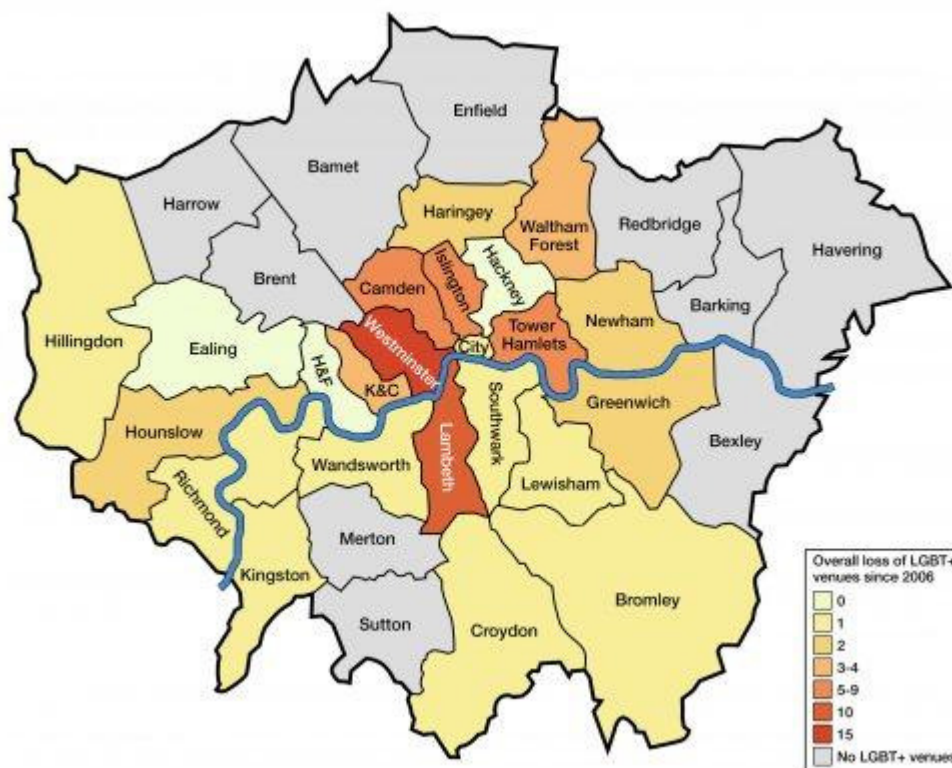
Source: based on a map published by James Manning for *Time Out London*, reporting data from Campkin and Marshall (2017) and the Greater London Authority. Recreated by the author.

The closure of nighttime venues is particularly puzzling when we consider the economic power of LGBTQ communities. The combined purchasing potential of LGBTQ adults in the United States is $1 trillion. The "untapped market," Morgan notes, "is considerable": while 4.5% of the US population identifies as gay, only 0.8% of US bars are gay.

Explanations for the loss of queer spaces point to a geographic dispersion of the gay and lesbian residential population across cities, which itself stems from factors such as the increasing acceptance of sexual minorities (Ghaziani 2011), an affordability crisis in global cities like London (Wetzstein 2017), and the international popularity of hookup and dating apps (Renninger 2018). These trends negate some of the need for network density in singular districts like the "gayborhood" (Ghaziani 2014).

Figure 2 maps the gay and lesbian population in the UK and in London. It challenges explanations for bar closures by revealing persistent and significant residential concentrations of LGBTQ people, especially in Inner London, which is also where we see the greatest rates of closure.

Figure 2. Estimated gay and lesbian population in England and Wales, 2013–2015 (%)
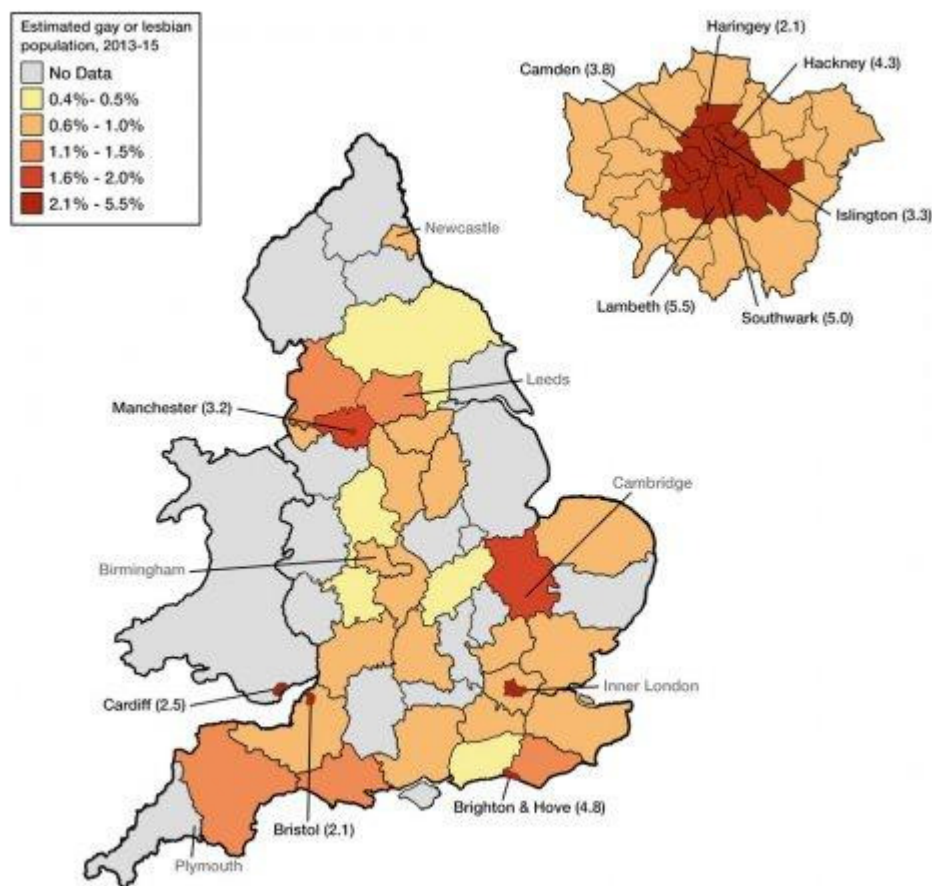
Source: based on a map published by Alice Ross for *The Guardian*, reporting data from the Office of National Statistics. Recreated by the author.

Queer nightlife spaces are closing even among densely concentrated populations. How then do we make sense of the decline of queer spaces in London? What measures is the city taking to protect its nighttime infrastructure?

Based on my interviews with officials in London, I argue that the economic rationale for protecting the city's nighttime venues is clear: they bring money and jobs to the city. But we also need to pay attention to matters of culture. From highbrow to popular expressions and from galleries to graffiti, the entertainment, leisure, creative, and consumption-based expressions of culture are the capital's DNA. The response to the closure of nighttime venues in London teaches us that we must protect places where communities come together and where we can experiment with who we are or want to be.

Appointing the night czar

The capital's workforce at night consists of 1.6 million people, or one-third of London's workforce. The value of its nighttime economy is estimated at £26.3 billion in gross value added. Fully 40% of the £66 billion for the total UK nighttime economy is represented by London alone, and the mayor expects £2 billion in additional growth of the creative nighttime industries each year through 2030.

In 2016, Mayor Sadiq Khan responded to the crisis of venue closures by appointing Amy Lamé as the UK's first night mayor, or "night czar." London's move mirrors similar efforts in cities such as Amsterdam, Berlin, New York, Paris, and Zurich. The promotion of a night mayor signals the importance of "culture at night" as a way of creating social cohesion in our cities.

I interviewed Amy Lamé in London's City Hall in 2018. Our conversation highlighted the important role that culture plays in the nighttime economy.

> **Ghaziani:** I understand that the nighttime economy in London contributes about £26 billion and accounts for one out of every eight jobs in the city. Clearly, the nighttime economy is important for economic reasons. But for what other types of reasons do you think it matters for us to have these conversations?

> **Lamé:** I think the nighttime economy is important, and the particular kinds of venues that we are trying to save are important because they build resilient communities. They create safe spaces. They are places where people can be themselves without question. Even though we know that laws have changed to, for example, be more accepting of LGBT people, we're still facing discrimination. Hate crime is up. We saw a big spike in hate crime following the vote to leave the EU. These are all issues that are very much alive, and we need to make sure that we have spaces that exist in order for communities to thrive and survive.

Explaining venue closures

From 2006 to 2016, a total of 116 LGBTQ venues in London closed. Several factors contributed to this outcome (Table 1).

Table 1. Explanations for the closure of LGBTQ nightlife spaces

Reason for venue closure	Count	%
Became a different LGBT venue	2	1%
Manager / owner decision	2	1%
Refurbishment / renovation	3	2%
Licensing dispute / revoked	5	3%
Taken over by new owner / company / manager	5	3%
Financial issues / business viability	7	5%
Unknown	28	19%
Venue continued / converted to non-LGBT venue	32	21%
Redevelopment	57	38%
Total number of reasons counted	151	100%
Total number of venue closures	116	

Source: Campkin and Marshall 2017.

Redevelopment poses the greatest risk, especially its connections with land value. This issue resonates with Lamé:

> **Ghaziani:** In your first year as night czar, you've had conversations with various stakeholders, including business owners, developers, residents, the police, community groups and local authorities about how to champion the capital's nighttime

economy. What are some of the major themes that have emerged from these conversations?

Lamé: What's interesting is that we've found LGBT spaces facing the same kinds of threats that grassroots live-music venues have faced, nightclubs have faced, and pubs face. There's a Venn diagram, really, where there's a sweet spot where all of these venues are facing similar challenges. Those challenges are the rise in commercial rents, threats from development, and a rise in business rates. The combination of these things has created a situation in London where it's very difficult for small, independent venues to survive and thrive.

Over the last decade, London has experienced some of the highest land values of any city in the world, particularly in areas with potential for residential use. As Amy Lamé described, increasing land values is one of several factors that have combined to threaten London's nighttime venues (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Risk analysis
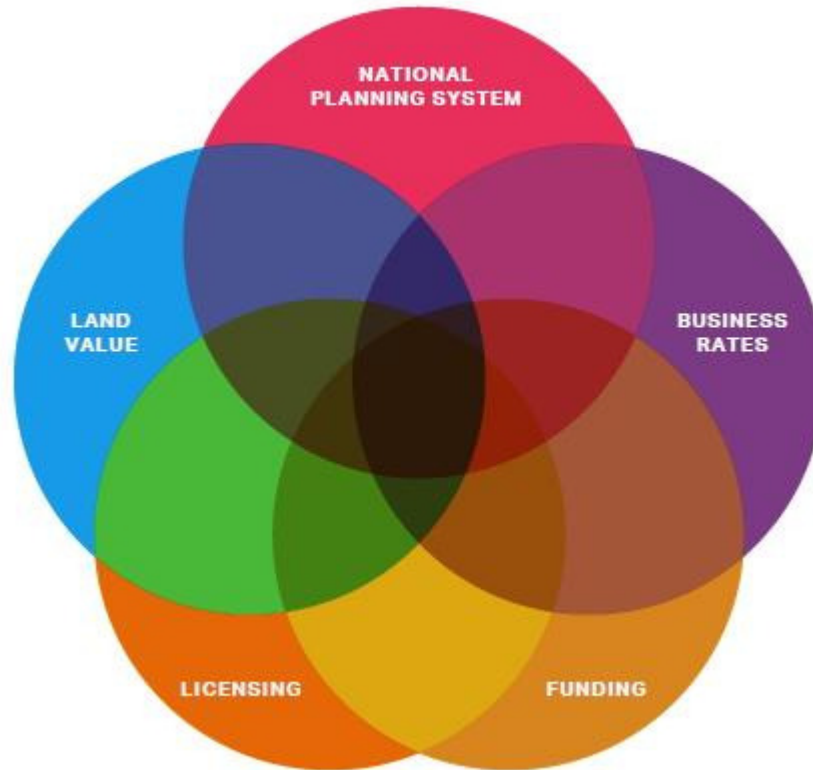
Source: Mayor of London's *Cultural Infrastructure Plan*.

Planning for culture

London is renowned for its cultural offerings, yet the capital is currently experiencing dramatic declines in its queer nighttime venues, performance spaces, and pubs in general. Collectively, these losses pose challenges to local communities, the tourism industry, and municipal efforts to support, sustain, and strengthen London's creative economy and its cultural offerings.

In addition to the night czar, the mayor also established the city's first "Culture-at-Risk Office" to safeguard London's cultural infrastructure and its heritage assets. Ed Bayes held the role of culture-at-risk officer in 2018, and was responsible for shaping the mayor's cultural strategy by supporting the development of policies and projects focused on protecting London's cultural assets and creating opportunities for creative professionals to thrive in the capital.

In 2019, Amy Lamé, Ed Bayes, and Mayor Sadiq Khan published a *Cultural Infrastructure Plan* that specifies how to protect and grow the city's cultural assets, or the "premises and places" where diverse ways of life are produced and consumed. The vision, as Khan describes it, is to put "culture right at the heart of local regeneration." To do this, London strives to better understand where its cultural infrastructure is located, plan for and create new components, support culture at risk (such as threatened queer spaces), increase investment in cultural assets, create policies to enable culture and the creative industries to put down deeper and more stable roots, and provide training, networking, and guidance across all levels of government and communities to reinforce the infrastructure.

In an interview that Lamé gave to *The Guardian*, she conveyed that the mayor has a particular interest in queer cultural infrastructure: "Sadiq and I keep LGBT places close to our hearts and hold them in very high regard. And we've made it really clear that it's an integral part of our plan to grow London culture." To make good on their promise,

Lamé, Bayes, and the mayor also published an *LGBTQ+ Venues Charter*. The document, which presents an innovative example of cultural policy, provides a set of practical steps that developers, property owners, venue managers, and pub companies can take to support London's queer spaces. The Charter recommends five actions:

- First, venues should display a rainbow flag, a universal symbol of the LGBTQ community, outside of the space.
- Second, venues should market themselves explicitly as an LGBTQ space. Marketing efforts can reach LGBTQ communities through social media, print and digital journals, blogs and other relevant websites, along with displaying community literature and posters in the venue itself. Venue operators should also engage in community outreach, such as hosting events around significant dates like Pride.
- Third, the venue should provide a welcoming, accessible and safe environment by welcoming people regardless of background or identity, religion, race/ethnicity, gender identity or expression, disability, age or sexual orientation.
- Fourth, management and security staff should be trained as LGBTQ-friendly.
- Finally, if the venue provides regular entertainment, the programming should be LGBTQ-focused.

Reimagining the city at night

Sustainable cities do not grow from policies that promote artificial dualisms like culture *or* the economy. We similarly cannot explain venue closures by focusing on single causal explanations like assimilation *or* gentrification. By appointing a night czar and culture-at-risk officer, and publishing documents like the *Cultural Infrastructure Plan* and *LGBTQ+ Venues Charter*, London champions the mutual constitution of culture and the economy in its vision for how to build a 24-hour city.

Nighttime venues are cultural assets as well as economic drivers that create new jobs, enhance tourism, and support the creative industries. The health of our economies, like the well-being of our local communities, is intimately connected with our ability to create culturally vital and connected spaces.

The nighttime economy provides a destination for LGBTQ people to use music, art, and dance to explore ideas about what it means to belong in a world that is witnessing a resurgence of hate and homophobia. Here, the night czar offers an important message of affirmation: "LGBT spaces are an important part of London. It's what makes London London. Having LGBT spaces makes for stronger communities, it makes for more resilient communities, and we must work to preserve them and to help them thrive. They are places where people can be themselves without question."

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