

A SNAPSHOT OF INCLUSIVITY

*A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
PROJECT ON INCLUSIVE
PUBLIC SPACES IN
VANCOUVER*



ANNA HETTIARACHCHI
JANINE POCHURKO
KARIN MISTLBERGER
ANDRES IBARRA

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
SPRING SEMESTER IN DIALOGUE
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INTRODUCTION

OUR PARTNER

Our partner on this project was the City of Vancouver. We worked under the guidance of Jordan Magtoto, a Public Space Planning Analyst for the City. Jordan supports the VIVA Vancouver program, which coordinates parklet, plaza, street, and sidewalk public space projects. The goal of this program is to enhance the sense of community in Vancouver.

THE PROJECT

Jordan pitched to our Semester in Dialogue 2019 cohort a problem that the City of Vancouver has identified with respect to the use of public spaces. Public spaces in Vancouver are designed with the intent to be used by all citizens, but the City has found that primarily one demographic (i.e. Caucasian males) feels comfortable and entitled to use public space. As part of a Community Partner assignment for our Semester in Dialogue class, our group decided to work with the City on a project that relates to the issue of public space and inclusivity. We chose to survey the public on inclusivity in city spaces. We collected data in two parts: 1) by asking underrepresented communities for photographs of inclusive public space, and 2) by hosting an interactive gallery walk of those photographs to engage incoming visitors in thinking about public space inclusivity. Our goal was to provide the City of Vancouver with data and suggestions on how to make the design, maintenance, and use of public space more equitable, diverse, and inclusive.

PROCESS

We started by researching traditionally underrepresented communities that could be contacted for participation. We compiled a list of organizations, which was reviewed and edited by Jordan (see Appendix A). We contacted all 40 organizations via email between February 11th and 26th. The email contained a brief description of our project and what we would need from participants. We visited 6 of the organizations in person with physical copies of the project outline.

We received responses from 7 organizations, 5 of which agreed to participate in our project. Members of the organizations that agreed to participate sent us photos for our Gallery walk. These individuals included a New Westminster-based student from Kwantlen Polytechnic University, a resident of East Hastings Street, a Mexican artist, members of the DUDES Club, and a youth group from Frog Hollow Neighbourhood house.

The photographs we received were printed and displayed at our Gallery Walk event, held on March 14th from 4PM to 6PM, at CityLab (511 West Broadway). We advertised the event through a Facebook event page, and it was also shared by VIVA Vancouver and CityStudio through their social media platforms. We organized the gallery walk so that photographs were grouped by their source on individual moveable boards. Each set of photographs was accompanied by a biography of the organization/artist/photographer.

We collected data at the event via two methods: a dotmocracy and comment boxes. Each photo board had a dotmocracy poster with the question: "Would you feel comfortable in

this public space?”. Visitors were instructed to put a sticker under either the ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ fields in response to the photographs they were viewing. Second, we used two comment boxes to ask questions about inclusivity in public spaces. The first comment box was placed at the beginning of the gallery walk, with the question: “Is public space for everyone?”. Visitors were asked to answer this question before viewing the photographs. The second comment box was at the end of the gallery walk, with the question: “Do you feel differently about public space after this gallery walk? How could we work together to make public spaces more inclusive?”.

RESULTS

During our event, we recorded the number of walk-ins and their rough demographics based on the personal judgement of one of our group members. In total, our captured account of attendees was 103. Roughly 2/3 were likely Caucasian, and a bit more than half were categorized as under 40 years old.

DOTMOCRACIES

Photo Location	YES	NO	MIDDLE/UNDECIDED
Lincoln Park	95%	0%	5%
New Westminster	66%	14%	20%
Granville Mural	38%	44%	19%
East Hastings	29%	59%	12%
Vancouver Native Health Clinic	26%	50%	24%

We placed a dotmocracy next to each group of photos to stimulate thought on different public spaces and for whom those public spaces are designed. The dotmocracies allowed for exposure to other people’s opinions and resulted in different modes of expression (such as a self-created, undecided/middle answer). We compared the photographs with similar dotmocracy results to determine the commonalities between spaces deemed most and least comfortable by our Gallery Walk visitors.

COMPARING DOTMOCRACIES AND PHOTOGRAPHS

The majority of people felt least comfortable in the East Hastings and Vancouver Native Health Clinic areas. We observed three similarities between these two locations: 1) a lack of seating areas, 2) a lack of cleanliness, and 3) low lighting. We also speculated that attendees to our Gallery Walk may not have personally identified with these spaces, which could have resulted in feelings of exclusion. Some of our comment box answers also suggested distrust of the surroundings in both of these locations could have accounted for feelings of discomfort.

The majority of people felt most comfortable in Lincoln Park and the New Westminster Parklet. We observed six similarities between these places by examining the photographs and comment box answers: 1) an open and inviting layout, 2) abundance of green space, 3) close

proximity to residential areas, 4) installations that promote cleanliness (i.e. accessible disposable bins), 5) ability to facilitate a variety of activities, and 6) overall accessibility.

COMMENT BOXES

1. The first comment box (*“Is public space for everyone?”*) had 34 total responses. 62% responded ‘yes’, 27% responded ‘should be’, 6% responded ‘no’, and 6% was not applicable.
2. The second comment box (*“Do you feel differently about public space after this gallery walk? How could we work together to make public spaces more inclusive?”*) had 60 total responses. Not all responses answered both questions, but we were able to extrapolate key themes that were commonly present throughout the submissions.

One theme that we found was an awareness that public space needn’t be for everyone. Some participants recognized the need for spaces to be held for underrepresented and marginalized populations, as not all current city spaces are completely accessible for those with varying levels of privilege. Some commenters expressed that public spaces should be held as locations of healing from systemic traumas.

Another theme that we identified was a desire for increased amounts of green space. Many commenters associated levels of inclusion, comfort, and safety with green space. One commenter noted that they “weren’t surprised that the park (Lincoln Park) was considered most inclusive”. Another comment noted that cleaning public spaces that hold meaning to certain populations could be problematic. For example, the removal of items seen as waste to those of higher socioeconomic positions could facilitate the exclusion of those who identify as homeless. Also related to green space, commenters identified a need for more open space. Enclosed spaces (such as the Granville bridge tunnel) were felt to be unsafe due to their lack of visibility and seclusion.

Many responses called for the design, use and maintenance of public spaces to be more equitable. This theme revolved around the need to consult populations affected by the public space they reside in and use, especially those that are marginalized. Many commenters felt that catering to the needs of underrepresented communities would increase levels of inclusivity, as precedents for public space would be set by those who are generally the least included in these processes. Suggestions that were posed by participants involved the hiring of marginalized populations to contribute to public space design and implementations, and that current staff have their cultural sensitivity training updated.

The last theme that we extrapolated from the comment box responses was a need for increased safety in public spaces. Safety was mentioned in the majority of comments and was an element of most of our themes. Participants felt less safe in areas with less greenery, less open space, and less equitability.

OUR SUGGESTIONS

The suggestions below were developed by applying a systems thinking framework to the Gallery Walk data. Systems thinking distinguishes complex problems from those that are merely complicated or simple. Ensuring that public spaces are inclusive is complex; there is no blanket solution for every context, and success depends on being open to adaption and continuous learning. Complex problems require interventions that focus on relationships, boundaries, and perspectives. Intervention can occur at many different levels of a system, but the most effective changes typically address the paradigm (i.e. deeply held beliefs) of that system. Using this lens, we developed five suggestions that could help the City of Vancouver make public spaces more equitable, diverse, and inclusive. We recommend that:

- 1) The cleanliness of public spaces be maintained so as to make such areas more approachable; however, cleaning should not disrupt the populations that generally use or rely on these spaces.
- 2) Existing greenery be maintained, and that the City takes care to make the design of public space environmentally friendly and sustainable.
- 3) Stigma and cultural sensitivity training be continuously revised and provided to staff, especially those involved in the design and maintenance of public space.
- 4) Authentic trust be fostered between urban space planning staff and communities to facilitate co-creation of public spaces.
- 5) Design equity be increased by placing those belonging to underrepresented communities in positions of power in regard to the use, design, and maintenance of the public spaces they frequent.

LIMITATIONS

The public that populated our Gallery Walk and from which we drew our data was fairly homogenous. This means that we must be cautious when drawing conclusions from our results, as they may not be representative or generalizable. We observed that the public visiting our Gallery Walk were largely of Caucasian appearance. Most were Vancouver City staff, walk-ins off of Broadway St., and students. Our event was not attended by many citizens belonging to underrepresented or minority groups. The location of our event along Broadway St. may have contributed to our largely homogenous population, as this area is fairly affluent and may not seem inviting to everyone. The homogeneity of attendees to our event may also speak more generally to who feels welcome participating in City events, especially those situated around City buildings. Events such as ours that are designed to promote inclusivity and equity in public space may, in fact be, be exclusionary due to their location. In the future, City events should be held in the communities for which they are created and designed to help. Barriers to attending City events need to be carefully considered.

It is also worth noting that some photographs depicted public spaces at different times of day (i.e. at night or during the daytime) and in different weather (i.e. sun vs. rain). It is conceivable that these dynamic and intractable characteristics of public space may have

influenced feelings of inclusivity in certain locations, rather than anything the City has control over. We speculate that gender and privilege could relate to public spaces being deemed less inclusive at night or in the rain. This might be something to investigate in future research.

Finally, it is important that we as the research team acknowledge the role of our own intersectional identities in shaping how we interpreted the problem, designed our process, executed our data analysis, and understood our results. Everyone who actively contributed to this project (i.e. four full-time Semester in Dialogue students and one Vancouver City staff member) brought their own limited lenses to the issue of public space inclusivity. Readers should be aware of these lenses when referencing our work. These are the frames of our research team:

- 1) **Karin Mistlberger** (*Semester in Dialogue Student*): is a cis-gender, straight, white, able-bodied woman completing her fourth year of a Psychology Major at Simon Fraser University.
- 2) **Anna Hettiarachchi** (*Semester in Dialogue Student*): is a cis-gender, straight, Sri Lankan-Canadian, able-bodied woman completing her undergraduate degree in Health Sciences.
- 3) **Andres Ibarra** (*Semester in Dialogue Student*): is a cis-gender, straight, Mexican, able-bodied man completing his undergraduate degree in Political Science and Communication.
- 4) **Janine Pochurko** (*Semester in Dialogue Student*): is a cis-gender, straight, white, able-bodied woman from a middle-class family who immigrated to Canada from Germany, Italy, and Ukraine in the mid-1900s.
- 5) **Jordan Magtoto** (*Vancouver City Staff*): born Jordan Thomlison, is a cis-gender, straight, white, able-bodied man from a working poor family who immigrated to Canada from Italy and France in the early 1900s and 1600s. During the course of this project, Jordan was working as a Planning Analyst with VIVA Vancouver, at the City of Vancouver.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all those who participated in our project by submitting photos for our gallery walk: Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House, Lincoln Saugstad, the DUDES Club, Furkan Donmezer, and Fabiola Rodea.

We would like to extend a special thanks to Jordan Magtoto, our Vancouver City staff partner, and Ileana Costrut, from CityStudio. This project would not have been possible without your guidance and support.



APPENDIX A

ORGANIZATIONS CONTACTED

List of Key Informants
BC PIAC -social justice law firm
Seniors First BC
Downtown Eastside women's Centre
Women in Film & Television
Minerva
Vancouver Signal- SFU based hip hop/rap community followers
Kevin Hackett for independent hip hop magazine called culdesac
Brooke Bartlett for Project Women Warriors
Mexican community in Vancouver
ALAS (latinoamerican sfu association)
Ismaile religion community
East hastings
Bahai community
Sfu Pakistan community
The DUDES club
First nations fashion (first nations friend who works with First Nations designers)
South Asian Family Association
South Asian Canadian Histories Association - V3
Asian Society for the Intervention of AIDS
Chinese Benevolent Association of Vancouver
Lookout Society
Vancouver Native Housing Society
Pacific Association of First Nations Women
BC Black History Awareness Society
Vancouver Latin American Cultural Centre
Indian Cultural Association of Vancouver
Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society
Southern African Cultural Association of British Columbia
Greater Vancouver Bangladesh Cultural Association
Ethiopian Community Association of BC
Hua Foundation
Hogan's Alley Society
Cedar Cottage Neighbourhood House
Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House
Gordon Neighbourhood House
Kitsilano Neighbourhood House
Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House
South Vancouver Neighbourhood House
MOSAIC BC

APPENDIX B

BUDGET AND EXPENDITURES

Below is our total expenditure on this project, minus the cost of the venue, which was covered by the City of Vancouver. This may be useful in the event that the City of Vancouver wishes to duplicate or scale-up our project.

BUDGET

Item	Cost
Disposable Cameras	\$70.00
Film Development	\$60.00
Honorarium	\$100.00
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>\$230.00</u>

EXPENDITURES

Item	Cost
Disposable Cameras	\$73.86
Film Development	\$67.81
Photo Printing	\$180.00
Coffee	\$50.00
Miscellaneous supplies	\$21.10
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>\$392.77</u>