

Ms Chi Nguyen comments

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Re: Response and commentary on the [consultation process](#) of The London Plan Draft December 2017.

THE FUTURE OF LONDON
WEIGHS 5 LBS
BUT FEW LONDONERS
WILL KNOW IT

Dear
Mayor Sadiq and the GLA,

On a Saturday in January 2018, I carried 10 lbs of London's future in my arms, from the headquarters of City Hall in Southwark on the south bank all the way back to where I live in Walthamstow, a fast-growing neighbourhood in Zone 3 of the outer London borough of Waltham Forest.

(5 lbs each side for equal distribution.)

I walked along the riverside footpaths of the Thames, where tourists were braving the cold weather to take in the sites; then took the tube at London Bridge, passing by Borough Market and the Shard.

I changed trains at Kings Cross, a very busy area that is home to St. Pancras International, the Guardian, Google, the British Library, Wellcome, and other major institutions, like University College London where I am doing doctoral research.

40 minutes later, I arrived tiredly at my residence on Blackhorse Lane, a former industrial precinct that's undergoing intensive regeneration/gentrification, evidenced by the cranes of the numerous multi-million £ developments that have risen up around the tube station. I considered going down to Walthamstow Market, the longest outdoor street market in Europe, to pick up some groceries, but couldn't bear the thought of adding more to my heavy load.

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What I lugged across town were two copies of the Draft London Plan, a 500+ page publication that was released in December 2017 which outlines the Mayor's new strategic framework for how London will take shape over the next 20 years. It is one of the city's most important documents, and it will impact the economic, spatial, social, environmental, and transport development of every area that I passed along the length of my 40-min journey.

The directives will significantly effect change to the everyday of 8.788 million Londoners, and the quality of urban life and experiences in the city.

Its policies will determine whether London will achieve 'good growth'; if there will be affordable homes to live in, viable places to work or learn, green open parks to enjoy, accessible pubs and night venue to socialise in, adequate public transportation to efficiently get somewhere, and inclusive and diverse communities to be a part of.

That is a lot to squeeze into one document.

But, who will read it? Unlikely, Londoners.

Having hauled the hefty thing up and down stairs, in and out of tube stations, I can honestly say that the future of London was heavy to carry.

Yet, few others in London will have shared my plight, unaware that such a telephone-book size publication even exists, that the future of the city is tied to it.

The Mayor even openly admits in the foreword of the draft, "many Londoners won't know about or have come across the London Plan."

BBC London Political Editor Tim Donovan: "let's face it, few people will ever set eyes on the London Plan, let alone leaf through any of its 500 pages."

Presumably very few will seek it out, carry it home, labour over it page by page, and then write up a response as part of the 3-month public consultation process. And only the most determined, motivated and technologically inclined, would try to navigate the document digitally online.

“As the new London Plan is developed there will be opportunities for the public to engage and help shape its development.” (london.gov.uk website)

But, how could the public get involved if they don't even know that the London Plan exists?

If the document lies outside of general public consciousness. For me, that is a fundamental concern with the consultation process and the draft Plan:

No one, but the most ardent, knows about it.

If the London Plan has not been properly disseminated; how can it be meaningfully consulted? Let alone be shaped by the public's input.

Who is the London Plan for if Londoners are not reading it?

What is the purpose of the publication if the public is not aware of it?

Why don't they know about or have come across it?

It makes me question then who is the *public* in public consultation.

If a city is built in the forest and no one is around to witness it—and there aren't any signposts for entry into the clearing—does it exist?

These were some of the questions running through my mind while I observed two draft consultation meetings, co-facilitated one, and streamed another online. As I reflect on the first three, counting the number of participants, I wondered where is the rest of London.

The GLA-led subregional event in Brent had a rough headcount of forty people, including local councillors, local residents and planners.

The community-focused event supported by Just Space had an approximate showing of one hundred, mostly representatives from special interest groups.

With other UCL researchers, I co-facilitated a LGBTQI+ public conversation on inclusivity in the London Plan, a community-focused event co-hosted by Queer Spaces Network and the UCL Urban Laboratory. Seventy people registered to come together on a Friday night in Soho at ThoughtWorks to generate a collective public response that focuses on LGBTQI+ communities, their needs and spaces.

Compare this to an audience of over 1,000 at the Big Debate organised by New London Architecture to discuss the key policies guiding the draft Plan.

Presenters and panelists included GLA members, local authorities, built environment professionals, academics, and representatives from various design, building, and planning organisations, many coming from privileged positions of influence and/or enjoying high socio-economic statuses.

The night's major sponsor was British Land, one of the largest property development and investment companies in the United Kingdom.

The NLA event heavily featured the logos of the programme champion, the supporters, and the supporting organisations in the leaflet and presentation.

From my perspective, the evening at Friends House, despite a higher attendance, addresses a very narrow (mostly white) exclusive public.

Although there were several references throughout the night about the criticality of the London Plan reaching a wider public and engaging with communities, as many of the panelists had strongly advocated for in their sessions, the proceeding was happening inside an echo chamber where the scale of privilege and purchasing power does not reflect the greater breadth of London's ethnic, cultural, socio-economic diversity.

The lack of diverse representation in that room—and the relative small number of public participation in the other meetings—markedly falls short for me of the inclusivity aims of the draft consultation process, and of the Mayor's vision of an inclusive city for all Londoners.

Deputy mayor of planning Jules Pipe says good growth in London “means ensuring people have more of a say in the development of their city.”

Yet, from what I have observed of the draft consultation stage alone, and its participants, it means more of the *same* people have more of a say.

The draft consultation process, as it is, only produces a pre-determined outcome that favours those with the means and the special skills to read and interpret the London Plan. While the wider public needs a high level of will, and knowledge of where to look, to even find the document.

And when they do, there are ver little resources to support their efforts. A tremendous amount of volunteer hours and extensive collaboration coordinated through active networks like Just Space is required to help and support community organisations in formulating their responses.

It is a heavy onus on the wider public to try to match the mechanisms of, and achieve the same impact, as British Land or NLA member organisations.

If we are to have a truly inclusive city, one that takes into account heterogeneous perspectives and allows for more inclusive and productive conversations with the public, the GLA should explore new or different forms of public outreach and interactions. Conversations about and around the London Plan should consider the notion of 'public' beyond its concept as a singular entity. Plurality is key. *Publics*, rather than public. Any public consultation or calls for public participation should be very specific about which public is being addressed or reached.

For me, the Big Debate is not a public consultation. It is an event for planners, designers, and the larger built environment community. Although they give extremely invaluable input to help shape the Plan, their voices shouldn't be the most persuasive or pervasive of the conversation.

For me, the first step to opening up the conversation is to better inform the wider public that the London Plan exists.

It's important to let the public know that a rich conversation is happening in the first place. Many more Londoners should know that the future of their city weighs 5 lbs, and that they have the power and opportunity to tip the scale towards a truly inclusive London, one for all Londoners.

I am happy to have a chat with the GLA team to find ways of widening public knowledge of and interactions with the new London Plan.

Sincerely,
Chi

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I am a graphic communications designer working across the boundaries of visual communication and architecture.

I design books, exhibitions, and interactions. I research and write about publishing and its relationships to the built environment.

I am currently undertaking doctoral research at University College London's Bartlett School of Architecture looking into the role of publishing and publications in public-led participation in urban change.