

“Environmentalizing” social issues? From ‘skid rows’ to communities in North America. Relevancy and limits of community action.

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Résumé: Cette contribution propose un regard dans le temps et l'espace sur la condition de populations marginalisées - des années 1960 à aujourd'hui. L'expression skid row, expression négative désignant à la fois une condition et un espace marginalisés, s'est diffusé au cours des années 1960 quand les formes de rénovation urbaine se sont imposées dans la plupart des villes. Des travaux de chercheurs ont étudié alors ces questions, dans une perspective réformatrice, à l'exemple de Donald Bogue aux Etats-Unis. Beaucoup de quartiers ont été rasés et tombés dans l'oubli avec quelques exceptions notables. L'exemple de Vancouver au Canada semble une exception intéressante. Nous construisons notre réflexion à partir des formes de marginalité et de la mobilisation des personnes marginalisées en synthétisant des travaux menés à partir de 1996 sur les pratiques spatiales et les actions d'une association de binner et du travail de terrain dans le quartier. Entre 1995 et 2014 l'association United We Can a grossi, connu une certaine reconnaissance et a contribué à faire connaître les enjeux sociaux à partir du recyclage, tout en permettant une amélioration pour certaines personnes très marginalisées. En 2014, toutefois, un changement de localisation et l'insertion dans un green hub -un ensemble d'entreprises de recyclage-montre à la fois le succès de l'initiative et ses limites dans le contexte actuel.

Mots-clés: Marginalité spatiale, marginalité sociale, skid rows, communauté, Amérique du Nord, Canada, Vancouver

Riassunto: Questo contributo pone l'attenzione sulla dimensione spaziale e temporale relative alla condizione delle popolazioni marginalizzate dagli anni Sessanta ai nostri giorni. Il termine skid row – espressione negativa che indica allo stesso tempo una condizione ed uno spazio marginale – si è diffusa nel corso degli anni Sessanta quando forme di riqualificazione urbana si sono imposte nella maggior parte delle città. Alcuni studiosi già all'epoca hanno affrontato tali questioni, secondo una prospettiva riformista, seguendo l'esempio di Donald Bogue negli Stati Uniti. Molti quartieri sono stati rasi al suolo e poi dimenticati, con qualche significativa eccezione. L'esempio di Vancouver in Canada rappresenta un'eccezione interessante. La nostra riflessione si struttura a partire dalle forme di marginalità e dalla mobilitazione di persone marginalizzate sintetizzando i lavori svolti a partire dal 1996 sulle pratiche spaziali e le azioni di un'associazione di *binner*, e attraverso un lavoro sul campo nel quartiere. Tra il 1995 e il 2014 l'associazione United We Can ha avuto una certa notorietà e ha contribuito a far conoscere le questioni sociali a partire dal riciclaggio, al fine di permettere un miglioramento per alcune persone particolarmente marginalizzate. Nel 2014,

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tuttavia, un cambio di localizzazione e l’inserimento di una green hub – un insieme di ditte di riciclaggio – mostra allo stesso tempo il successo dell’iniziativa ed i suoi limiti nel contesto attuale.

Parole chiave: marginalità spaziale, marginalità sociale, skid row, comunità, Nord America, Canada, Vancouver

In this article, I will first define and discuss the spatial dimensions of marginality in North America including a presentation of “skid rows”, an expression used to name some homeless districts in cities. In this, I will focus on the case of Vancouver, where forms of marginality have been succeeding in the same area for decades, presently known as the Downtown Eastside. I will share my perspectives through some primary material I collected during my research work in Vancouver on informal recyclers (so called *binner* in Vancouver), a recurrent figure associated with marginality. Finally, I will develop the idea of the *environmental turn* in social policies, in the context of the neo-liberal city.

1. DEFINING NOTIONS

1.1. *Defining social marginality with space* - According to the French sociologist Robert Castel (1994) the marginal ‘refers to the norms without being part of it’ (i.e. homeless, undocumented, etc.). Marginality is always defined from a point of view from the mainstream society: it is the condition of being excluded from the *mainstream society*.

The space (defined as a social construction –Lefebvre, H, 1972) is part of the construction of marginality:

-Some places are labelled as marginal. North America has been characterized by the production of *marginal spaces* inside the cities. Space is a strategic tool to confine social issues; the less the society is regulated through Welfare policies, the more the space is used as an attempt to control populations.

-Marginality can refer to a *condition*, characterized by the *use of space*, i.e. public space as a resource (begging, sleeping, etc.), and the lack of voice/power. The language may contribute to reflect and perform marginality by labelling the people (stereotypes) and consider their presence in commercial areas or well off areas as “out of place”.

Defining the skid row, an emblematic expression of marginality in North American cities

The expression skid row was used in North America by scholars and public institutions in the 1950 and 1960’s. The Chicago sociologist Donald Bogue tried to give an overview of this phenomenon in US in an interesting book *Skid Row in American cities* (1965):

‘The term Skid Row (in the West it is called Skid Road) has come to denote a district in the city where there is a concentration of substandard hotels and rooming houses charging very low incomes’ (...)

Most frequently the Skid Row is located near the Central Business District and also near a factory district or major transportation facilities such a waterfront, freight yards, or a trucking or storage depot’ (Bogue, p.1)

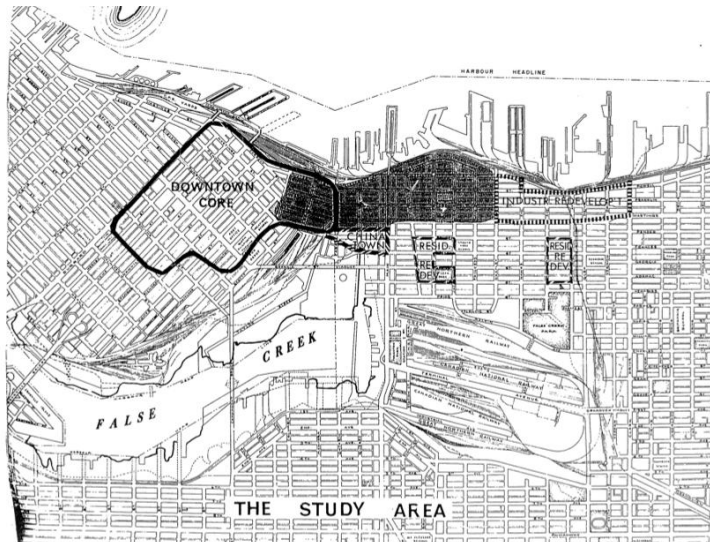


Fig. 1. The location of the former "skid road" of Vancouver, near the harbour and the railway station. Map from the city of Vancouver report (1965). The project to renovate the core of the *skid road* area (in dark on the map) did not take place. Only few renovation operations took place.

It is unclear to get a proper explanation of the « invention » of the expression skid row which defines both a space and a condition ("to be on skid row"). "Skid row" or "skid road" come probably from the West coast cities in the 19th century. It could have been borrowed from the logging industry as many cities were first dedicated to harbour activity and primary product. A skid row defined a track used by the logging industry to carry the log to the factory. During the early stage of industry in the West cities, the companies recruited many transient, low skill workers. The name skid road has been extended to the place surrounding the activities in the harbour areas with cheap rooms, beer parlours –all the activity connected with the population living in the area. What is interesting is that expression has been extended to characterize spaces of marginalization in many cities and has been used as depreciative, labelling a space with no place name as such. The skid row or skid road label can thus be considered as an « anti place », reasserting the social stigma.

Donald Bogue (1965) identified 41 US cities over 500, 000 inhabitants having skid row areas, many of them targeted by renovation policies. In fact, in the 1960's the skid rows attracted the attention of public bodies and academic scholars. From invisible spaces, the skid row became visible as the public institutions paid attention to these areas in order to reshape the urban fabric. Due to their location, being close to the downtown cores, they became strategic. The city cores were planned to be renovated, paving the way to freeways, offices and new apartment buildings. Many Canadian cities also, had similar spaces. In the US, the Federal Government favoured urban renovation schemes, leading to the destruction of many skid row areas (ex: Saint Paul/Minneapolis, cf. Hirschhoff and Hart, 2002); in some cities, these areas have been squeezed by the expanding business districts or more recently by a gentrification process (arrival of middle class or professionals in a low income area). However, few places have remained as the Vancouver Downtown Eastside in Canada or the emblematic Skid Row (this expression is still used!) of Los Angeles.



Fig. 2. The Balmoral Hotel is an emblematic example of an old, cheap and substandard hotel of Vancouver Downtown Eastside. The decline of SRO hotel rooms has only been partly replaced by residences operated by non-profit organizations. Photo B. Raoulx, 2013.

The skid row as such referred both to space and to what is called today the “old homelessness” (as opposite to the ‘new homelessness’ since the 1980 Hoch, C., 1990): mainly men, white, ‘acute personal problems’ (such as alcoholism, disabilities), old people... To some extent, it is the end of the hobo condition, a kind of migrant “subproletariat” attached to the railroad and primary industries (Anderson, N, 1923²). The marginalized populations got pushed away to other areas, and the old form for homelessness tended to disappear.

In the US, in the 80’s, the impoverishment of some downtown areas can be considered as a reminiscence of ‘spaces of marginality’ (where charities, non-profit organizations, etc. are located). The context of urban renovation led to consider these places as an ‘eyesore’ to erase. As a recurrent figure of speech, most of the deprived areas adjacent to the core are considered as “*revitalizing operations*”, labelling the marginalized areas as “*dead bodies*”. In many cities, the urban revitalization policy has attracted middle and well off classes in downtown areas, often expelling the homeless from the space.

The expression ‘skid row/skid road’ got replaced by “proper” places names (the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver), but the social function of the ‘skid road’ continues to exist. The expression is sometimes used in media to “spectacularize” the condition of marginality like in Vancouver.

2. THE CASE OF VANCOUVER: STILL THE SAME STORY?

The case of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, is interesting as in the 60’s the urban renovation did not take place, because of a strong local opposition, partly due to the location of the adjacent Chinatown, which became considered as a heritage district. Therefore, even though the space has been shrinking through some renovation processes

² In his work Nels Anderson –a former hobo- distinguished, however, the hobo from other types of homeless, even more marginalized (bumps, etc.). The hobo would refer to a community (*hoboemia*) as opposed to the “disaffiliated” man, an expression coined by Bahr in 1970’s (1970, 1973). It is possible that this distinction became less and less relevant with the economic and social change. The hobo has today a positive connotation: it is a mythological figure of the West celebrated in popular culture...

(including the creation of the tourist street renamed Gastown district near the waterfront), it is still identified as the space of marginality in Vancouver. Since the 1960's, many official reports from the city of Vancouver have documented the social deprivation, often using detailed maps.

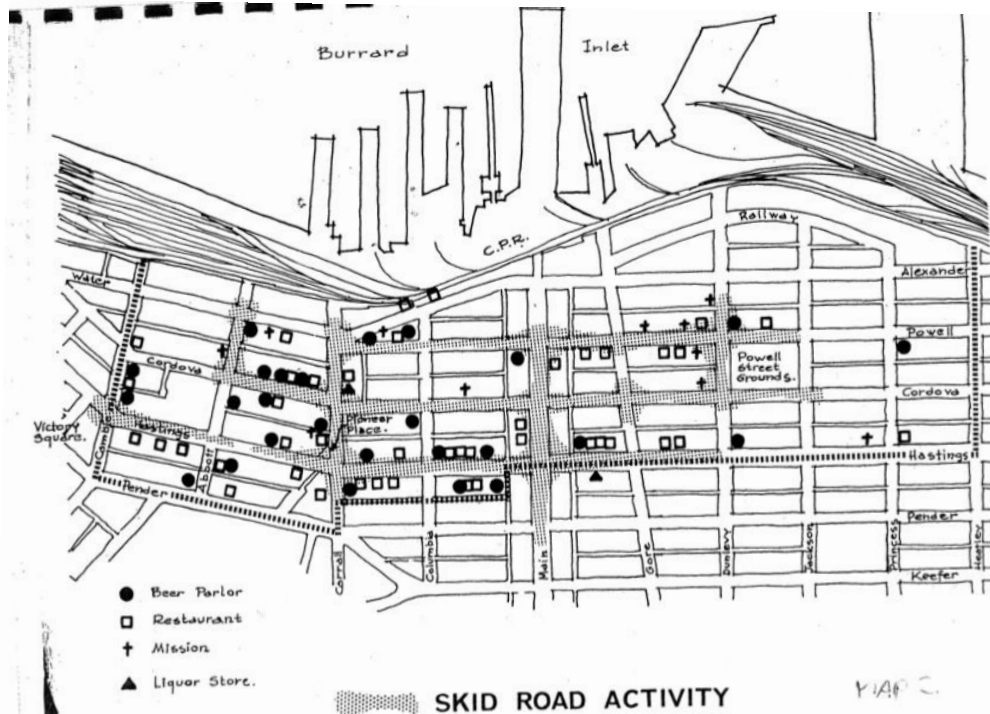


Fig. 3. Space confinement as a tool of control: the "skid road activity", according to the City of Vancouver (1965)

The marginality patterns have changed overtime. In the 1960's, the concern of the authorities was to "rehabilitate" the alcoholic man on "skid row". The skid road area of Vancouver was the place of Single Room Occupancy Hotels (SRO), beer parlours, casual labour offices, missions. In the 1970-1980, the name of Downtown Eastside, imposed by grassroots organizations is an attempt to make this space a "community" and "destigmatize" the skid row image (Hasson, S, Ley, D, 1994). Nevertheless, the patterns of marginality changed, but the function of this area is still the same: to receive the disenfranchised, the groups cast aside from the mainstream society.

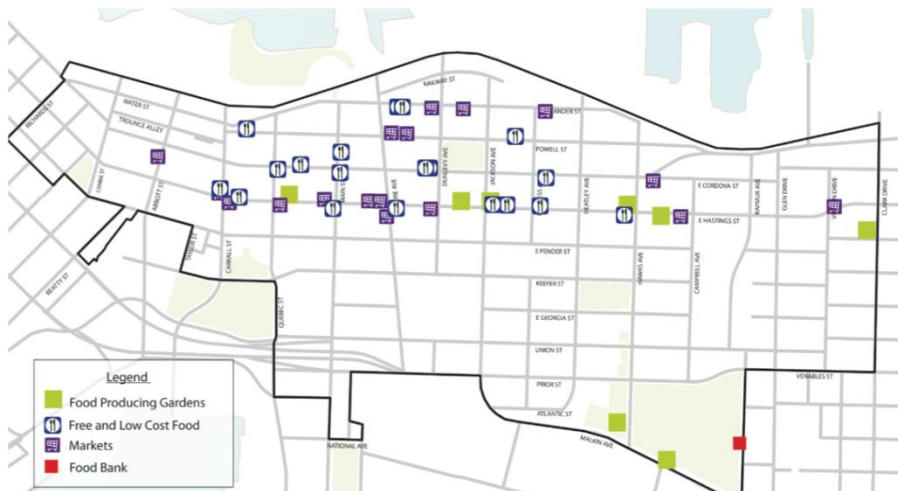


Fig. 4 . The food facilities in the Downtown Eastside area according to the City of Vancouver (2014).

The area is still the place of disenfranchised people with a lot of services especially along Hastings Street. In the 2000's, reflecting the "greening" of the social policies and actions the community gardens get developed, a trend noticed in many North American cities.

In the 1990s, the rise of street drug scene (cocaine) and the epidemics of HIV renew the stigmatization of the area. The figure of the alcoholic of 1960's became replaced by the drug addict. The population is more diverse than in the 1960's, with more women and youth including street kids. And the "100 block Hastings" in the area is still considered by the mainstream society as the "worse" space of the city.

The cutbacks in Welfare and health policies ("desinstitutionalization" of the mentally ill...that is the closure of mental health services), the shortage of affordable housing, the incapacity to deliver adequate services is characterizing the end of the 1990s. The slow public response has been exemplified by the HIV epidemics among the drug users (Raoulx, B 2002). In 1999, The "Vancouver agreement" signed by 3 levels of government (The Federal, the Province and the City of Vancouver) targeted on Downtown Eastside issues. The perception of drug issues evolved: from a criminal issue it became a public health issue. In 2003, the first supervised heroin injection site in North Americas opened in the area, on Hastings Street. The site was part of the harm reduction policy aimed to reduce the health damage among the drug users and the sprawl of viral diseases.

Since the 1970's, non-profit organisations, advocacy groups, have invested the neighbourhood, delivering a range of services, for specific populations or rather specific needs (natives, women, drug users, sex workers, etc.). More than 170 organisations were identified in 2012! Many organizations were created from the "bottom" as the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (Vandu) or United We Can.

Since 1995, United We Can have operated a beverage containers recycling depot for *binners*, informal recyclers. In the next section, I am going to focus on the latter example, from the initial research I conducted from 1996, through participating observations, a number of field working experiences and a documentary film entitled "*Traplins in Vancouver*" (2003). I have since made shorter visits to follow up the changes.