University of Guelph

sociable cities

SPACES OF SOCIABILITY
Enhancing Co-presence and Communal Life in Canada

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Territorial Acknowledgment

Our team acknowledges the lands of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples on which we live, work, and play. The University of Guelph, where this work was conducted, is located on the treaty land and territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit (the Between the Lakes Purchase; Treaty 3, 1792) and within the Dish with One Spoon territory. These are the ancestral lands of the Attawandaron peoples, and our neighbours in the region are the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and the Métis. As our work is centred on sociability and co-presence through place-based relations, we express our deepest gratitude to the Indigenous peoples who share this land with us and from whom we continue to learn.

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Executive Summary

Background

Digital technologies have transformed how we connect and socialize. Although virtual spaces command much of our attention, physical spaces remain essential to our everyday lives. This report synthesizes existing research on public spaces that potentiate, facilitate, and enhance relations between people beyond networks of primary relations, to better understand where sociability between strangers happens, where it does not, and how it may be enhanced. As central spaces of sociability, public spaces are an essential part of our social infrastructure.

Objectives

(1) To understand what Canadian and international research tells us about how public spaces foster positive social encounters between strangers, acquaintances, and neighbours
(2) To inform public policy, practice, and research agendas in Canada in support of spaces of sociability

Results

Public institutions such as libraries and community centres enable and enhance sociable encounters as they serve the general public and local communities through social gatherings, educational activities, recreational and leisure activities, and youth programming. Libraries as physical spaces are important to the social lives and identities of older adults. By providing activities, multigenerational interaction, and ongoing relationships with staff, libraries reduce social isolation. Libraries and community centres foster intergenerational sociability through both improvised and programmed interactions. Libraries are key public spaces for diverse groups of citizens (i.e., those experiencing homelessness, those recently incarcerated, at-risk teenagers, unemployed persons, newcomers, and those experiencing violence). Furthermore, libraries are key sites of sociability for young children and their caregivers, helping childrenand teenagers to develop autonomy.

Ambiguously public spaces, while technically private, are public facing or available to the public in some manner and provide opportunities for sociability and practices of neighbouring. While complicated by the tension between public and private ownership, these spaces are a central part of our shared social infrastructure. These spaces contribute to sociability by facilitating informal everyday contact, sense of place attachment, and community belonging. As our cities grow and municipalities grapple with creating new public spaces, privately owned public spaces (POPS), have emerged as potential spaces of sociability. Similarly, privately owned porches and balconies attached to homes and apartments are public-facing liminal spaces that support sociable interactions within neighbourhoods and along streetscapes. As adaptable and personalizable spaces, they allow for impromptu public-facing events and interactions, intra-

neighbourhood comradery, and unique outdoor activities. Malls, while technically private, are key spaces of sociability often unrelated to their commercial functions, particularly for teenagers, older adults, racialized groups, and low-income groups.

Social scientific research on the *public realm* is burgeoning internationally, with wide-ranging studies of parks, sidewalks, shared public leisure, and encounters—both sociable and conflictual—between people in public spaces. A consistent theme is the importance of varied public spaces for promoting, enhancing, and facilitating intergenerational social encounters. Careful, context-aware planning and programming as well as play and improvisation are important features of successful spaces. Cultivating intergenerational public spaces requires intentionality and effort due to entrenched structures of age-segregation in Canadian society. Art and culture can enliven public spaces and bring people together though a common focus of attention. Contemporary art practices contribute to the development of temporary communities, while traditional (static) forms of public art encourage amicable co-presence and contemplation in public spaces. Festivals and carnivals can cultivate playful engagement and diverse cultural expressions. The most successful approaches pay careful attention to process, locality, participation, and realization. The literature on DIY, guerrilla, activist, and other grassroots urban tactics underscores their positive contributions in terms of critical engagement, placemaking, and addressing collective needs.

Key messages

As spaces of sociability, public spaces improve quality of life by increasing opportunities for social contact, learning, leisure, play, and simply sharing space with strangers. Sociable public spaces facilitate interactions across social difference and create belonging; they can be both planned *and* flexible, and support a range of uses that respond to local needs and residents. The best sociable public spaces attend to historical, social, cultural, and community context; they include careful planning and programming and facilitate playfulness and improvised uses; they attend to basic human needs and foreground accessibility in multiple ways. To make public spaces better spaces of sociability, planners and policy makers need better more granular data on the social life of public spaces. Investments in public spaces as social infrastructure that supports diverse populations will counter social isolation, social fragmentation, and political polarization.

Methodology

Funded by SSHRC and ESDC, our University of Guelph–based research team brought together over two dozen international researchers from across the social sciences in a series of virtual roundtable discussions. Discussions were organized around (1) public institutions (libraries, community centres), (2) ambiguously public spaces, and (3) the public realm. Drawing on the collective expertise of the research team and participants, our roundtable discussions were complemented by a comprehensive review of international research literature on spaces of sociability.

Background: In a Digital World, Physical Spaces Still Matter

Digital technologies enable contact across vast physical distances, permitting individuals to have wide ranging social contacts regardless of physical location. In principle, this has the potential to increase the range and quantity of possible social contacts that we can have. In practice, the widespread adoption of digital technologies has driven political polarization and threatens to undermine pluralism (Bail et al 2018; DellaPosta 2020; Karlsen et al 2017; Lelkes et al 2017; McCoy et al 2018). While we continue to contend with the novelty of various ways of connecting and interacting digitally, we cannot escape the simple fact that we are still embodied beings. That is, we remain physically located in specific places. So even in an increasingly digital world with expansive virtual spaces, physical spaces remain central to our everyday lives. Indeed, physical spaces are becoming more and more significant for enhancing collective life precisely because of digital distance and virtual diversification.

As both physical and social beings, our immediate physical locations remain vitally important for social interaction. More specifically, physical *co-presence* remains central to our social lives. While co-presence can apply to virtual spaces, social scientists use the term to refer to people being in physical proximity to one another. By definition, co-presence depends on people sharing the same physical location: sharing space. The types of social interactions that happen when we are co-present are qualitatively different from those that are digitally mediated. In this report we focus on public spaces, that is, spaces beyond the private sphere. These are spaces where individuals encounter and interact with strangers, with people they may know only in passing, and with neighbours. In public spaces, we often find ourselves co-present with other people with whom we have little in common beyond our shared humanity and the shared business of using the space. This report focuses on these everyday connections and interactions in public spaces and treats them as essential to addressing political polarization, social fragmentation, and isolation. By enabling encounters across difference, by enhancing communal life, and by facilitating sociability, public spaces are vital to the everyday unfolding of just and egalitarian democratic life.

From polarization to well-being, connectedness, and simply sharing space

Recent research on political division—and in particular *affective polarization*—suggests that a primary driver is digital media's focus on "nonlocal interaction" (Törnberg 2022). Digital media's relative anonymity and the facilitation of communication across great distance permits ungrounded, harmful, and often false beliefs, ideas, and opinions to circulate freely without encountering any concrete local referent. As Törnberg demonstrates "it is not isolation from opposing views that drives polarization but precisely the fact that digital media bring us to interact outside our local bubble. . . . By encouraging nonlocal interaction, digital media drive an alignment of conflicts along partisan lines, thus effacing the counterbalancing effects of local heterogeneity" (Törnberg 2022). When people interact locally, they have varied kinds of encounters and experiences with a wide variety of people. Even when such in-person local encounters are conflictual, they tend to be a "stable plural patchwork of cross-cutting conflicts" (Törnberg 2022).

This suggests that participation in the daily routines of life in the shared spaces of our cities is a good in itself because it brings people into close physical proximity and enhances individual and collective capacity to dwell among others and live with difference. We suggest that everyday local embodied interactions can partly attenuate polarization for the simple reason that persons interacting across difference in everyday life still have to get on with things. Our task then is to sustain and enhance existing shared spaces, and also to experiment with and develop more of such spaces. In this way, treating simply being among others as a good in itself may also have knock-on effects in mitigating against social polarization.

The core purpose of this synthesis report is to provide research-informed perspectives on how public spaces can enhance well-being, happiness, and belonging in everyday communal life. At an individual level we may feel that we derive most happiness (and perhaps a lot of our personal pain) from close personal ties to friends and family. While our existing networks of strong personal ties are, of course, important to our well-being, working lives and sense of belonging, weak ties are also significant. These may run the gamut from small nods of acknowledgement between strangers, to a brief exchange of pleasantries with someone we only know to see on a regular walk but with whom we have little other contact. Social scientists have long understood the significance these kinds of weak ties (Granovetter 1973) in the development of our sense of well-being and connectedness. In fact, recent research has shown that the more widely varied *types* of relationships that we have—that is, not just with friends and family, but also with colleagues, acquaintances, and contacts with strangers—enhance happiness and well-being for individuals and improves social cohesion and connectedness more broadly (Aelbrecht 2019; Aelbrecht et al 2022; Collins et al 2022). These kinds of passing encounters and everyday momentary social anchors regularly occur in public settings like sidewalks, community centres, public transit, parks, and trails.

Based on our expert panels and research review, we can confidently state that publicly accessible settings where strangers can have ordinary and everyday encounters across various kinds of social difference are key to both countering digital media driven polarization *and* enhancing our individual and collective well-being. This report then synthesizes existing research on spaces that potentiate, facilitate, and enhance relations between people beyond networks of primary relations, that is beyond just family and friends. We examine existing research to determine the specific characteristics—both social and physical—of public settings that facilitate sociability. Our aim here is to investigate where sociability between strangers happens, where it doesn't, and how it may be enhanced.

Public spaces and everyday encounters

The day-to-day work of designing, managing, and maintaining Canadian cities primarily focuses, as it should, on *physical* infrastructure—buildings, garbage collection, sewage and stormwater systems, transportation management. What we sometimes miss is that cities are also filled with *social* infrastructure. Public spaces are an essential part of our shared social infrastructure. This

Figure 1 Pedestrians, Yonge Street, Toronto. Photo by Mission Wikimedia Commons.

includes obvious sites like playgrounds, public squares, and urban parks, but also seemingly mundane and incidental public spaces, like alleyways, patches of grass, or bus stops. These too are essential social infrastructure.

We begin from the premise that public spaces are central to the everyday social life of cities. Public spaces can evoke a range of emotions: people like them, people loathe them, and people barely give them a second thought. They are sites of everyday conflict and disagreement, and they are also sites of shared joy in being together with others. Regardless, public spaces are spaces of encounter. More pointedly, because we encounter others who we do not know or with whom we may share little with beyond the shared business of using public space, public space are important to the everyday life of a free egalitarian and democratic society. Public spaces can and should facilitate sociability. Our concern here, then, is with *public spaces as spaces of sociability*.

Sociability is a particular form of social interaction. It involves a shared commitment between two or more persons to the creation of a fleeting moment of positive social encounter. Sociable interactions are generally low stakes; they involve positive mutual regard and a lack of concern with achieving a particular outcome beyond the pleasure of encountering and engaging with another person. While sociability is not something that can or should be legislated, facilitating sociability creates and enhances connection between people.

The core focus of the report is synthesizing and assessing existing research and identifying gaps of relevance to the Canadian context. It provides a synthesis of social science literature on sociable encounters between co-present persons in public and ambiguously public spaces, and develops recommendations on how to cultivate and maintain robust infrastructures of sociability.

Current social science research maps social isolation and social fragmentation as interrelated, complex phenomena (Abrams et al. 2020; Congdon 2011; Hwang et al. 2020; Klinenberg 2018; Pickup et al. 2020; Wu 2020). Much recent academic, government, and public discourse is largely focused on two areas: 1) virtual space, social media, and technology, and 2) pandemic heightened isolations and disruptions to everyday social interactions (Low and Smart 2020). In both strands, the significance of physical spaces of social encounter for counteracting social isolation and fragmentation is underexplored. Put simply, virtual spaces can complement but not replace

physical spaces as sites of sociability (Klinenberg 2018). It is worth remembering that despite the many negative impacts of the pandemic, it also moved much of our social lives outdoors and facilitated local-level grassroots acts of place-based everyday solidarity, community expression, and neighbourhood outreach (Horgan et al, forthcoming).

While there is a plethora of scholarship on public and ambiguously public spaces, and on public institutions, much of it is within disciplinary siloes. Architects and urban planners identify and map material elements of public spaces that may support sociability, yet this research is rarely in conversation with contemporary ethnographic work in sociology and anthropology, and vice versa (Jones 2021). This project bridges such gaps by convening an international team of scholars from across the social sciences—including urban designers and landscape architects, anthropologists, geographers, and sociologists—with a shared interest in spaces of sociability. This report synthesizes empirical knowledge on sociability in public and semi-public spaces and in public institutions to inform ongoing decision making, particularly around the design and management of the public realm, programming in public institutions, and municipal zoning.

Objectives

To develop a robust response to concerns about the "emerging asocial society," our review focuses on collective life and co-presence in public spaces. Our project themes address the Knowledge Synthesis Grant subthemes: "physical surroundings," "prosocial and antisocial behaviours," and "expressions of belonging." In focusing our work on the public realm, public institutions, and ambiguously public spaces (three types of spaces of sociability), we emphasize that these spaces can be leveraged to develop and strengthen communal life in Canada. Accordingly, our knowledge synthesis is guided by the following questions:

- What does Canadian and international research tell us about public and transitional spaces that foster positive social encounters between strangers, acquaintances, and neighbours?
- How can we enhance wide and varied spaces of sociability, and better identify and cultivate infrastructures of sociability to collectively enrich the social life of Canadian public spaces?
- How can this knowledge inform public policy, practice, and research agendas in Canada?

To respond to these questions, our literature review and international research panels of expert social scientists assesses and synthesizes existing evidence to support policy development and address the issue of an emerging asocial society characterized by social fragmentation and isolation. We also identify gaps in knowledge and provide both focused policy recommendations and a future strategic research agenda.

Infrastructures of Sociability: From Material Affordances of Space to Affordances of Sociability

Before describing our methods and reporting our findings, we would like to briefly outline the conceptual underpinnings of our approach. The concept of *affordances* was developed by ecological psychologists to understand and analyze the ways that the individual and the physical environment interact, specifically how particular features of physical environments suggest, enable, promote or offset specific kinds of use by individuals (Gibson 2011). Subsequent applications of the broader theory of affordances have focused on the material organization of physical spaces and, more recently, on the communicative structures of virtual spaces (Rietveld & Kiverstein 2014; Weltevrede & Borra 2016).

While inspired by insights from these research trajectories, and mindful of the centrality of the physical design of space, here we draw the idea of affordances towards the *social* characteristics of spaces and, in particular, the kinds of social interactions that take place in various public spaces. In a study of outdoor public ice rinks that several contributors to this report conducted, Horgan et al. define *affordances of sociability* broadly as "any elements of a social setting that facilitate positive interactions between strangers," with such affordances located in the "material *and* social organization" of particular public spaces (2020: 147, emphasis added). Further advancing these insights by applying the concept more widely, we suggest that numerous and varied affordances of sociability within and across different public spaces are an essential, potentially overlooked, dimension of our shared social infrastructure. Moreover, we suggest that developing and supporting such affordances can be considered part of *infrastructures of sociability* that are not simply enabled by particular features of the physical environment, but significantly, complement and enhance them. The intention of this report is to help researchers, planning professionals, and policy makers to better identify and cultivate such infrastructures of sociability, with the goal of collectively enhancing the social life of Canadian public spaces.

Methods

This research review and synthesis focusses on three key public spaces of sociability: 1) the public realm, (2) public institutions (libraries, community centres), and (3) ambiguously public spaces. These three areas were identified at the proposal stage of this project based on previous research conducted by project investigators Horgan, Liinamaa and graduate students Hunter, Wilson and Xu on the [Sociable Cities Project](). Rather than a clearcut definition of public space that draws a hard line between public and private, we approach public space broadly, and include formally designated spaces accessible to the public, non-commercial publicly accessible spaces, as well as some private and commercial spaces (such as shopping malls) that share similar characteristics. So rather than a restricted ringfenced definition of public space, we highlight the *publicness* of a variety of spaces. Our methodology is guided by three perspectives on the nature of knowledge: that knowledge is contextual, dynamic, and often fragmented across disciplines. We view knowledge as contextually situated. We acknowledge that discipline-based empirical and theoretical work offers situated and partial perspectives (Guba 1990). To this end, this report

reflects the experiences and insights of over two dozen researchers representing more than ten academic and intellectual traditions.

This project began with the identification of experts who have research experience in our three areas of emphasis (see Table 1). First, regarding the public realm, our panelists included researchers who study street festivals (Heble; Radice; Wynn), public leisure spaces (DeLand; Horgan; Liinamaa), public protest zones (McIlwraith), public markets (Aptekar; Stewart), and the public realm more generally (Germain; Horgan; Jackson; Kusenbach; Landman; Latham; Stewart). For the second area, public institutions, we drew on team members' research expertise in and on public libraries and community centres in diverse communities across Canada, the US, and the UK (Aptekar; Dalmer; Jackson; Lewis). For our third theme, ambiguously public spaces (such as transitional zones and privately owned public spaces), we drew on the expertise of team members studying the social life and physical design of liminal spaces (Kusenbach; Landman; Lewis; McIlwraith; McTighe; Ruonavaara; Stewart). Core members of the research team representing urban sociology (PI Horgan; Co-I Liinamaa), the sociology of culture and organizations (Co-I Liinamaa), the anthropology of place (Co-I McIlwraith), and the anthropology of gender and community spaces (Post-Doctoral Fellow MacLeod) coordinated and participated in a series of virtual interdisciplinary brainstorming and knowledge-sharing panels.

Table 1: Participants and Collaborators

Participant	Institutional Affiliation	Country	Research Discipline
Patricia Aelbrecht	Cardiff University	Wales	Urban Design/Cultural Geography
Sofya Aptekar	City University of New York (CUNY)	USA	Urban Studies
Nathalie Boucher	Organisme Respire	Canada	Anthropology/Urban Studies
Nicole Dalmer	McMaster University	Canada	Health, Aging & Society/Library Sciences
Michael DeLand	Gonzaga University	USA	Sociology
Annick Germain	l'Institut national de la recherche scientifique	Canada	Sociology
Troy Glover	University of Waterloo	Canada	Recreation and Leisure
Ajay Heble	University of Guelph	Canada	English/Critical Studies in Improvisation
Mervyn Horgan	University of Guelph	Canada	Sociology/Sociable Cities Project
Devan Hunter	University of Guelph	Canada	Sociology/Sociable Cities Project
Emma Jackson	Goldsmiths, University of London	England	Sociology
Laavanya Kathiravelu	Nanyang Technological University	Singapore	Sociology
Margarethe Kusenbach	University of South Florida	USA	Sociology

Participant	Institutional Affiliation	Country	Research Discipline
Karen Landman	University of Guelph	Canada	Landscape Architecture
Alan Latham	University College London	England	Geography
Camilla Lewis	University of Manchester	England	Architecture/Anthropology
Saara Liinamaa	University of Guelph	Canada	Sociology/Sociable Cities Project
George Lipsitz	University of California, Santa Barbara	USA	Black Studies/Sociology
Katie MacLeod	University of Guelph	Canada	Anthropology/Sociable Cities Project
Thomas McIlwraith	University of Guelph	Canada	Anthropology/Sociable Cities Project
Laura McTighe	Florida State University	USA	Anthropology/Geography/Black Studies
Pavel Pospěch	Masaryk University	Czech Republic	Sociology
Martha Radice	Dalhousie University	Canada	Anthropology
Hannu Ruonavaara	University of Turku	Finland	Sociology
Quentin Stevens	RMIT University	Australia	Urban Design
Brendan Stewart	University of Guelph	Canada	Landscape Architecture
David Trouille	James Madison University	USA	Sociology
Meng Xu	University of Guelph	Canada	Sociology/Sociable Cities Project
Edith Wilson	University of Guelph	Canada	Sociology/Sociable Cities Project
Jonathan Wynn	University of Massachusetts Amherst	USA	Sociology

With our international team of experts in place, we used a three-pronged methodology to generate our findings and policy implications. The first was a series of panel discussions organized around our three topics. Second, a series of directed but individual discussions occurred over email or through Zoom calls with researchers who, due to time zone differences or scheduling conflicts, could not attend panels. The third prong was a comprehensive literature review.

Our panels took the form of ninety-minute virtual roundtable discussions, held over Zoom (see Table 2). The Zoom meetings were held in the summer and early fall of 2022. Each panel was facilitated by Postdoctoral Fellow MacLeod and began with participants introducing themselves and sharing their research interests. This was followed by a series of guiding questions and prompts from the research team aimed at (1) understanding the existing state of knowledge, and (2) identifying gaps in existing knowledge in each of the above three areas, focusing especially on practical challenges and opportunities related to researching, creating, and enhancing spaces of sociability. This generated conversations identifying relevant literature, key themes, and key challenges around implementation within policy and planning contexts. Core team members

took extensive notes during each panel, and panel discussions were recorded for further review. After each panel, we followed up with all participants via email, requesting panelists recommend (1) recent social science literature that speaks to relevant theories, concepts, and methods for studying spaces of sociability, and (2) resources for policy makers (see Appendices B & C). Due to scheduling conflicts and time zone differences, individual discussions and email exchanges also took place with three participants: Quentin Stevens (Australia), Pavel Pospěch (Czech Republic), and Patricia Aelbrecht (Wales). These discussions were similar in focus to the panel discussions.

Table 2: Panels and Participants

Panel	Participant	Focus of Remarks
Public Realm		
	Nathalie Boucher	Collaborative planning, aquatic public spaces
	Michael DeLand	Public space, parks, pickup sports
	Annick Germain	Housing, diversity, neighbourhood
	Troy Glover	Community leisure, parks
	Ajay Heble	Festivals
	Mervyn Horgan	Public spaces, everyday encounters
	Emma Jackson	Homelessness, belonging, community hubs
	Laavanya Kathiravelu	Global cities, migration
	Margarethe Kusenbach	Street art, ethnographic methods, housing
	Karen Landman	Landscape architecture, planning
	Alan Latham	Social infrastructure, human geography
	Saara Liinamaa	Urban culture and creativity
	George Lipsitz	Insubordinate spaces, race/ethnicity
	Katie MacLeod	Community centres, shared spaces
	Thomas McIlwraith	Space and place, ethnography
	Martha Radice	Urban space, festivals
	Brendan Stewart	Physical design, POPS
	David Trouille	Parks, migrants, sport
	Jonathan Wynn	Festivals, urban culture
Public Institutions		
	Sofya Aptekar	Gentrification, diversity
	Nicole Dalmer	Aging, library technologies
	Mervyn Horgan	Housing, encounters between strangers
	Emma Jackson	Homelessness, belonging, community hubs
	Alan Latham	Social infrastructure, human geography
	Camilla Lewis	Aging, housing, neighbouring
	Saara Liinamaa	Urban culture and creativity
	Katie MacLeod	Community centres, shared spaces
	Hannu Ruonavaara	Housing, neighbouring

Panel	Participant	Focus of Remarks
Ambiguously Public Spaces		
	Mervyn Horgan	Neighbouring, encounters between strangers
	Alan Latham	Social infrastructure, human geography
	Katie MacLeod	Community centres, shared spaces
	Laura McTighe	Porches, ethnicity/race, community making
	Martha Radice	Urban space, festivals
	Brendan Stewart	Physical design, POPS
	Xu Meng	Shopping malls

The literature review was conducted through the research team's knowledge of the subject areas and in dialogue with areas identified by panelists and participants. In addition to peer-reviewed articles and monographs, our conversations and searches also returned a variety of research reports and working papers. The results of the panel conversations and literature review are described in this report and the evidence brief (see Appendix A), which summarizes our findings and discusses policy implications.

This report and related evidence brief were produced by the core research team, Mervyn Horgan, Saara Liinamaa, Thomas McIlwraith, and Katie MacLeod, with important contributions from PhD students, Devan Hunter, Edith Wilson, and Meng Xu, who are also graduate research assistants on the Sociable Cities Project at the University of Guelph.

1. Findings: Public Institutions

Many public institutions provide and maintain accessible and active public spaces. Our public-institutions panel concentrated on two main examples–libraries and community centres–as important sites for social connection and exchange, especially when other forms of social support in other public service domains may be underfunded and/or under-serviced. Panelists emphasized the following key areas: the new demands placed on libraries as social spaces; libraries and community centres as spaces for intergenerational interaction; libraries, community centres, and their surrounding spaces as neighbourhood anchor institutions; the importance of both planned and unintended uses of these spaces for forming social ties; and the importance of nuanced, belonging-centred approaches to understanding issues of access and accessibility; and a discussion of university and college campuses as public spaces.

As public spaces that serve the general public and local communities, libraries and community centres are significant in enabling and enhancing everyday sociable encounters. These public institutions can create intentional spaces for fostering sociability (Latham and Layton 2019). They facilitate interaction across social and cultural differences by bringing together the diverse populations they serve. For example, public libraries are central to the lives of isolated seniors, children and youth, newcomers to the community, and those who are unhoused or precariously housed. As Eric Klinenberg notes, "libraries are the kinds of places where ordinary people with different backgrounds, passions, and interests can take part in a living democratic culture" (2018:

220). Community centres support a community's social and leisure pursuits. They can be municipally or privately operated. These spaces hold social gatherings, educational activities, recreational and leisure activities, and youth programming. Both of these public institutions help foster sociability by orchestrating points of common focus and gathering within safe and (generally) physically accessible spaces that are nimble in responding to the collective needs and interests of their communities (Klinenberg 2018; Latham and Layton 2019).

Libraries and Community Centres as Spaces of Sociability

Libraries are not solely places to borrow and read books. They are places that aid in building community and contribute to community resilience (Audunson et al. 2019; Vårheim 2017). Libraries are important to immigrants, older adults, those in search of work, youth, and future entrepreneurs because they offer these groups opportunities to meet and offer benefits related to activities in their lives (Center for an Urban Future 2013). Libraries are one of the last places you can visit without an expectation of payment to enter or to purchase goods or services. This freedom of being in a place without expectation allows people to experience the space as a "public living room," where people can engage in small talk, create social ties, and otherwise just be around others without explicit interaction. Libraries present opportunities for cultivating social capital and increased social inclusion for those of all ages. These spaces act "as hubs of sociocultural connection, with relationships between patrons, library staff, and the surrounding community" (Johnson 2012). Public libraries, for example, are mandated to be accessible to all—culturally, socially, physically, financially, and at times, linguistically. Library and Information Sciences (LIS) scholarship showcases how public libraries help counter social inequities by facilitating access to important informational, technological, and social resources and by bringing people from all walks of life together into a shared space (Audunson et al. 2019; Rodriguez 2019; Vårheim 2017). They also help enhance social ties and build friendship networks (Kathiravelu and Bunnell 2018).

Because of the library's important public mandate, questions and concerns around library access and accessibility have many layers (Burke 2009; Morris 2013; Playforth 2004; Provence 2019, 2020; Wentz et al. 2015). Libraries provide access to content, to technology, to information and education, but accessibility as a principle is meant to ensure the fullest use of any resource for the greatest number of people regardless of social location. Accessibility for persons living with disabilities, for example, can involve access to information, social interactions, and physical space. In this regard, libraries must consider accessibility in terms of physical characteristics that facilitate equitable movement through the space; social accessibility such as opportunities for exchange and belonging (programing, common areas); and information accessibility, such as web accessibility and assistive technology (alternate formats, e-readers, and other tools) that people use to access and interact with information. As Booth (2012) explains, widely identified barriers to library accessibility include lack of knowledge about accessibility best practices and standards; gaps in spaces and services, such as an appropriate range of assistive and adaptive technology tools, and/or patrons may lack awareness of accessibility options; difficulty with mobile devices and e-books, digital rights management, design and information architecture; inaccessible library

websites, especially for patrons who use assistive or adaptive technologies; inaccessible online content (e-books, e-journals) or issues with search and discovery tools via library interfaces.

Like libraries, community centres are neighbourhood anchor institutions. Community members see these spaces as meaningful as they provide a sense of belonging and facilitate social interaction through activities (Colistra et al. 2017). Historically "the creation of community centers was generally accepted as an attempt to create public spaces in which community members could get involved in governance and influence the course of community affairs" (Glover 2004: 64). Community centres, and the spaces that surround them (like community gardens and farmers' markets), can positively impact community engagement; however, they can also become a source of conflict. For example, a Canadian study found that in a seniors' centre that operated with a membership model (where members and participants have a say in what happens in the space), members felt they had little control over the activities offered at the centre. As a result, seniors felt they were being treated more as clients by the staff, rather than members with decision-making capacity (Gallant and Hutchinson 2016). Likewise, as community centres move toward corporate models, decision-making processes for spaces explicitly designed for leisure and to improve community life can lead to social inequalities and social hierarchies (Glover 2004). Despite these tensions, community centres can foster sociability by offering diverse activities to diverse groups in an accessible environment. Collective use very often brings potential conflicts, but care and attention within the decision-making and community-development processes can support productive and respectful dialogue and disagreement.

In some Canadian provinces, community centres tend to be recreation and leisure centres, while in other provinces like Québec, community centres offer a wider range of services. The divide between publicly and privately owned community centres began in the twentieth century. At this time, centres became more corporate and professionalized, and began to appear more institutional to community members (Box 1998; Glover 2004; Slack 1999). Notably, community centres that engage mainly in leisure and recreation activities provide more than physical well-being for individuals. Colistra et al. (2017) found that participation in leisure activities at community centres provided participants with increased social capital, emotional support, and access to information and resources. In some centres, programs support community needs through, for example, recreation for seniors (Keyani et al. 2005; Myerhoff 1980), education and training, social gatherings, addiction recovery programming (Haberle et al. 2014), and youth programming. Centres that are community-run rely heavily on volunteers, funding, and membership to sustain their programming.

Social infrastructure for an aging population

Libraries and community centres are key destinations for older adults to meet others, access air-conditioning, and form and maintain connections with a community. Aging adults are at an increased risk of social isolation and loneliness (Dalmer et al. 2020; Wu 2020). Those aged sixty-five years and older are more likely to experience social isolation and live alone (Klinenberg 2018). These spaces hold activities such as book clubs, art clubs, cooking classes, and knitting circles, which are popular with older adults. As physical spaces, libraries are important to the social lives and identity of older adults. This "third place" becomes central in the lives of people without

access to a "second place," such as a workplace (Dalmer et al. 2020; see also Oldenburg 1999). In other words, libraries provide a space for healthy aging and facilitate aging in place (Buffel et al. 2021). Relationships with library staff are important for everyday conversations that serve as a regular check-in. Further, libraries are one of the places that older adults interact with those of other generations (Klinenberg 2018).

Social activities for older adults in community centres, such as dance groups, promote social engagement and relationship building between members (Keyani et al. 2005). As spaces of sociability, community centres and seniors' centres can help seniors interact and mobilize. Two prominent models for considering interactions and mobilization include (1) citizen power, and (2) consumer focus models (Cusack 1994; Gallant and Hutchinson 2016). As Gallant and Hutchinson note, "Within community centers, one means of offering people opportunities to exercise power is through establishing *membership*"; membership in this context can be defined as "citizenship at the scale of a local community organization" (2016, 360). The likelihood of seniors taking on leadership roles at the community centres is closely related to leaders' beliefs in the skills and potential of seniors; older adults are more likely to become active participants and leaders if they are not oriented to as clients requiring services (Cusack 1994). Community centres can helpfully blur distinctions between service provider and patron; older adults can volunteer their time and skills to support the community, and, at the same time, draw on the services and supports on offer (Myerhoff 1980; Gallant and Hutchinson 2016).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic increased social isolation and loneliness among older adults. This was compounded by limited access to or the closure of public spaces like community centres, seniors' centres, and libraries (Dalmer and Mitrovica 2022; Wu 2020). During the pandemic, the key social function of the library was highlighted by its closure. The inaccessibility of these spaces meant that some older adults lost their only social connections. While some people viewed reading as a form of social connection during the pandemic, the library operating as a virtual space due to the pandemic "had the potential to exacerbate feelings of social disconnection among older patrons" (Dalmer and Mitrovica 2022, 7). With COVID-19, community centres transitioned to providing emergency food packages, mainly to older members. Age friendly recovery strategies in post-COVID urban settings will thus be an important step moving forward, as we need to rethink "the kind of urban infrastructure needed to support vulnerable populations in times of crisis" (Buffel et al. 2021, 14). Following COVID, some of these community spaces are closing, which can have an adverse impact on older populations who depend on such spaces for visiting with friends and acquaintances and, more generally, to be in social spaces with others. This recovery period will be especially pertinent for older people as the pandemic has had an adverse impact on their ability to sustain social networks (Buffel et al. 2021, 14).

Programming for children and youth

Libraries often segregate space according to users, reserving certain spaces for children, teenagers, and seniors (Aptekar 2019b; Iveson and Fincher 2011). They are also regularly frequented by babies and toddlers accompanied by their caregivers. Thus, with the frequency of use and the availability of child-specific programming, libraries are important social spaces for people providing care to children (Klinenberg 2018). Library programming for young children aims to support early childhood literacy; however, other social benefits for both children and caregivers are connected to library visits, including relationship building and social support (Stooke and McKenzie 2009). Importantly, during programming, babies and children can interact with individuals who are not their caregivers. These programs encourage informal social activity, model school-based expectations for children, and foster literacy (McKenzie and Stooke 2007).

Figure 2 Child at a library. Photo by Keren Fedida on Unsplash.

Likewise, even if youth are not the primary users of libraries, libraries provide safe spaces for youth; recent library planning and programming recognizes the advantages of becoming more attractive to this age group because of the social connections and resources libraries can offer. For example, youth—known to be avid users of digital media—can benefit from outreach programs that incorporate information and digital media literacies (Adeyemon 2009; Tripp 2011). Libraries can foster youth independence, providing a sense of responsibility through access to a library card and borrowing privileges. Further, libraries can offer a place of refuge after school (Klinenberg 2018). Costello et al. (2001) recommend increasing collaborations and partnerships between libraries and youth-serving organizations (such as Boys and Girls Clubs, Scouts, park districts, art centres, faith-based youth programs). With reduced operating budgets, libraries are increasingly under pressure to consider alternative forms of use and resource sharing (Rasmussen 2016). Expanding uses and users could be key to future stability; accordingly, public libraries are likely to develop more opportunities for young people. Similarly, community centres offer accessible, safe, and recreational spaces for youth. Youth centres, like seniors' centres, are able to offer more targeted programming, learning, and social activities for young people (Aspiazu et al. 1998; Ginwright and Cammarota 2007).

Intergenerational use

Libraries are spaces that are "trusted, safe and constructive," allowing people of all ages to make connections (Johnson 2012: 61). Libraries and community centres provide opportunities for non-familial intergenerational contacts (Lee, Jarrott, and Juckett 2020). They offer two main types of intergenerational contact: (1) improvised, and (2) programmatic. In the first, improvised intergenerational contact typically includes the following: an inclusive rather than "add-on" model of infrastructural design (Hoyer 2013; Klinenberg 2018; Konstantoni 2022); the co-location of public institutions such as libraries and community centres (Melville and Bernard 2011; Yarker 2021); the creation of opportunities for relaxed "encounters with otherness," where diversity is recognized but not dwelled upon (Williamson 2020); and, the continued physical presence of information and service providers who maintain inclusivity within the space

Figure 3 Public Chess Game. Photo by Tanner Mardis on Unsplash.

(IFLA 2022; Stričević 2012). Second, intergenerational programming in these public institutions is shaped by shared goals and a collaborative approach (Veelken 2000; Jarrott, Stremmel, and Naar 2019) and includes, for example, common interests, which operate as "vehicles for interaction, such as the intergenerational dance program at the Toronto Library (Ng 2020: 47); smaller and more intimate group settings, such as one-on-one or small group reading circles ((Jarrott 2019; Steward and McDevitt 2021); the presence of facilitators to co-construct the space (Ng 2020); and, centring reciprocity and mutual benefit to all participants rather than one particular age/generational group (Sanchez et al. 2020).

Libraries also have differing temporalities that impact intergenerational mixing. There are times of day when waves of children are present, such as after school, and times when libraries are mainly occupied by older adults. Older adults who use the library during times when children are present have a greater opportunity for intergenerational interactions. Likewise, community centres and public schools that act as community hubs can become places where intergenerational programming and interaction occurs. However, in some spaces, particularly in rural areas, the demolition and/or institutionalization of community hubs can have a detrimental effect on intergenerational interactions (Villa and Knutas 2020; Kvalsund 2019; MacLeod 2022).

In terms of intergenerational programming in libraries and community centres, research suggests that the following approaches have more limited social benefits: large group sizes that prevent meaningful interaction and which may overwhelm older adult populations (Steward and McDevitt 2021); "learning from" approaches, where one generation provides service and/or cares for another through traditional age/generational roles, such as younger individuals teaching older adults how to use technology or information services (Lee, Jarrott, and Juckett

2020; Spiteri 2016); exhibition programming that involves one age/generational group showcasing their interests, hobbies, or experiences for another (Bouderbane and Zahi 2012; Parent 2012); and, public programming that is centred on familial relationships, for example, a mother-daughter book club (Aldana 2012). These types of intergenerational programs in libraries and community centres are also limited in their capacity to culturally disrupt patterns of age/generational segregation prevalent in the wider society, where generational boundaries are broadly accepted and intergenerational contact relatively rare.

Diversity and belonging

Libraries and community centres are public institutions that facilitate diverse uses, users, and forms of social contact (Kaplan et al. 2020; Klinenberg 2018; Yarker 2019). These institutions emphasize principles of accessibility, diversity, and inclusivity in their core mandates (Hoyer 2013; IFLA 2022; Parent 2012), but the implementation and experience of these guiding principles remains uneven. Scholarship recognizes how these public institutions both cultivate sociable contact across differences *and* can simultaneously perpetuate social structures of inequality that impede belonging, especially for marginalized groups.

A library can operate like "civic glue" (McNulty 2020), an "anchorings space" (Kaplan et al. 2020), and a site for building social capital (Kerka 2003), bringing diverse populations together in a shared space (Williamson 2020). Libraries are key public spaces for diverse groups of citizens who use them as a meeting place, to access citizen-relevant information, as arenas for debate, and as makerspaces (Audunson et al. 2019). Socially marginalized individuals are frequent users of libraries, including those experiencing homelessness, those recently incarcerated, at-risk teenagers, unemployed persons, people with disabilities, and those experiencing violence (Adeyemon 2009; Giesler 2021; Morris 2013; Provence 2020; Westbrook 2015). Libraries are core institutions for many newcomers and provide them with opportunities to learn about the city, develop new networks, and, if needed, practise language skills. Library programming can increase social capital and create social trust for immigrants (Johnson 2012; Vårheim 2011; 2014). What's more,these programs can increase trust between strangers and support newcomers' integration within new communities (Vårheim 2014).

Public library staff struggle to offer services and provide a safe space to library users, especially with limited budgets to address all needs (Aptekar 2019b). Libraries increasingly serve marginalized populations. Consequently the work of librarians intersects with that of social workers, but often without additional support, services, and training (Aptekar 2019b; Provence 2019). "Libraries are key partners for engaging homeless patrons and connecting them with needed information and supports" (Aykanian et al. 2020, 579). People experiencing homelessness, for example, spend time in libraries for daytime shelter and access to washroom facilities. In response to librarians having to provide more and more support to marginalized populations, some public libraries now employ social workers as part of their staff. In 2009, the San Francisco Public Library created the first full-time social worker position in a public library, and others have followed (Provence 2020). Social workers in libraries are able to build relationships with vulnerable patrons, humanize the library space and experience, and equip

other staff to engage in humanizing interactions (Giesler 2021; Provence 2020). However, placing a single social worker in a large flagship library doesn't necessarily remove the burden from librarians or address inadequate funding, especially as smaller branch libraries are less likely to receive these services. This scholarship stresses that we need to develop meaningful and robust support for the public library's contributions to social services; at issue is that libraries are increasingly called upon to paper over shortages within other social service systems but without appropriate funding, resources, or staff.

Community centres, along with other community spaces, such as community gardens and farmers' markets, can be both sites of community belonging and where power inequalities emerge (Aptekar 2015; Gallant and Hutchinson 2016). Social hierarchies and circumstances of gentrification can lead to resistance and conflict between members. Different types of community centre models impact accessibility for community members. Centres that follow a consumer-focused model, for example, will be more corporate and potentially present a financial barrier to membership and access (Gallant and Hutchinson 2016; Glover 2004). Depending on the structure of a community centre and its program, memberships and fees make these spaces less accessible to individuals who are low-income or experiencing homelessness. Conflict can arise

Figure 4 San Francisco Public Library. Photo: Joe Mabel, Wikimedia Commons.

between long-term residents and newcomers in centres where community members have decision-making power.

In a study of a community garden in a diverse and gentrifying neighbourhood in New York City, Aptekar (2015) outlines conflict over culture and resources amongst the diverse group using the garden. Social hierarchies within the garden were reproduced according to the preferences of the "high-end developers and affluent residents." Despite these tensions, residents from diverse backgrounds using the garden were able to form social bonds (Aptekar 2015, 224). Farmers' markets in urban areas are other locations where there is tension between those of different backgrounds and can reinforce existing social and structural inequalities (Aptekar 2019a, 27). In these spaces, there is a reproduction of race and class hierarchies because of inequities in access to the space. Yet alongside these conflicts, "people of different racial and class characteristics shared the space and interacted peacefully, civilly, and often convivially" (Aptekar 2019a, 28).

University and College Campuses

Universities are related but different public institutions in this context. Canada has a large, publicly funded system, but university and college campuses are not comparable public spaces to those of libraries or community centres. Certainly, postsecondary campuses have varied connections and involvements within their wider communities. They offer learning and recreation opportunities (many fee-based) to the wider public such as lectures, workshops, sporting events, and concerts, including activities directed toward children and youth. They generally have well-maintained facilities, such as theatres and gyms, and green spaces.

"The university falls short of what is ideally defined as 'public'" (Guzmán-Valenzuela 2016, 676). Though universities receive significant public funds, this doesn't mean that they prioritize the public good. Opening university campuses to the public can diversify public spaces in cities, especially in contexts where there are significant urban financial and infrastructural obstacles. A case study of Cairo, Egypt shows that general acceptance is not hard to secure, but the success of this approach requires a carefully designed process (Ali and Kim 2020). Our review suggests that college and university campuses could further enhance how campus spaces are used and prioritize their openness to diverse types of non-student learning, activity, and engagement.

When university and college campuses are shared with the public there is opportunity for positive impacts on the urban space they occupy. Campuses can help to revitalize adjacent communities, create additional employment opportunities, enhance ecological services, and provide safe and sociable public gathering places (Ali and Kim 2020; Haar 2011; Hebbert 2018). When there is increased integration between the community and university—the "town and gown"—there is increased opportunity for partnership and engagement (Bruning et al. 2006; King et al. 2017).

2. Findings: Ambiguously Public Spaces

Not all publicly accessible spaces are equally public. Many publicly accessible spaces are not in public hands. Nonetheless, spaces that are in some way publicly accessible can also be significant spaces of sociability. We use the intentionally vague term "ambiguously public spaces" to gather together a variety of spaces that are technically private but that are public facing or are available to the public in some way. Ambiguously public spaces include those transitional or liminal spaces between the private and public realms, such as front porches, front steps, and balconies, which often function as staging grounds for varied practices of neighbouring and types of neighbour relations (Ruonvaara 2022). We also include private-but-public spaces like shopping malls and privately owned public spaces (POPS), which are of increasing interest to municipalities concerned about both the general lack of land available for public use in dense areas and the increased capital cost of acquiring such lands.

Thinking about, planning, researching, and legislating around what we are calling ambiguously public spaces is complex. It is in ambiguously public spaces where issues of public versus private ownership rub up against one another. For many users it matters little whether a particular space

meets a technical legal definition of public or private—what matters more is how it is and/or might be used. Nonetheless, ambiguously public spaces are an increasingly important part of our shared social infrastructure, especially when spaces that are technically private are appropriated for public or semi-public non-commercial uses.

Drawing on an analysis of three large Australian cities, and honing in on issues of access in particular, Dovey and Wood (2015) note that public/private distinctions tend to be more clearly defined in suburban settings and are less clear in denser more central urban areas. Spaces where public and private realms are a little blurred, interstitial spaces or "urban interfaces"; are "the typical ways in which private territories plug into public networks" (1). They show how public/private interfaces are exceptionally complicated to map, but are vitally important spaces.

Ambiguously public spaces challenge merely *technical* definitions of public spaces. Public-private intersections within everyday life demonstrate how we need to attend to different kinds of ambiguously public social spaces; here, rather than focusing traditionally defined *public space*, we instead attend to *spaces of publicness*. This opens up new ways of approaching the transitional, liminal, and private spaces that uphold key features of public use and enjoyment.

At core, these are usable spaces that abut more conventionally understood public spaces; more pointedly, they are also spaces over which municipalities in most jurisdictions have some level of input if not control (at least around zoning and design). "Edges" and "thresholds" are sometimes important to commercial exchange. Significant here is that such transitional or ambiguous zones can provide spaces for people to engage with one another in ways that balance playfulness—the "ludic city" (Stevens 2007)—and a sense of safety and security.

In the expert panels and research review, we sought to capture existing research and ideas about these ambiguous spaces as spaces of sociability. The scholarship on these spaces draws attention to the importance of the informal everyday contacts that they facilitate and demonstrates how they contribute, often in intangible ways, to local community development, sense of place attachment, and community belonging; this evolving research holds promise when it comes to identifying approaches to fostering sociability that offset social isolation and fragmentation.

Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS)

Since their initial emergence in U.S. cities in the 1980s, privately owned public spaces, or POPS, have become more and more prevalent in cities both internationally and here in Canada. The most common kinds of POPS are specially designated permanent spaces, built on private property by developers as part of negotiated public benefit agreements through the planning approvals process.

Strip malls are an interesting example of ambiguously public spaces whose potential as spaces of sociability is overlooked. Some are being reconceptualized and used as a kind of POPS. In inner suburban communities with underused public spaces or a lack of usable public spaces, strip malls are essential to neighbourhood social and economic life. They are locations for small businesses serving specific communities. They are community hubs, islands of sociability in the midst of car-

dependent suburban neighbourhoods (Bain 2013; Chiras and Wann 2003; Farrow and Hess; Keil 2017; Linovsky 2012; Noble 2009; Zhuang 2015; 2019; Zhuang and Chen 2017). There are a number of interesting and instructive POPS initiatives underway in Canada that seek to formalize strip mall POPS as public spaces. These show promise in enhancing spaces of sociability in locales with less usable public space. Here we focus on two ongoing examples: the Corner Commons Project in Toronto's Jane-Finch neighbourhood and the plazaPOPS project in a variety of locations across Toronto's inner suburbs.

In the summers of 2021 and 2022, the Corner Commons project in Toronto's Jane-Finch neighbourhood involved collaborations between the Jane/Finch Centre, Jane Finch Action Against Poverty, Black Creek Community Health Centre, and Perkins & Will (design studio) to transform a parking lot at the Jane-Finch Mall into a public space. As the project website notes, the space was designed and managed by local residents to "provide a much-needed public space in the heart of the Jane-Finch neighbourhood that is neutral, accessible, and inviting to everyone." Especially significant here is that the project foregrounded the fact that neighbourhood residents increasingly face "development and gentrification pressures" and so the creation of this space provides somewhere "to talk about the neighbourhood's past and future, and access key resources and services." Programming at the Corner Commons included artists-in-residence, curated artists' shows, music events, and information sessions on workers' rights.

In a similar vein, the plazaPOPS initiative run in partnership with the University of Guelph, the City of Toronto, local BIAs and community groups, is currently piloting a number of POPS in Toronto's inner suburbs with the express purpose of developing a model that can be used across the City of Toronto. This is a collaborative, community-based initiative designed and run by Professor Brendan Stewart and Daniel Rotsztain (ERA Architects) since 2018. In response to the relative absence of pedestrian-friendly human scale public realm in Toronto's postwar suburbs, and the limited amount of land in public ownership in these areas, the plazaPOPS initiative creates accessible non-commercial gathering spaces within commercial strip-mall plaza parking lots with the explicit goal of developing social infrastructure in support of local social life and local businesses. These installations are envisioned not as a replacement for or instead of the development of new public spaces, but rather a new type of civic commons "that enable communities to learn, celebrate, express collective actions, collaborate and flourish, together" (Evergreen 2017).

Context sensitivity is essential in attending to both the specific interests and concerns of local communities and the great need for public realm enhancement in Toronto's inner suburbs. Intentionally avoiding a one-size-fits-all model, the plazaPOPS team collaboratively develops a partnership-based community-driven process tailored to the specific conditions of the suburban neighbourhoods where these POPS are located. This attention to the suburban public spaces is especially significant given that Toronto's inner suburbs (1) make up the majority of Toronto's land area, (2) are home to larger numbers of recent immigrants, (3) have on average higher social needs, and (4) lower access to social services (Parlette and Cowan 2011). Despite their location on private property, plazaPOPS installations are fully accessible to the public: there is no cost to enter and everyone is welcome.

Part of what makes these kinds of POPS novel is that they involve *public appropriation of privately owned space* for free and accessible public use without users being obliged to engage in any kind of commercial activity to use the space. This is in contrast to the private appropriation of publicly owned space for the expansion of restaurant and café patios across many Canadian municipalities during the pandemic. For example, the City of Toronto's CaféTO program provided business owners the opportunity to develop "outdoor eating areas located on sidewalks" and "expanded temporary outdoor dining space by reallocating the public right-of-way on curb lanes for use by licensed eating or drinking establishments" (City of Toronto). While these patios were welcomed by many, they do involve private encroachment onto publicly owned spaces. PlazaPOPS inverts this through a "modest tactical intervention that minimally impacts or disrupts how the existing system operates . . . employ[ing] a low-cost, low-friction strategy" (Stewart forthcoming) to create new publicly accessible space on private land. Envisioning and designing-in possibilities for public sociability in these private spaces they provides for expanded definitions and more nuance understandings of the possibilities of private space.

Porches, Balconies, and Other Transitional Spaces

Porches and balconies attached to homes and apartments offer public facing but otherwise private spaces where functionalities and interactions are controlled by the property owner. Benches, front steps, and other features located in front of multi-unit buildings function in similar ways. As locations in-between the strict privacy of living spaces and the fully public spaces of the streetscape, porches and balconies are places to mingle and linger. They create the potential for interactions within neighbourhoods and along streetscapes with passersby who are using sidewalks and boulevards. These are liminal spaces, private in fact, but public in exposure. They provide users with sheltered spaces for sociability.

Porches and balconies are adaptable spaces (Peters and Masoudinejad 2022). They are used for impromptu music concerts and places to host small neighbourhood gatherings. With balconies specifically, the vibrancy of the street takes on a vertical orientation and promotes direct contact between people who may otherwise live at a distance. In some contexts, as Smektała, and Baborska-Narożny (2022:135) explain, "balconies even appear as a continuation of the public realm assembling strangers living nearby to experience some common events, but in formally private spaces." Porches and balconies are places from which parents watch the activities of children. Their use comes with rules, of course, such as expectations about what is stored on them, what activities can occur within their confines (like the permissibility of smoking), and who can use them (see Smektała, and Baborska-Narożny 2022).

As places "where people actually sit and talk" (McTighe and Haywood 2018:29), the porch is not just a metaphor or neighborhood planning ideal. For New Orleans' Women With a Vision (WWV), porches are places of resilience, resistance, and knowledge production post-Katrina. These spaces are at risk of gentrification, and WWV's intentional use and occupation of front porches is part of deliberate "strategies for ending violence against black women" (48) and ensuring that such spaces endure in the face of rapid urban change.

Beyond resisting inequitable urban change, porches promote or invoke nostalgia for neighbourhoods of bygone eras. Indeed, Brown, Burton, and Sweaney (1998) recognize the porch

as a symbol of an era in which cars were uncommon, walking was encouraged, and wealth was devoted to a spacious home on a large lot. This research identifies the porch as a place for contact with neighbours as well as a place for relaxing and exchanging news, activities that have been significant at both the beginning and end of the twentieth century (1998, 588). Yet housing developments are sometimes sold as "front-porch communities" as both an attempt to create community through design and, more cynically, to impose a feeling of nostalgia on otherwise generic construction projects (e.g, Rice Development Corp's Westlinks project in Port Elgin, Ontario).

Alleyways offer similar liminal qualities, often removed from the busiest traffic and used regularly by those who access properties along them. Access is not, strictly speaking, limited despite serving as extensions of nearby dwelling spaces. Like porches and balconies, alleys provide opportunities for unexpected encounters even though the most common encounters are likely to be with area residents and between friends and acquaintants. This sort of micro-scale placemaking is more likely to occur in neighbourhoods with a density that encourages street-level interactions between neighbours in houses with balconies, porches, decks, or patios (Tamura 2020:185-187). Further, alleys and laneways are becoming more important as potential sites for compact housing. More generally, as Moreau (2022) argues, such spaces "are undervalued urban features that sum to vast amounts of land in areas deprived of public space" and can be "reappropriated for social activities."

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the significance of these spaces—for example, "porch placemaking" (Tamura 2020)–and may have heightened their use, as dwellers were reluctant to or prohibited from socializing with strangers in public and private spaces. Porch visits and rituals that expressed support for health care workers, such as the banging of pots and pans on sidewalks at a prescribed hour, reinforced practices of neighbouring even when distancing was demanded and indoor spaces were less likely to be shared (e.g., Bassetti 2020). Porches, sidewalks, balconies, and alleys together constitute extensions of living spaces and blur the line between private and public in ways that promote encounters, particularly when opportunities to visit in private are impractical or undesirable.

Shopping Malls as Social Infrastructure

Shopping malls are important nodes for urban sociability. While the intensification of online shopping has impacted in-person shopping, malls have been evolving and expanding across North America (Corroto and Richardson 2019; Sorkin 1992; Zukin 1998), Europe (Allen 2006; Lowe 2000; Pospěch 2016), Latin America (Beiró et al. 2018; Campo 2016; Miller 2014), Africa (Abaza, 2001; Eduful and Eduful 2021; Fournet-Guérin 2021), Oceania (Tyndall 2010; Voyce 2006), and Asia (Gaubatz 2008; Jewell 2016; Thiollet and Assaf 2021; Wang 2019; Wu and Lo 2018). A substantial amount of research demonstrates the varied role of shopping malls and their social and civic function as physically and publicly accessible spaces of encounter. For example, in Aktobe, Kazakhstan, young migrant women use the mall as a dating venue for seeking romantic partners and developing social intimacy (Jäger 2016). In Hangzhou, China, newly constructed

malls provide neutral social grounds for people from various backgrounds to cultivate positive tolerance and public trust (Sahito et al. 2020). In Canada, the lengthy and frigid winters have turned enclosed malls into ideal congregation points for local communal life (Manzo 2005), with the West Edmonton Mall as a well-known example (Goss 1993; Hopkins 1990; Shields 1989, 1992, 1994).

A shopping mall is more than a site for the consumption of goods. Malls present key spaces of sociability, and this does not necessarily involved shopping. Some researchers adopt a relational lens to approach mall sociability; this sort of framework emphasizes that goods are communicative, consumption is a social practice, and malls are spaces that shape and reconstitute people's relationships (Miller et al. 1998; see also of Bourdieu 2002 and Douglas and Isherwood 1996). From such a perspective, malls

Figure 5 Starfield COEX Mall, Seoul. Photo by. Sung Jin Cho on Unsplash.

provide consumption-based affordances of sociability by presenting various goods and services around which people forge and contest identities (Holbrook and Jackson 1996; Jackson 1999). This makes shopping a social process during which unacquainted people cultivate transient forms of solidarity (Aceska and Heer 2019; Shield 1992; Wise 2011). Beyond functioning as merely "marketplace icons" where sociability is wedded to retail consumption (Warnaby and Medway 2018), malls can be important social spaces for non-shoppers (Stillerman and Salcedo 2012). This is especially evident for teenagers (Pyyry 2016; Vanderbeck and Johnson 2000), seniors (Lewis 1990; White et al. 2015), racially marginalized urban dwellers (Houssay-Holzschuch and Teppo 2009; Zhuang 2021), and financially disadvantaged groups (Heer 2017). This contrasts with earlier work that treats malls solely as non-places (Augé 2008), consumption spaces or exclusive enclaves (Davis 1992). Malls are not simply indicators of the decline of public spaces (Crawford 1992), rather they are spaces that afford various modes of sociability.

Responding to the emerging asocial society, should involve investigating the potential of malls as spaces of sociability (Koch and Latham 2012). Understand and promote the sociable affordances that malls offer. The pandemic-accelerated demise of malls may run the risk of conveying a misleading impression that malls no longer matter to our social life (Finlay et al. 2019); on the contrary, diminished social infrastructure may deprive urban dwellers of accessible opportunities to participate in collective life (Klinenberg 2018). For example, a local demonstration triggered by the proposed closure of Morningside Mall in Scarborough, Ontario, underscores the prominence of malls as *de facto* social spaces for communities in Canada (Parlette and Cowen 2011). Against such a backdrop, some of Canada's mall owners have initiated projects to redesign

malls as more adaptive spaces (Patterson 2018), adding non-retail amenities (Patterson 2019), and collaborating with different stakeholders to create a more inclusive environment for socially marginalized individuals and groups (Ahmed et al. 2017). Returning to the mall vision articulated by Victor Gruen (1960: 24), the pioneering architect of this contemporary spatial form, may be beneficial for leveraging the social value of malls in these re-malling practices: "if the shopping center becomes a place that not only provides suburbanites with their physical living requirements but simultaneously serves their civic, cultural and social community needs, it will make a most significant contribution to the enrichment of our lives."

3. Findings: Public Realm

Prompted by increasing social diversity and global mobility, recent social scientific research is especially attentive to the role of sociability within our increasingly heterogeneous and dense cities, with more focus on public spaces (Amin 2013; Anderson 2011; Horgan 2020), accessibility, and belonging across social difference (Back and Sinha 2016; Nowicka and Vertovec 2014; Valentine 2010; Wise and Velayutham 2008), recognizing the value of shared public leisure and festival spaces for supporting public life and interactions (Delgado 2016; Horgan et al. 2020; Liinamaa et al. 2021; Radice 2021; Wynn 2015). In addition, architects and urban planners identify and map the physical elements of the public realm, such as street furniture and public art, that can make such spaces well suited for positive social encounters between strangers (Wood et al. 2010; Zakariya et al. 2016; Zebracki and Bekker 2018).

Figure 6 Nathan Phillips Square, Toronto. Photo: S A on Pexels.

The public realm panels explored the social and physical elements of the public realm that facilitate sociable encounters. Participants discussed how sociability is cultivated in different spaces, from sidewalks and parks to public leisure and festival spaces. Throughout this report we emphasize the importance of various kinds of public spaces as essential parts of our social infrastructure. The place of service-based and programmed spaces like libraries and community centres in providing social infrastructure is more immediately evident. In this section, we consider the place of ordinary free and accessible public spaces, from parks to outdoor ice rinks, from sidewalks to parkettes, as essential parts of social infrastructure. Many such spaces are generally so integrated into the round of everyday life in built-up areas that we may take them for granted. Some may even think it somewhat frivolous to take them seriously as something more than simply functional spaces. Social scientists, and especially sociologists of

everyday life, have long been interested in the kinds of ordinary public spaces that are often overlooked, or that many people may not think matter all that much. Earlier studies of the social life of ordinary public spaces have shown such spaces to be characterized by deceptively complex social dynamics (Anderson 2011; Duneier 1999; Goffman 1963; 1971). What at first glance may appear to be mundane largely meaningless parts of the public realm, through careful study, are shown to be central to urban collective life. Parks and rinks, for example, are generally talked about in terms of leisure and recreation. We approach such public spaces as staging grounds for *social activity*. Public spaces are simultaneously characterized by sociability and conflict, by easy fleeting interaction and by divergent expectations and uses.

Spatial Planning Processes: Consultation, Co-production & Cultivating Co-presence

Across Canada there are provincially and municipally mandated process for public participation in spatial planning. While these formal and legislatively necessary processes provide ordinary citizens and users of public spaces with opportunities for giving input into shaping new or redesigned public spaces, the extent to which ordinary people are involved in the proposal, design, and development of public spaces is patchy and, to most, not at all clear. Chevalier (2021) suggests that we should distinguish between "participation in planning" and "participatory planning." In addressing changes to the public participation process in the Netherlands, Chevalier notes that the distinction is significant, as participation in planning can involve responsibilities without accompanying rights, while participatory planning involves *both* rights and responsibilities. Participatory planning involves the active and meaningful participation of ordinary people making decisions about public spaces. This we can think of as similar to the shift from a top-down model of *consultation* to a deeply collaborative model of *co-production*. The vertical model of consultation engages with ordinary people, but its hierarchical structure risks doing so in tokenistic or surface-level ways. The horizontal, collaborative model of co-production goes beyond mere consultation or engagement, and it actively seeks not only to solicit input from ordinary people, but also to support involvement at all levels, from brainstorming and conceptualization through to design, construction, and management.

While complex, instituting and enabling co-production processes provides for meaningful and sustained involvement by ordinary people. Co-production can always be *citizen-initiated.* This makes it distinct from the existing approaches used by most governments. In their analysis of co-production processes initiated by social movements in different parts of the world, Watson (2014) notes that "the nature of state–society engagement is significantly different from either the standard and limited approaches to participation adopted by many governments world-wide, or the far more open and democratic approaches introduced through collaborative and communicative planning ideas." Such processes are explicitly and unashamedly aimed at being transformative (Albrechts 2013). Citizen-initiated processes gather people to discuss ideas of collective goods.

Enhancing, facilitating, and promoting wide and varied involvements of ordinary people, especially historically marginalized and equity deserving groups, is essential to creating just and inclusive public spaces and municipally programmed spaces. For example, in Scotland in October 2022, Glasgow City Councillor Holly Bruce proposed a "Feminist City" motion, stating that it is

"fundamental that women are central to all aspects of planning, public realm design, policy development and budgets," so that the specific safety and mobility concerns of women are put at the centre of the creation and maintenance of public spaces with the express purpose of enhancing safety and inclusivity (Brown 2022). Such an approach has been adopted with some success in Austria (Vienna) and Spain (Barcelona). While centring women's experiences and needs, the aspirations of feminist urban planning are not only about women, but also about expanded accessibility for the public and with the provision of free and/or deeply affordable services (Kern 2019).

Related to this, urban anthropologist, Dean Saitta (2014) argues that "casting widely across cultures, histories, and disciplines for planning concepts and precedents is essential if we desire a comprehensive agenda for dealing with the many urban challenges that currently bedevil us." Saitta advocates for taking seriously the burgeoning movement towards *intercultural urbanism*, an "interdisciplinary perspective on city planning and design that investigates the relationship between cultural diversity and built form. It seeks to identify what people of different cultural backgrounds value in the built environment, as well as the qualities of place that resonate with people of *all* cultural backgrounds."

Masterplans and architectural drawings often look appealing, holding a wow factor that can woo politicians and policy makers through snappy visuals. Our position is that we must attend to the *experiential qualities* of public spaces: a place may look great but may be empty or underused. Or a space may be dominated by particular uses and users while being unsafe, exclusive, or unwelcoming to others. Ugly spaces are sometimes used, useful and/or use-filled. Whether ugly or beautiful, if a place is not peopled, then sociability is impossible. In what follows we address the question of how to develop, enhance, and support public spaces of sociability.

Cosmopolitan Canopies, Conviviality, and Conflict

Over the last decade or so, social scientists have increasingly focused on the lived experiences of shared public spaces in dense multicultural environments. This has been dubbed the "convivial turn" (Wise and Noble 2016; Lapina 2016; Neal et al. 2013). Scholars use the closely connected terms "conviviality" and "sociability" to study the ways that people who are physically proximate but socially distant get along (Gilroy 2005), with conviviality variously viewed as a set of practices (Noble 2009), a process (Gilroy 2005), and a policy ideal (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014). Simultaneously, scholars show how sociability and conflict co-exist in public spaces, public institutions, and local neighbourhoods (Back and Sinha 2016; Karner and Parker 2011), pointing in particular to the need to understand how sociability may be inflected with inequality, privilege, and disadvantage (Ahmed 2012; Amin 2013; Liinamaa et al 2021; Valentine 2008; Wise and Velayutham 2014).

Recent studies of interactions between strangers in public spaces centred on race, for example, show the importance of mundane interactions in mitigating against stereotyping and potentially, in part, undoing the lasting damage of racial segregation and the more general separation of various racial and ethnic communities from one another in many cities (Anderson 2004; 2011; 2015; 2022). Across studies examining interracial interaction in the US, Anderson shows how the

relative absence of ordinary, everyday, routine interracial social contact, results in interpersonal perception being shaped by pervasive stereotypes rather than by actual experience. This generates conditions that further mutual estrangement, conditions especially consequential for how racialized minorities experience public spaces. In particular, Anderson notes that African Americans in, what he calls, "white space" report a heightened awareness of and sensitivity to the racial makeup of people present within a given space. For many African Americans, awareness of pervasive stereotyping—what Anderson calls the "iconic ghetto"—plays a central role in "stigmatizing black people as they navigate the white space" (2015, 20). Conversely, for white people "the same settings are generally regarded as unremarkable, or as normal, taken-for-granted reflections of civil society . . . white people usually avoid black space, black people are required to navigate the white space as a condition of their existence" (2015, 10, 11).

Some, but not all, public spaces are characterized by mutual suspicion, wariness, or fear. Based on decades-long research in the US, Anderson observes that "racially mixed urban space . . . exists as a diverse island of civility located in a virtual sea of racial segregation" (2015, 11). The best kinds of spaces of generally unencumbered interracial interaction are characterized by sociability, and Anderson suggests that the willful cultivation of such spaces—the "cosmopolitan canopy" (2004; 2011)—is essential to overcoming and repairing racial divides. Especially significant here are "heterogeneous and densely populated bounded public spaces within cities that offer respite from this wariness, settings where a diversity of people can feel comfortable enough to relax their guard and go about their business more casually . . . [where] people are encouraged to treat others with a certain level

![Figure 7 Beasley Skatepark, Hamilton. Photo by Dave Ghent (with permission).]

Figure 7 Beasley Skatepark, Hamilton. Photo by Dave Ghent (with permission).

of civility" (15). Here, the *canopy* is a carefully chosen metaphor, providing shelter from surrounding environments of suspicion, but with open and porous boundaries where people freely come and go and mix and mingle. In a study of one such "cosmopolitan canopy," the Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia, what he calls a "quasi-public space," Anderson finds that "within this canopy are smaller ones or even spontaneous canopies, where instantaneous communities of diverse strangers emerge and materialize . . . relax and feel relatively secure . . . strangers may approach one another to talk, to laugh, to joke, or to share a story here and there. Their trusting attitudes can be infectious, even spreading feelings of community across racial and ethnic lines" (2004, 15,16).

Art, Festivals, and Protest

Art and culture can enliven public spaces and encourage a range of interactions amongst strangers by creating opportunities to gather and mingle through a collective point of focus, such as a performance or an outdoor exhibition. Art and culture planning and programing in public spaces creates opportunities for interaction, contemplation, participation, and education (Cartiere and Tan 2021; Cartiere and Zebracki 2016; Evans 2001; Lacy 1995). These characteristics are central to art and culture's contributions to sociable encounters in public spaces. As Radice and Boudreault-Fournier (2017, 4) explain:

> Artworks in public space have the potential to change the ways in which members of the public experience their cities. Artworks that fit into the interstices of the city – the parking lots or alleyways, the gaps between buildings – open up these spaces for new explorations. Artworks that appropriate central urban places, like main squares or monuments, can reframe or subvert their dominant meanings. Art can reclaim the streets.

There are many types of activities that fall under this domain, including outdoor festivals, exhibitions, performances, and other culture-based events. These sorts of events are usually carefully planned and programmed, but there are also many spontaneous and improvisational examples. Some activities in this domain have a commercial component (e.g. local artists and artisans selling works) or fee barriers, and there is considerable variation in how such events are staged in public spaces. Most receive funding from municipalities but are organized by community or non-profit groups, and may also include different levels of local or corporate sponsorship. A working definition of public culture includes aspects of the following; public accessibility or visibility; relevant or interesting to diverse participants and audiences; supports placemaking in public; and, has some amount of public funding (Cartiere and Willis 2008).

The critical literature on how art and culture is put to use in public space is especially well developed, and emphasizes the careful attention required in terms of process, locality, participation, and realization. Art and culture are complex agents within broader concerns about betterment and gentrification; they can become facilitators of urban displacement for lower income residents and produce vibrant critiques of such processes or offer alternative visions of urban renewal (Deutsche 1996; Matthews 2010; Wright and Herman 2018). There is now more attention given to how ideas and ideals around art and culture facilitated inclusion are being put into practice and evaluated within municipal art and culture plans (Ashley et al. 2022; Loh et al. 2022). How audiences actually engage with public art and the role of public art in producing socially inclusive public spaces is complicated and not often well studied in the social sciences (Radice 2018; Zebracki 2013; Zebracki and De Bekker 2018).

Festivals and carnivals

Festivals can be wide ranging in their locations, activities, and offerings; they can be large destination events with significant corporate sponsorship or they can be small-scale local initiatives with few resources. Though festivals and carnivals have long roots in socio-cultural rituals and beliefs systems, many contemporary festivals are noted for mediating cultural

globalization, while "also communicating something meaningful about identity, community, locality and belonging (Bennett, Taylor and Woodward 2014, 1). Festivalization is now an identified practice and urban policy approach to enlivening urban spaces (Wynn 2015). Festivals are often celebrated for their contributions to urban branding and consumption (Evans 2001; Zukin 1995), but here we emphasize their role in animating public spaces via a convivial collective orientation. This happens through a combination of features, including supporting and recognizing cultural expressions and diversity, the quality of physical and spatial dynamics of the location, and the effective transformation of the everyday into a space of play and enjoyment (Wynn 2015). There is much to be learned, for example, from the complex relationships, creativity, and orchestration of carnival culture (Gough 2017; Radice 2022). The risks and implications of festivals and carnivals, especially "mega-events," is well documented, especially for historically marginalized groups, including those who may be subjected to displacement or cultural appropriation by the carnival or festival in question. To better facilitate possible social benefits, care and attention must be devoted to understanding the organizational dynamics, relationships, histories, and impacts within the specific context and community (Booth 2015; Gold and Gold 2005; Jones 2021).

Public art and social practice art

There are a number of socially rooted contemporary art practices (new genre public art; community art; social practice art; performance art) that have actively engaged with public spaces and questions of locality, conflict, and togetherness. These wide ranging, often interdisciplinary practices, make social exchange central to the artistic process, with projects that centre on processes such as dialogue, collaboration, or participation (Lacy 1995; Bishop 2012; Kester 2004; Pinder 2008; Thompson 2012). These sorts of projects tend to transform the traditional divide between artist and audience to one of artist-facilitator and participant-artist, and often involve staging encounters in public spaces or in public institutions. The research on these practices emphasizes the importance of socially rooted practices for bringing together temporary or provisional communities centred on collective artistic praxis (Kwon 2004). These forms of urban social and aesthetic experimentation raise questions about how we know and understand the city, suggesting alternatives to the status quo in thoughtful but not uncomplicated ways (Liinamaa 2014; Loftus 2012; Sachs Olsen 2018). There is considerable interest in the transformative possibilities, for example, of improvisational practices for re-imagining publicness, identity, and belonging (Caines and Heble 2015). As Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz (2013) demonstrate, the improvisational strategies of jazz music and performance were inseparable from the wider context of Black civil rights, social change, and political activism.

Whereas the above literature emphasizes the significance of art that centres foremost on social exchange, more traditional (static) forms of public art such as sculpture, murals as well as monuments and statues have a place in this discussion as well. These forms can encourage amicable co-presence and contemplation in public spaces, but how or if this takes shape depends on many factors, including the design of the space, its aesthetic effectiveness, as well as the specific cultural and historical contexts of neighbourhoods, and the responsiveness of the work to its wider locality (Cartiere and Willis 2008; Sharp et al. 2005). Some destination public art

works, such as Chicago's "bean" (Annish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate*, 2004) become iconic gathering points for visitors and residents, but eye-catching street art can also have a similar function (e.g., Graffiti Alley, Toronto).

In this regard, recent examples involving the taking down of statues together with other ways of contesting official historical monuments are worth mentioning here. The actions are also a form of public gathering that produce connections rooted in politics and activism, and they augment public discourse on political and social justice issues (Cox 2021). The wider literature on public art, history, and collective memory emphasizes the importance of allowing space for marginalized histories to be told and for dialogue, even if tense, to take place. To address potential conflicts and exclusion within public art projects and over their characterizations of culture and history, Zitcer and Almanzar (2020) have developed an evaluative rubric for planners and the public to use in decision-making processes for cultural representation in public spaces, and it addresses the process of selecting, funding, siting, and maintaining artworks.

Figure 8 Chicago Bean. Photo by Chait Goli on Pexels.

A number or recent books and articles contain Canadian case studies that examine the rich possibilities and challenges of the expanded terrain of public art and culture's varied contributions (Gérin and McLean 2009; Radice and Boudreault-Fournier 2017; McLean 2009; 2014; 2018; Sloan 2007). The potentially positive contributions align with the literature above. Yet the Canada specific studies note concerns over aspects such as gentrification, commodification, and urban exclusions. Art and cultural activities have been strategically employed to facilitate gentrification, having an impact on affordability for lower income residents. Moreover, these activities have been used to paper-over gaps in social services and other needed supports (e.g., funding a community art project is cheaper than
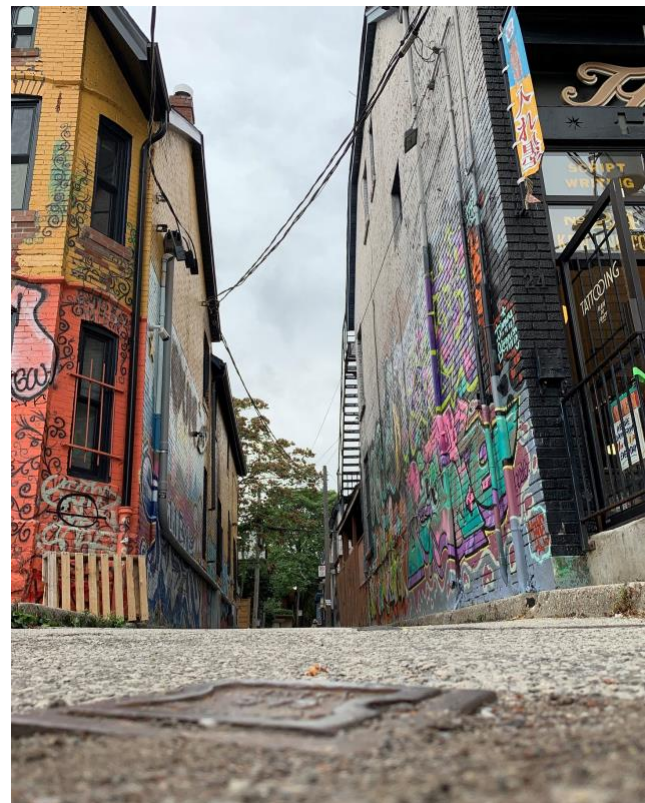

Fig 9 Graffiti Alley, Toronto. Photo by DrBarbPetVet1 on

social service provision); projects and organizations have inserted themselves in communities without proper consultation or consideration; and art has been used to speak *for* instead of *with* communities, especially historically marginalized groups.

DIY culture, protests, and social movements

Related to the above art and cultural activities is the rise of DIY, guerrilla, activist, and other grassroots urban tactics that centre on urban change, community, and placemaking (Hou 2010; Webb 2018). Known under a number of different terms (tactical urbanism, insurgent urbanism, grassroots urbanism), these DIY urban strategies have been termed, "civic-minded and intended toward the functional improvement of lived urban spaces through skillful, playful, and localized actions" (Douglas 2014, 6). For example, urban intervention practices such as guerrilla gardening (planting gardens in underused urban spaces, regardless of land ownership) or yarn bombing (knitted/crocheted street art in unexpected places) have aesthetic and social components. As one yarn bomber describes, "it causes people to stop and talk, and to communicate with one another. You wouldn't normally chat to someone in the street, but it causes a person to stop and

Figures 10 & 11 Yarn Bomb Tree (Herbert Bieser on Pixelbay) & Car Garden, Kensington Market, Toronto (Thomas Lendt on Wikimedia Commons)

talk and have a look, a little touch at something that's otherwise boring, like a bollard. It's a community thing" (quoted in Price 2015). Yarn bombing is referred to as a type of "craftivism" that addresses wider social and environmental questions (McGovern 2019). It is capable of "breaking the blasé" of the city through playfulness and whimsy (Mann 2015, 68).

Yarn bombers form an intergenerational community that includes diverse femininities and "complex histories of empowerment, disempowerment and relationships" (Price 2015, 89). These activities are often unsanctioned, which does test municipal regulation of space (McGovern 2019; Millie 2019; Finn 2014), yet this literature tends to underscore the positive contributions in terms of critical engagement, placemaking, and addressing collective needs and resources. Because of these dimensions, the literature recommends that municipalities find ways to support these more spontaneous and improvised practices, while understanding and addressing the risk and disadvantages—for example, being careful not to celebrate some DIY as urban placemaking while harshly penalizing other arguably DIY activities, for instance informal vending or encampments.

There is good reason to be concerned about the issues these practices raise for democracy and for participation in urban politics and decision making (Douglas 2018; see also Taucer 2017). While keeping in mind the blind spots of DIY platforms in terms of how they can negotiate and reinforce urban differences, there are also "bright spots for more inclusive, reflexive practice" (LaFrombois 2017). There are ways for cities to "harness that enthusiasm and creativity in ways that are safe, equitable, effective and locally appropriate" (Finn 2014, 395).

The above activities underscore the fine line between art and culture, and social movement activism. Social and political activism and protest also brings people together in public space. While not all public protests are rooted in progressive politics or advance social justice platforms, research literature emphasizes that space is not just a container for these activities but facilitates and invites connections across different groups committed to a common cause, and with positive impacts for supporting diversity. Sociability plays a role in solidarity (Glick Schiller 2016). To this end, protest and activism in public spaces express the right to democratic political engagement and the success (even if temporary) of collective and community organizing. Public spaces can be targeted, constrained, or reassessed by authorities because of their potential for political unrest; for example, urban policies toward urban space in North Africa shifted after the Arab Spring (Beier 2018), but they can also help to repair politically fractured cities (Kukoleca et al. 2018).

While there is a history of work attentive to the centrality of public space for democracy, recent research continues to emphasize that cities and urban spaces can be crucial to supporting or impeding networks of actions, depending on factors such as the type and diversity of participants and networks, existing urban policies in place, the approaches to regulation (Beier 2018; Leontidou 2020; Nicholls and Uitermark 2017; Parkinson 2012). Göle argues for a "public space approach" to social movements, one that recognizes how "actors become visible in co-presence with other actors, and they experiment with ways of being and acting together. The basis of society making is the existence of a social relation that binds people together, with common memories and shared places in their everyday lives" (2022, 1). As Tomlinson and Lipsitz (2019) explain, there is a utopian dimension to the creative and improvisational spaces of social justice movements.

Improvisation, Play & the Importance of *Not* Programming: Pick-up Sports

Municipally programmed activities can enliven and activate public spaces, and are often promoted as ways to advance social inclusion. Focus group research with youth in Toronto suburbs, for example, identifies a lack of recreational opportunities in marginalized communities, and in particular neighbourhoods undergoing gentrification (Mendly-Zambo et al 2021). While the immediate response may be to develop programming, this must be approached in broadly participatory ways that not only attend to demographic specifics and the particularities of neighbourhood wants, needs, and desires, but just as importantly, must attend to existing uses and users of neighbourhood public spaces. Too often the introduction of specific programming or booking systems into public spaces, especially parks, that were previously open to free and informal uses, can generate conflict between users. They can also privilege particular demographic groups over others.

An especially powerful example of this comes to us from San Francisco, where the municipality introduced an online fee-based booking system for a soccer field at Mission Playground. Local Black and Hispanic communities had been using this field for decades, with children and adults self-organizing games of pick-up soccer with little evident conflict. As soon as the booking system was introduced, teams began booking the field and driving to it from distant neighbourhoods, wielding their booking forms as evidence that they had the legal right to take over the field. Following a widely publicized [video](#) of an encounter between the long-time free-playing local racialized youth and 'we-booked-and-paid-for-this-field' predominantly white Silicon Valley tech professionals, the municipality abandoned the booking system. In our research through the Sociable Cities project, we have also observed such conflicts in high-use neighbourhood parks, where municipally-run adult recreation leagues are programmed in neighbourhood parks that are used for free and informal play by local children and youth. Conflict arises when participants in municipally-run adult recreation leagues claim ownership over space with little regard for ongoing improvised uses by people who live nearby. Conversely, conflict can also arise when marginalized groups book space for organized activities in more well-to-do areas. For example, in Los Angeles, Latin American working-class men in amateur recreational soccer leagues "regularly play in an upscale Los Angeles neighborhood where they are not always welcome" (Trouille 2021). Programming can be a double-edged sword.

Studies of 'pickup sports' in public spaces are instructive here as they have something to contribute to our understanding of programming. These are informally organized games, often soccer or basketball, where, with no central booking system and no officials, players organize games themselves. Teams are highly fluid, created on the spot by those present, and with rules upheld collectively. Players may come and go throughout the duration of a game—some may be regulars, some may be strangers—with games beginning and ending through mutual agreement. Pickup games are animated by the fact that the entire enterprise requires collective improvisation, often across class, racial, and generational differences, and is based on mutual trust and shared commitment to the game (see DeLand 2012; 2018; 2021).

Pickup sports have a range of benefits that go beyond health and wellness. Pickup sports require people to self-organize games rather than apply to, rely on, or accede to an external authority. The absence of external organization means that people must communicate, discuss, and come to agreement to get, and keep games going. In an open public basketball court, for example, those present govern themselves and settle disputes through dialogue, often across a range of social differences (DeLand 2013). The absence of central authority here is key, as players must work out disputes collaboratively and contribute collectively to the creation of a good time. Here, it is the very absence of formal programming that produces possibilities for sociability. Some municipalities have attempted to facilitate pick up sports using apps to match single players with regularly organized games (see Region of Waterloo's 'Pickup Hub') rather than formalized teams. This may be useful for some, but since it involves fee-for-use and advance planning and booking, it mitigates against free and spontaneous use. As an improvisational cultural form (versus an organized one), learning from pickup sports can help us to understand how to spark some of the magic of improvising together in public spaces with minimal planning.

Everyday users should be able to appropriate public spaces and use them in free, informal, improvised, and playful ways without fear of sanction. The example of pickup sports shows that it is important to leave space for unprogrammed activities.

Intergenerational Use of and Contact in Public Space

A consistent theme across the expert panels was the importance of public spaces for promoting, enhancing, and facilitating intergenerational social encounters beyond family-based interactions in the private realm. Post-industrial Western societies are deeply age segregated (Gory, Ward and Mucatel 1981; Vanderbeck 2007) along institutional, structural, and cultural lines (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2005; 2006). This is especially magnified in the North American context where many spaces and most activities are heavily age segregated (Generations United 2020). This finds its most explicit form in specific institutions that are based on, even dedicated to, the segregation and separation of generations. Think, for example, of the dedicated and separate spaces used by kindergartners and seniors; in most contexts, childcare centres and playgrounds are entirely separate from long-term care facilities and seniors' centres.

Intergenerational public spaces are inclusive, accessible, and frequented by age/generation diverse populations. Policy makers increasingly recognize the importance of age diversity and intergenerational contact within public spaces as essential to the creation of healthy and cohesive societies. New suites of concepts being developed and employed in both academic and policy realms indicate the degree to which intergenerational spaces are being conceptualized and operationalized, including for example, intergenerational contact zones (Thang 2015; Kaplan et al. 2017; Kaplan et al. 2020); intergenerational shared sites (Generations United 2018); intergenerational shared spaces (Melville and Bernard 2011; Melville and Hatton-Yeo 2015); elastic spaces (Hauderowicz and Ly 2020); age-friendly communities and cities (Fitzgerald and Caro 2016; Menec et al. 2015; PHAC 2009; Spina and Menec 2015; WHO 2007); age-inclusive spaces (Hauderowicz and Ly 2020), and "multifunction" spaces (Sundevall and Jansson 2020). While each of these concepts is distinct, a common thread between them is that they centre on bringing age/generationally diverse populations into physical proximity with each other within specific spaces. Because we attach cultural value to highly specialized and age-differentiated spaces, cultivating intergenerational public spaces within the Canadian context requires intentionality and effort.

There are a number of best practices for producing and/or maintaining intergenerational public spaces through inclusive design, architecture, and infrastructure (Hauderowicz and Ly 2020; Klinenberg 2018; Yarker 2019; Williamson 2016). For example, best practice guidelines can provide safety needs across the life course (Agost-Felip, Rua, and Kouidmi 2021; Sundevall and Jansson 2020), develop built space with a "social logic" that encourages intergenerational integration (Kaplan et al. 2020) and makes anti-discrimination, access, and diverse forms of belonging central (OHR 2007). This includes building "multifunctional" spaces (Sundevall and Jannsson 2020) that encourage collaborative intergenerational use, receptiveness to intergenerational use (Lüscher 2011; Yarker 2021) or temporally regulated intergenerational use (Kaplan et al. 2020; Yarker 2019). It can also mean meeting common needs in a single space, such as transit and mobility needs (Honkatukia and Svynarenko 2019), information services

(Klinenberg 2018; Ng 2020), and leisure and physical activities (Sundevall and Jansson 2020); these common spaces support community integration, especially for solo dwellers, and encourage civic participation and social engagement (Konstantoni 2022; PHAC 2009; Portacolone 2015; Sundevall and Jansson 2020).

Interest in the development and maintenance of intergenerational spaces has steadily increased over the last two decades. Global bodies such as the World Health Organization promote age-friendly policies (WHO 2007; WHO 2015), and these increasingly figure in national level agendas and policies (PHAC 2009). While there is no explicit policy on intergenerational public spaces in Canada, the topic is addressed through policies on age-friendly cities, communities, and rural areas (PHAC 2009), as well as in anti-age discrimination, accessibility (OHR 2007), and "aging in place" policies (Dalmer 2019). The age structure of the Canadian population is rapidly inverting where the proportion of adults 65 years and older now represents one in five Canadians (Statistics Canada 2022). Older adults are living longer and staying involved in their communities for longer (Statistics Canada 2022). Therefore, in the current social and political climate, the question of intergenerational public space is largely being explored implicitly in discussions of inclusion, accessibility, and lifestyle and health guidelines for active and healthy aging amongst older adult populations in Canada.

Recent research stresses how intergenerational interactions produce solidarity across generations (Angel and Angel 2017; Kaplan et al. 2017; Skropeta, Coldin, and Sladen 2014); reduces ageism and negative stereotypes about older adult populations (Lee, Jarrott and Juckett 2020); improves cognitive health in aging populations (Cornect-Benoit 2020; Lee, Jarrot, and Juckett 2020); imparts wisdom to younger generations (DeMichelis et al. 2015); and, importantly, combats loneliness and social isolation (Steward and McDevitt 2021). An integrated intergenerational society is one marked by "generational intelligence" characterized by individuals' enhanced capacities to recognize and respond to lived realities of their "age-other" peers (Biggs, Haapala, and Lowenstein 2011).

Intergenerational contact also intersects with intercultural contact. For example, children are often agents for the production of intercultural encounters. Research in Europe has shown the "brokering role" of children in facilitating inter-ethnic contact (Schaeffer 2013; see also Wilson 2013). At playgrounds, for example, adults and caregivers who may not otherwise interact find themselves sharing space. Where children interact, their caregivers are also more likely to interact with one another. Indeed, research conducted in Berlin (Germany) showed that inter-ethnic contact between adult caregivers tapers off once children age out of using playgrounds (Schaeffer 2013).

While some kinds of age segregation may be appropriate for the provision of specific specialized services, when it comes to public spaces, existing literature emphasizes the importance of public spaces that facilitate intergenerational interaction. Fostering intergenerationality boasts benefits to individuals, to specific social groups, and to the broader communities. Multiplying, diversifying, and expanding opportunities for intergenerational spaces of sociability, thus, serves to advance social integration and belonging.

Back to Basics: Washrooms and Basic Human Needs

Social scientific research on public spaces recognizes that there are many dimensions to accessibility and inclusion. As such, a central starting place is to meet basic human requirements: washrooms, water fountains, and resting spots.

In the postwar era, many scholars saw the public realm in North American as being under threat from a range of angles—commericalization, securitization, fear of crime, and beyond (Fyfe & Bannister 1996; Horgan & Kern 2014; Lundberg 2021). The primary concern in the mid- to late-twentieth century was disuse and misuse. Over the last decades, we have faced "a different kind of threat to public space—not one of disuse, but of patterns of *design* and *management* that exclude some people and reduce social and cultural diversity" (Low et al 2005).

The history of built environments in public space is inseparable from the right to access and participation in public life; for example, originally, public washrooms did not exist for women (Cavanagh 2010). The consequences of that history still reverberate; washroom access for women remains inadequate–in the UK, it amounts to about half the number of washrooms available to men (Greed 2019). As Edwards and McKie note, insufficient access to washrooms for women is an "abuse of women's time and . . . discomfort to women's bodies" (1996, 215).

Disability scholars have also remarked that the absence of accessible public washrooms makes public space less inclusive; washroom access supports belonging, care, and dignity (Boge, Callewaert, and Petersen 2019; Kitchin and Law 2001; Mathews, Marshall, and Wilkinson 2022). Older adults also experience public washrooms as a key factor in community accessibility (Engel et al. 2016; Woolrych et al. 2021; Nelson and Rosenburg 2022; Novek and Menec 2014). Further, a shortage of public washrooms also impacts older adults' perceptions of safety in the community (De Donder et al. 2013).

Recent research on public washrooms centre trans people in public space, and, increasingly, political debate surrounds their access to washrooms of their choice (Bender-Baird 2016; Blumell et al. 2019; Callahan and Zukowski 2019; Davis 2018; DeGagne 2021; Dubin et al. 2021; Lerner 2021). The politically charged, high profile public battles against gender-neutral washrooms highlights how public space is "where power is enacted" (Bender-Baird 2016, 983). Sex-segregated bathrooms, in particular, are a "manifestation of institutionalized gendered routines" (Blumell et al. 2019, 366) in ways that align with "cisnormative and heteronormative ideology" (DeGagne 2021, 497). This has consequences for how people engage with public space, with some trans people "holding it" for long periods of time (Lerner 2021; Dubin et al. 2021). Sex-segregated bathrooms can also be uncomfortable to navigate for people who do not identify as trans but also don't fit expected gender binaries, such as "masculine-appearing cisgender women, (and) feminine-appearing cisgender men" (Davis 2018).

Public washrooms are sometimes used for activities other than their intended use. They can be a source of shelter for people who are sleeping rough (Neale and Stevenson, 2013), and a shortage of public washrooms in certain areas can make homelessness all the more difficult (Daiski et al. 2012). Public washrooms are also the site of various "backstage behaviors" (Cahill et al. 1985), that can sometimes include graffiti, drugs, intimacy, and other unsanctioned uses (Schapper 2012). For example, much of the foundational social science work on washrooms responded to wider moral panic over men having sex with men in public washroom (Desroches 1990; Humphries 1970; Nardi 1996; Warwick 1973). More recently, advocates and

Figure 10 Public Washroom Coleford, UK. Photo by Jaggery on Wikimedia Commons.

activists for accessibility and inclusion argue that public concern over unsanctioned behaviours or uses should not be the focus of policy and planning; instead, the focus should be to prioritize the provision of safe and accessible washrooms.

Back to Basics: Benches, "Solitude in Public, Sociability for Free"

While we have centred sociability throughout this report, an easily overlooked dimension of the best kinds of public spaces is as spaces we share together with unknown others, but without the necessary expectation of interaction: spaces to be "alone together" (Coleman 2009; te Brömmelstroet et al 2017). Here we ought not mistake being alone in public with being socially isolated (Morril et al 2005). The simple activity of people watching is not only a pleasurable way to pass time for many, it is also a way to "do" solitude in public and, as recent research shows, can and does lead to sociability.

To round out our findings on various spaces of sociability, it is worth considering a very simple physical element of the public realm that provides for both solitude and sociability: the bench. In *The Bench Project: Solitude in Public, Sociability for Free*, a research report published by The Young Foundation (UK), Bynon & Rishbeth (2015) investigated this "unremarkable feature of public life . . . to explore how benches are being used and valued in urban spaces today." In many ways there is a mismatch or tension between general *perceptions* of those who use benches and the actual users and uses to which benches are put. Benches are perceived to be "a location of intimacy and benign social serendipity" and are simultaneously "problematised with regard to perceptions of unwelcome loitering" (Rishbeth and Rogaly 2018).

As physical artifacts, benches provide particular "affordances of sociability" (Horgan et al 2020): they are an "open gesture of welcome, an invitation to linger" (Bynon & Rishbeth 2015). The bench is a simple element in the design of public space, but one that fulfils important social functions as it "facilitates a mix of activities, comfortable for longer-stay users and accommodating a flow for those 'just pausing'" and in so doing "can provide a broadly inclusive place within an urban locality. Choice of where to sit is important in supporting a personal agency, easing the mostly unspoken practicalities and challenges of proximity to unknown others" (Rishbeth and Rogaly 2018).

Figure 11 People resting on a bench. Photo by Nguyen Thu Hoai on Unsplash.

Despite these positives, negative perceptions of benches seem to derive from the fact that they provide anchor points for people to gather in public spaces. Concern over who and how people gather appears in approaches variously known as hostile architecture, defensive design, or "prickly urbanism" (Davis 1995) as well as the more benign-seeming language of crime-prevention-through-environmental-design (CPTED) (Jeffery 1971; Newman 1972; Armitage 2013). Design details that incorporate crime prevention through environmental design now appear through explicitly hostile architecture and punishing street environments generally. 'Homeless spikes' are probably the most explicitly hostile form of exclusionary design (Petty 2016), but many similar practices engage in a more "subtle art of exclusion" (Dakin 2021), where seemingly benign or even visually attractive design features are deployed with the intention of excluding particular uses and users, most often those who are already vulnerable.

These design strategies are not only concerned with preventing particular kinds of uses but also, more pointedly, are concerned with removing specific populations from our shared public realm. The tendency towards removing benches or limiting their numbers and placement is often for the express purpose of making it difficult for specific populations—usually *already* marginalized populations like youth, and homeless and precariously housed persons—to engage in sustained uses of public space. There is evidence that such practices are pervasive in Canada and are increasingly being employed not only in dense downtowns, but also in smaller municipalities and suburban areas (Chellew 2016; 2019; Dakin 2021). Adopting principles of hostile architecture and defensive design regularly involves limiting public washrooms, failing to provide publicly usable shelter, and removing or modifying seating to prevent particular kinds of uses. In addition to contributing to the "hyper-regulation of public space" (Brown 2017; see also Doherty et al 2008), a core issue here is that in targeting specific populations, such moves do not just serve to exclude target groups. Such moves impoverish public spaces for *all* users, actual and potential.

Attending to basic human needs through the provision of washrooms, water fountains, and seating is essential. The public realm can, should, and must reflect the wants, needs, and desires of the surrounding community and those who wish to use it. Housed or unhoused, young or old, mobile or mobility impaired, these are the publics that public spaces must serve.

Implications and Areas for Further Research

This study of the three broadly conceived kinds of spaces of sociability—public institutions, ambiguously public spaces, and the public realm—highlights how positive social encounters are fostered in public spaces. Through our conversations with participants on the expert panels and the review of the literature, we have identified insights that apply to research, practice, and policy (see Appendix B for sources recommended to policy makers by our participants). Here, we briefly summarize some of the implications of our findings.

Enhancing Opportunities for Sociability

When people are co-present in public spaces, opportunities for sociability arise. Municipal by-laws and the policing of public spaces often centre on *loitering*. We think it is useful to shift attention from loitering—a term that implies ill intent and incorrect use of space—to instead frame ongoing presence in public space positively as *lingering*. Based on our expert panels and comprehensive literature review, we encourage municipalities to shift from prohibitions on loitering, and instead provide a *licence to linger*. The right to linger takes many forms, from aimlessly strolling on sidewalks to sitting uninterrupted on public benches.

Lingering requires essential amenities like water and washrooms and can also be facilitated by equipment for play and collaboratively programmed art and culture events. Festivals and spaces designed for mixed-age users also facilitate play and lingering. A commitment to play extends beyond building playgrounds and involves supporting intergenerational sociability throughout policy and planning. We recommend fully accessible 24-hour washrooms, water fountains, as well as diverse types of seating and shelters that can be used in all types of weather. We need to recognize and reinforce public libraries as mixed-use service centres that support diverse populations. In short, enhancing opportunities for enjoyment, leisure and lingering facilitates sociability.

Planning for Public Spaces as Spaces of Sociability

Our research reveals that formal programming in public spaces is important, but spontaneous uses, while often orverlooked, are also significant. Support must be given to informal and unanticipated uses, unplanned interactions, accidental public and semi-private spaces, and improvised events. Municipalities should develop guidelines for non-punitive responses to unsanctioned uses of public spaces and work with (not just resist) the tension in design and planning between the orchestration of space and the unpredictability/uncontrollability of uses. We also recommend moving away from individualized and age-segregated orientations to public

space use, and moving towards prioritizing collective approaches, participatory planning, and the co-production of sociable public spaces.

To make this possible, we note that while professional education in planning and design in Canada is generally well-developed in terms of certification, most professionals receive very limited training in social research methods. The types of methods that currently dominate tend to be oriented to the creation of spaces that centre consumption and the preferences of middle-class users. Many of our Canadian and international participants involved in professional training emphasized the need for design and planning education to involve more sustained engagement with qualitative social research methods and insights from the social sciences more generally. This will help to enhance and nuance planning and design practitioners' understanding of the social life of public spaces. Moreover, municipalities need better data on the social life of various public spaces in Canada. Take *social* research seriously. Follow what public spaces users do. Attend to historical, social, cultural, and community contexts—consider *actual* uses, users, and immediate needs alongside desired outcomes.

Enhancing Interdisciplinary Methods for Studying Public Space to Inform Practice

In terms of methods for the study of spaces of sociability, interdisciplinary collaboration is needed (see Appendix C for sources that demonstrate useful methods for the study of public space). Classic sources for the study of public space include Gehl and Svarre (2013), Goffman (1963; 1971), Lofland & Lofland (1995), and Robertson and Culhane (2005). Recent shifts towards big data privilege relatively easy to gather quantitative data, but this kind of data can be thin and reductive. Some more qualitatively-oriented methods for the study of public space can be as simple as walking, wandering, listening, and "going-along" with members of specific groups in these spaces (Hall et al. 2008; Kusenbach 2003; Rishbeth & Rogaly 2018). As we wander in public spaces, we are able to observe simple gestures and complex encounters. Recent innovations in ethnographic methods demonstrate how this method is best suited to understanding the complex social relations that happen in public spaces (Katz 2010; Kusenbach 2003; Low, Simpson, and Scheld 2019; Radice 2022). Play is another wonderful method for exploring these topics, both as participation and observation (Gomez 2022; Lipsitz 2018; McKenzie et al. 2006; Pruesse et al. 1999). Other methods consider performance, body language, and everyday cohabitation as ways to understand interactions in public spaces (Gomez 2022; Plaster 2020; Aelbrecht 2019; White and Germain 2022).

Conclusion

This report demonstrates the importance of public spaces as essential sites for the everyday unfolding of a just and egalitarian democratic life through everyday encounters. This project brought together over two dozen researchers across a variety of social sciences disciplines to interactively explore the public realm, public institutions, and ambiguously public spaces, showing the importance of physical space through the lens of co-presence and sociability. These conversations highlighted the fact that despite living in a digital world, physical spaces still matter. This report synthesized existing research on spaces that potentiate, facilitate, and

enhance relations between people beyond networks of primary relations, to better understand where sociability between strangers happens, where it does not, and how it may be enhanced.

Our findings emphasize key characteristics, forms, and contributions of sociable public spaces; these public spaces improve quality of life and facilitate interactions across social difference. Good public spaces support diverse uses and users; the best provide multiple opportunities for participation and cultivate belonging. Accessibility is multifaceted and requires addressing economic, physical, social and cultural barriers. Our policy and planning recommendations emphasize the importance of understanding actual versus ideal uses and paying careful attention to historical, social, cultural and community contexts. Sociability is supported by creating opportunities for rest, play, and leisure with mixed uses and diverse users. Municipalities, organizations, and communities committed to cultivating sociable public space need to be thorough, flexible, creative, inclusive, and playfully serious.

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SPACES OF SOCIABILITY: ENHANCING CO-PRESENCE AND COMMUNAL LIFE IN CANADA

About the project

Public spaces are central to the everyday life of cities. These include signature public spaces like public squares, parks, and playgrounds, and more overlooked spaces like sidewalks, street corners, and informal greenspaces. Public spaces are not simply physical infrastructure. As key sites for facilitating contact and sociability amongst users, and as spaces that we simply share others, they are an essential part of our shared *social infrastructure*— "the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact" (Klinenberg 2018: 5). Treating public spaces as social infrastructure requires planning, adequate sustained funding, cross-disciplinary and cross-community collaboration, participatory design, and ongoing care.

As concerns about social isolation and fragmentation increase, we need to better understand what creates, enhances, and sustains sociability between strangers, acquaintances, and neighbours. Public spaces can and should facilitate sociability.

To prepare this Evidence Brief, we examined how the best kinds of sociable public spaces work, to understand:
- social and physical elements of the public realm that facilitate sociable encounters
- public institutions (such as libraries) that enable and enhance sociable encounters
- ambiguously public/transitional zones between private and public space as staging grounds for neighbourhood-level sociability

Our recommendations are based on a comprehensive review of research literature and a series of multidisciplinary expert roundtables and individual interviews with 29 Canadian and international research collaborators. Our findings and recommendations are alive to the social and material features of public spaces that (1) facilitate people's co-presence and (2) facilitate sociable contact across various forms of difference.

Key findings

Our findings emphasize key characteristics and contributions of sociable public spaces.

Sociable public spaces improve quality of life by increasing opportunities for social contact, play, learning, leisure, and simply sharing space. Some public spaces are disappearing as more open spaces are folded into restricted uses, private ownership, and commercial consumption-driven

design. Policy and programming must respond by attending to different degrees and scales of publicness. Understanding sociable public spaces' diffuse contributions to quality of life requires empirically grounded, multi-disciplinary qualitive and quantitative research.

Sociable public spaces facilitate interactions across social difference and create belonging. Good public spaces support diverse uses and users; the best cultivate belonging. Many public spaces are accessible in principle, but inaccessible in practice. Heavily planned, regulated and/or commercialized public spaces favour dominant users and uses, impacting belonging and accessibility. Exclusion happens along different lines, including age, gender, ability, race or ethnicity, and/or socio-economic status. Accessibility eliminates economic, physical, social and cultural barriers. Not all spaces can be used by all people at all times, but the best provide multiple opportunities for participation and belonging.

Sociable public spaces are planned *and* flexible. Public spaces must mediate many tensions: planned vs unplanned; formal vs informal; risk vs safety; predictability vs. unpredictability; convivial vs. conflictual. How tensions take shape is context-specific, both impacting and impacted by design, planning, programming, uses, and user experiences. Supporting diverse uses and users is a fine balance; overplanning and overregulating impacts accessibility and sociability. Facilitating spontaneous, free use and flexible physical arrangements increases user diversity.

Sociable public spaces can have different designations. Not all public spaces are formally designated as such. The boundary between public and private can be blurry; there are ambiguously public spaces that also provide opportunities for sociability: shopping malls and public-facing privately-owned spaces (porches, patios, balconies) share some characteristics with public spaces. These ambiguously public spaces are often at risk of displacement or erasure in gentrifying or highly commercialized neighborhoods. Policy makers might not always see where and how people use such spaces, or how they can be supported.

Sociable public spaces need information and participation. Residents require information and tools to create good public spaces, especially when private and commercial interests are in play. To enhance resident and community understanding and participation in planning, zoning, design, and decision-making processes, municipalities should create legible, accessible toolkits. Meaningful consultation must happen at all stages, and must engage the history, context, and diverse uses and users of space. Supporting dialogue and participation is key.

Policy Implications

Observe. Ask. Listen. Learn. Municipalities need better data on the social life of public spaces. Take *social* research seriously. Follow what public spaces users do. Attend to historical, social, cultural and community contexts—consider *actual* uses, users and immediate needs alongside desired outcomes.

License to Linger. Rather than cracking down on loitering, provide license to linger. The right to linger takes many forms, from sidewalk seating and park benches, to essential amenities like

water and washrooms, to play and recreational equipment, to collaboratively-programmed art and culture events. Enhancing opportunities to linger facilitates sociability.

Be spontaneous. Formal programming is important, but so are spontaneous uses. Support informal unanticipated uses, unplanned interactions, accidental public and semi-private spaces, and improvised events. Develop guidelines for non-punitive responses to unsanctioned uses of public spaces.

Play beyond playgrounds. Plan, design and program for mixed-age users and uses within and beyond playgrounds. Support everyday intergenerational sociability by centering play in policy and planning.

Take a walk. Develop public space networks that encourage mobility. Active transportation facilitates encounters between people in ways that cars and roads simply cannot. By weaving locales together, walkability enhances sociability.

Back to basics. Attend to basic human needs: fully accessible 24-hour washrooms, water fountains, diverse types of seating, and shelters for all types of weather. Recognize and reinforce public libraries as mixed-use service centres that support diverse populations.

In sum, to support sociable public spaces **be flexible, creative, inclusive, and playfully serious.**

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Appendix B: Recommended Readings to Policy Makers

We asked workshop participants to suggest texts that they would most like to get into the hands of policy makers. These are their suggestions.

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Appendix C: Methods for Studying Public Space

We asked workshop participants to suggest texts that offered new or alternative methods for studying public space. These are their suggestions.

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