



Intersectional Identities, Inequality, and Public Green Space

Vanita Naidoo, Salem State University

Many cherished green spaces in the United States are shaped by exclusionary practices and design choices that center European culture, history, and values. The **National Park System desegregated** in the mid-1940s, and soon after, **Olmsted's reverence for English landscapes** inspired the creation of New York's Central Park. Historically, urban planners and architects who were white, straight, and male applied traditional design principles to create shared gardens and parks for the enjoyment of white people. These planners did not incorporate the needs and opinions of minority groups such as LGBTQIA+ and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) into design choices. Natural landscapes also frequently have origins involving land theft, slavery, displacement, and ongoing marginalization. Moving forward, it is essential to include underrepresented groups in planning shared green spaces, **a form of healing that supports well-being** and fosters a sense of belonging derived from contact with nature.

Why Identity Matters in Contact with Nature

Research on college students' experiences of green space on campus shows that **the intersection of students' identities, including race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, influence how they experience green spaces**. Contact with the natural environment has a **significant impact on feelings of belonging and well-being**. Shared green spaces can provide a supportive environment for marginalized communities that face discrimination, isolation, and limited access to parks and gardens. It is essential for urban planners to recognize the eurocentric and **heteronormative roots of planning culture** when engaging with diverse communities. Urban planners should use a participatory planning approach to acknowledge the **role of colonialism, indigenous displacement, and discrimination** in green space planning and promote inclusion.

Considerations for Future Green Space Planning

Knowledge of Exclusionary Past: Planners should reflect on the past, specifically **the removal of Indigenous peoples and the theft of their land**, as well as racist policies that shaped and governed public green space. They should acknowledge their position of privilege as planners who have the power to design these spaces, and the role of their personal biases that inform their planning practices. Conversations about the colonization of land, displacement, and slavery would help planners identify the historic origins of shared green spaces and the reasons for continued discrimination. Given their educational background and professional training, planners are in a unique position to implement inclusive practices such as participatory green space planning that can support healing and empower LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC communities moving forward.

Apply Inclusive Planning Practices: Planners can adopt more inclusive practices by considering the design and experience of natural settings for those who are not white, male, or heterosexual. Planners should avoid

making broad generalizations or assumptions about the communities that will share outdoor spaces, and instead, they should engage in participatory research that involves communities in creating thoughtful and supportive designs. Planners should also understand terms and concepts that promote inclusivity. They can improve these skills by learning about and discussing [intersectionality and queer theory as it relates to urban planning](#). Planners might also consider working with academics, activists, and other advocacy groups to gain a deeper understanding of these issues and ideas.

Follow Issues that Impact Access to Nature for Marginalized Groups: For example, planners should know how development laws relate to their efforts to prioritize equal access for a range of communities. There are many resources that planners can use to stay up to date on issues of nature access. The outdoor recreation store, REI, sponsored talks focused on inclusive practices to boost diversity among park visitors, resulting in an [action plan](#). Establishing an annual meeting with [ambassadors](#) from the LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC communities can help identify obstacles and support mechanisms. Organizations like [Melanin Basecamp](#) and [LGBTQ Outdoors](#) are committed to environmental justice and can be a great resource. Local organizations can help planning professionals understand regional and community differences in experience.

Document Discrimination and Implement Inclusive Language: Planners should be judicious in how they discuss and document discrimination, and their work to advance inclusion, based on their understanding of current issues. For example, in states with laws and initiatives targeting BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities, planners may need to exercise caution to ensure that their conversations are not construed as reverse discrimination. Such consideration is particularly important given current anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion policies.

Seek Support as Needed: Planners should reflect on the bounds of their expertise and consider consulting existing resources for best practices and historical context. There are numerous outdoor groups dedicated to increasing representation and scholars who are experts in the historical, political, and social aspects of environmental racism. Professional organizations focused on specific identity groups may also provide relevant consultations. These groups can help planners stay informed, address biases about interventions, and implement inclusive planning practices. Educational programs on environmental and restorative justice can help normalize these conversations, better prepare planning communities to engage in such dialogues, and foster a culture of listening to historically marginalized voices. The planning community should participate in an ongoing dialogue that includes attending conferences, visiting organizations, and hosting meetings on environmental justice. Connections with international organizations can offer a rich cultural perspective on inclusive practices for planning and potential obstacles.

As the landscape of diversity, equity, and inclusion continues to evolve, institutions and planners who create shared green spaces must also adapt to support these marginalized groups. Furthermore, they must understand that knowledge on this topic is not static, instead requiring consistency and networks of support. Overall, planners should begin with the understanding that access to nature is a fundamental right and work to uphold this as they create shared green spaces

Read more in Vanita Naidoo, “[Understanding student experience of campus green space post COVID-19](#).” *Journal of American College Health* (2025): 1-9.