

# DECOLONISING BRITISH PLANNING 9

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Two major events of 2020 concern the legacy of racism and colonialism on UK soil. The first is the COVID-19 pandemic, and particularly its disproportionate effect on BAME communities. The second is the resurgence of Black Lives Matter protests in the US this year, which moved across to Britain and ignited a public debate about the figures we memorialise in British public spaces. In particular, the statue of slave trader Edward Colston was removed and thrown into the river Avon in the latest turn of a long-standing dispute in Bristol about the veneration of men who benefited from slavery.

At first sight, these issues appear to be separate, even disconnected. Yet when Marvin Rees, the black mayor of Bristol, addressed the Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) Select Committee's 'Hearing into Physical Heritage', he was keen to emphasize the relationship between them. He argued that the challenge to the Colston statue had to be seen in the light of a wider landscape of socio-spatial inequalities, which have a particularly negative effect on BAME people: "I think there is a lot that has been built up over the years", he said, "whether we're talking about unaffordable housing, gentrification feeding into this, or being left behind by the national or the international economy".<sup>53</sup> Elsewhere, he and Cllr Asher Craig explained that the increase of hate crime against Black Bristolians in the aftermath of these events demonstrated the need to establish a history commission: "we will be in a better position to bring the whole city with us as we understand who we are, how we got here, and whom we wish to honour".<sup>54</sup> Such a position links the representational and symbolic politics of the Colston statue to unequal material conditions, in a manner that reveals the role of planning in generating inequality, and its responsibility to ameliorate these effects.

Planning must address the makings of BAME inequalities in the UK, not least because it bears some responsibility for their creation. Britain's post-war history created a series of spatial inequities that directly impacted the lives and health of BAME communities, the ramifications

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<sup>53</sup> Cole, W (2020). 'Bristol mayor says toppling of Sir Edward Colston statue was fuelled by 'years of unaffordable housing, gentrification and being left behind'. *Daily Mail*, 6 October 2020. [dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8811337/Bristol-mayor-says-Colston-statue-toppled-unaffordable-housing-gentrification.html](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8811337/Bristol-mayor-says-Colston-statue-toppled-unaffordable-housing-gentrification.html). Accessed 6 October 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Rees, M and Craig, A (2020) 'Why leadership matters and how the One City approach is fundamentally important for encountering institutional racism'. *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and the City*, 1(1) Online First

of which we are witnessing today in these times of pandemic.<sup>55</sup> In the realm of housing, a discriminatory labour market, different housing needs (e.g. multi-generational dwelling units), formal policies of housing allocation, exclusionary financial conditions on products such as mortgages, and informal racism all combined to ensure that black and minority ethnic people settled in poorer urban areas, where housing was of a lower standard.<sup>56</sup> Many BAME communities could only access housing in “twilight zones”, blighted areas, left behind in post-war planning redevelopment schemes.<sup>57</sup> Even where housing allocation systems were ostensibly based on need, negative perceptions of BAME applicants for housing could influence decision-making.<sup>58</sup> More recently, algorithmic decision-making around financial issues like credit scores often contains inbuilt racial assumptions.<sup>59</sup> The move away from Government Equality Impact Assessments have concealed how planning reforms, such as permitted development of office to residential, consign poorer groups, including BAME communities, to housing disadvantage in a way that creates multiple deprivations. The result has been a long-term association between BAME communities, and poor quality housing, which is a major determinant of poor health outcomes.<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, BAME communities face other types of adverse environmental conditions as a direct result of planning policy. The location of transport infrastructure, waste facilities, and industry close to poorer neighbourhood has ensured that poor BAME communities in the UK are disproportionately affected by issues such as bad air quality and exposure to toxic

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<sup>55</sup> Marmot, M, Allen, J., Boyce, T., Goldblatt, P., Morrison, J. (2020). *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review Ten Years On*.

[health.org.uk/sites/default/files/upload/publications/2020/Health%20Equity%20in%20England\\_The%20Marmot%20Review%2010%20Years%20On\\_full%20report.pdf](https://health.org.uk/sites/default/files/upload/publications/2020/Health%20Equity%20in%20England_The%20Marmot%20Review%2010%20Years%20On_full%20report.pdf). Accessed 6 October 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Smith, S. (1987). ‘Residential Segregation: A Geography of English Racism’. In: Jackson, P. (ed.) *Race and Racism - Essays in Social Geography*. London: Allen and Unwin. Enderson, J. and Karn, V. (1987). *Race, Class and State Housing: Inequality and the allocation of public housing in Britain*, Aldershot, Gower.

<sup>57</sup> Bristow, M and Adams, B N (1977) Ugandan Asians and the Housing Market in Britain.

<sup>58</sup> Pawson, H and Kintrea, K. (2002). ‘Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution? Social Housing Allocation Policies and Social Exclusion in Britain’. *Journal of Social Policy*, 31, 643-667. Preece, J and Bimpson, E *Forms and Mechanisms of Exclusion in Contemporary Housing Systems: an Evidence Review*. Sheffield: UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence. [housingevidence.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Forms-and-mechanisms-of-exclusion-in-contemporary-housing-systems-June-2019.pdf](https://housingevidence.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Forms-and-mechanisms-of-exclusion-in-contemporary-housing-systems-June-2019.pdf)

<sup>59</sup> Kear, M. (2017). ‘Playing the credit score game: algorithms, ‘positive’ data and the personification of financial objects’. *Economy and Society*, 46, 346-368. See also the section on technology in this report.

<sup>60</sup> Khan, O, Finney, N, Lymperopoulou, K (2014). *Drifting upwards or sliding back? Ethnic inequalities in local authorities in England and Wales, 2001-2011*. London: Runnymede.

[runnymedetrust.org/uploads/Runnymede%20Ethnic%20Inequalities%20Briefing.pdf](https://runnymedetrust.org/uploads/Runnymede%20Ethnic%20Inequalities%20Briefing.pdf) Khan, O. (2020). *The colour of money: how racial inequalities obstruct a fair and resilient economy*. London: Runnymede Trust.

pollutants from traffic, industry, and incinerators.<sup>61</sup> They are also far more likely to live in areas where there is a lack of high quality green space for healthy exercise.<sup>62</sup>

If we shift to a more international lens, we begin to see a powerful intersectional relationship between these environmental injustices suffered by communities in the UK, and the uneven geographical distribution of carbon emissions versus climate change harms at a more international level. As black activists have recently argued, there is a deep and historically extensive relationship between racial and colonial justice and environmental justice.<sup>63</sup> The development of fossil fuel capitalism in the UK was made possible by expropriative and extractive forms of colonialism and imperialism, involving black slavery and coerced labour elsewhere.<sup>64</sup> This neglect of the black ‘other’ outside of our national borders persists today, in our racialized failure to consider the impacts of the contemporary decisions we make on poor, vulnerable and marginalised black and indigenous communities in the global south.<sup>65</sup> Since building and construction account for 36% of global energy use and 39% of energy-related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, the controls that the planning system can exert are potentially vital if we are to meet our wider ethical responsibilities to BAME communities, both in the UK and abroad.<sup>66</sup>

Planners must also consider their own disciplinary heritage, including the ways that British planning expertise continues to be exported overseas, as a colonial and imperial technique to manage and control land, territory, and peoples. Far too little attention has been paid to this

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<sup>61</sup> Fecht, D., Fischer, P., Fortunato, L., Hoek, G., De Hoogh, K., Marra, M., et al. (2015) ‘Associations between air pollution and socioeconomic characteristics, ethnicity and age profile of neighbourhoods in England and the Netherlands’, *Environmental Pollution*, 198: 201-10. Greenpeace (2020). ‘UK waste incinerators three times more likely to be in poorer areas’, <https://unearted.greenpeace.org/2020/07/31/waste-incinerators-deprivation-map-recycling/>

<sup>62</sup> De Zylva, P., Gordon-Smith, C, Childs, M (2020). England’s green space gap - How to end green space deprivation in England. London: Friends of the Earth. Sharp, L., Kenyon, A., Choe, E., (2020): Designing Blue Green Infrastructure (BGI) for water management, human health, and wellbeing: summary of evidence and principles for design. The University of Sheffield. Report. <https://doi.org/10.15131/shef.data.13049510.v1>

<sup>63</sup> Yeampierre, E and Gardiner, B (2020) ‘Interview: Unequal Impact: The Deep Links Between Racism and Climate Change’ [https://e360.yale.edu/features/unequal-impact-the-deep-links-between-inequality-and-climate-change?utm\\_source=tw&utm\\_medium=tweet&utm\\_campaign=EJ](https://e360.yale.edu/features/unequal-impact-the-deep-links-between-inequality-and-climate-change?utm_source=tw&utm_medium=tweet&utm_campaign=EJ)

<sup>64</sup> The literature in this area is vast and varied, for example Williams, E (1944). *Capitalism and Slavery*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. Harvey, D (2010) *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. Moore, J (2015) *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. London, UK: Verso. Vergès, F (2017) ‘Racial capitalocene’. In: Johnson, GT, Lubin, A (eds) *Futures of Black Radicalism*. London, UK: Verso. Smallwood, S (2007) *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Harvard: Harvard University Press

<sup>65</sup> Gardiner, S (2011). *A Perfect Moral Storm: the Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Sealey-Huggins, L. (2018) ‘The Climate Crisis Is a Racist Crisis: Structural Racism, Inequality, and Climate Change’ in *The fire now: Anti-racist scholarship in times of explicit racial violence*, ed. A Johnson, R Joseph-Salisbury and B Kamunge

<sup>66</sup> Global Status Report (2017). International Energy Agency. [worldgbc.org/sites/default/files/UNEP%20188\\_GABC\\_en%20%28web%29.pdf](http://worldgbc.org/sites/default/files/UNEP%20188_GABC_en%20%28web%29.pdf)

history, with professional institutes like the RTPI virtually silent on the racist history of certain spatial tools. To give a recent example, the government's White Paper suggests that the UK planning system should adopt techniques of zoning. Yet in the US, zoning was a technique of racial exclusion and segregation, and this legacy persisted despite legislative attempts to eradicate it. This potential for zoning to act in ways that exacerbate racial inequalities means that this tool should be used in a manner that reflects its potentially discriminatory possibilities.

We should not assume that BAME communities lack agency or power. There is a need both for BAME political and professional representation within planning, and for a greater knowledge of, and interest in, racial and ethnic inequalities or experience. However, while we remain ignorant or silent about planning's colonial history or the role it has played in sustaining racial inequality in Britain, attempts to engage with the BAME community are likely to remain tokenistic and unable to influence meaningful change.

How would we begin to decolonise planning? There are a number of areas that require attention:

- Acknowledge the racial and Eurocentric history of planning techniques, both in Britain and abroad.
- Recognise the structural existence of racism, beyond individual actions and behaviours, and use the planning system to combat it.
- Ensure that robust spatial redistribution is approached through a lens of race, as well as class, acknowledging the pressing needs of BAME communities when it comes to access to services and green space, high standard housing, etc.
- Diversify the planning profession, removing barriers to BAME entry.
- Critique ideas of professional technical expertise as a form of 'neutrality' that doesn't need to concern itself with race; recognise the different views and voices of the BAME community.
- Question taken-for-granted assumptions about the use of space, and challenge the attitude that the alteration of existing regulations to accommodate BAME life is a 'special accommodation'.
- Consider the racial implications of participatory elements within the planning system. For example, the appearance of hostile and racist public comments on planning

portals is common, particularly where the proposed development concerns non-Christian places of worship. This issue needs to be discussed and addressed.

- Engage in a dialogue with communities about public spaces and memorialization, and the messages that they send. Develop more inclusive places that welcome and visibly recognise the contribution made by the BAME community to British life.
- Commit to strong principles of environmental justice, and adopt an international lens on the climate change impact of changes to the UK built environment, developing preventative and mitigation policies.