

## From Slum to Village: A Semiotic Analysis in Reimagining Urban Space

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### *Abstract*

The transformation of inner city spaces has been dominated by explanations stressing political economy factors such as rent gap and cultural factors such as urban amenities. This paper takes a different approach in that it uses the tools of urban semiotics to show how the representations of space in a downtown location of protracted decline in the Canadian city of Calgary are transformed discursively and experientially to produce a different image for a different social class. What made this reimagining of space so critical was the fact that the displacement of the existing population was rejected which called for a powerful and aggressive semiotic reinterpretation of the area. The semiotic strategies are discussed in relation to the material changes which reveal the contradictions and dilemmas in attempting to create a mixed class community through revitalizing imagery rather than merely redevelopment.

*Keywords:* urban semiotics, imagineering, slum, urban village, mixed class

### *Résumé*

La transformation de l'espace dans les quartiers défavorisés est souvent expliquée en mettant l'accent sur les facteurs d'économie politique comme l'écart des loyers et les facteurs culturels comme l'infrastructure urbaine. Dans cet article nous abordons la question autrement. En utilisant les outils de la sémiotique urbaine nous montrons comment se transforment les représentations de l'espace au centre-ville dans la ville canadienne de Calgary—endroit en déclin prolongé—à travers le discours et les expériences, et comment cette transformation produit une image neuve pour une classe sociale différente. Cette re-conception de l'espace est rendue d'autant plus cruciale par le refus de déplacer la population déjà installée. Cela a exigé une nouvelle interprétation sémiotique—puissante et agressive—du lieu. Nous traiterons les stratégies sémiotiques par rapport aux changements matériels qui dévoilent les contradictions et les dilemmes inhérentes à toute tentative de créer une communauté de classes mixtes par la re-dynamisation de l'imaginaire au lieu d'une simple rénovation urbaine.

*Mots clés:* la sémiotique urbaine, l'imagénierie, l'urbanisme, les banlieues défavorisées, le village urbain, classes mixtes

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The regeneration and revitalization of urban spaces has been documented in the literature as changes in built form, increased density, and social class transformation through the well-known processes of urban renewal and gentrification. What has received less attention is how the meaning of such spaces are transformed and reimagined in the public mind when the existing population is not displaced. The Canadian city of Calgary, a rapidly growing city of 1.3 million residents, provides an interesting case of a slum-like area as part of the downtown core that has resisted redevelopment for many years but has undergone a reimagining process with a new definition as a “village.” Using an urban semiotic approach, this paper demonstrates how the evolution of the meaning of urban spaces is a process of interpretation and reinterpretation as the result of imagining by forces external to that space but which competes with the uses and meanings of that space by the existing population. It will be shown that the primary mechanism whereby this reimagining takes place is through the redefinition of habitation in the community and the creation of an appearance of a new community in that space even before new populations arrived.

The process of areal disinvestment/reinvestment and revitalization always raises questions of displacement (Vigdor 2010; Causa Justa 2014). If displacement is not to occur, then reimagining must be very aggressive in order to transform the meaning of that space. The goal of this paper is to trace of the evolution and decline of a unique central city urban space and then to analyze the powerful tools used to produce a radical shift in public perceptions of that space through the perspective of urban semiotics.

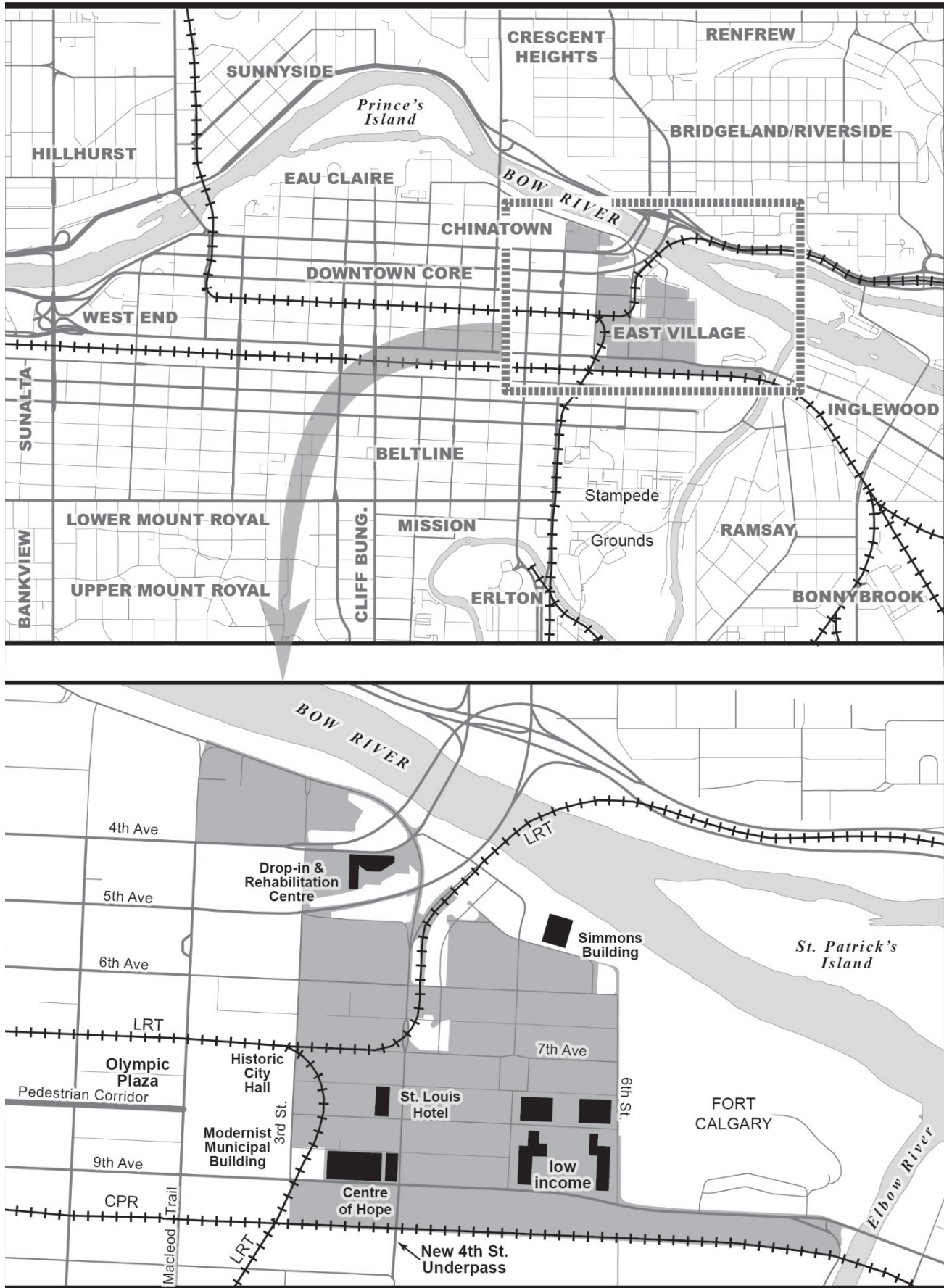
### Calgary as an Analytical Context

The rise of Calgary as a dynamic arriviste city (Hiller 2007) in Canada and its changing role on the national stage since the latter part of the last century has been largely the result of spectacular growth in the hydrocarbon industry and the rise of industries such as logistics and finance. Hosting the Winter Olympics in 1988 became symbolic of an emergent city which now houses over one hundred corporate head offices leading the city to bill itself as the “Heart of the New West.” Beginning in the late 1970’s, the downtown exploded vertically as high rise office towers transformed the city center including tallest building in Canada (“the Bow”) west of Toronto completed in 2012. Until the economic downturn in 2015, approximately 150,000 people worked downtown although only 20,000 people lived downtown meaning that Calgary has a high rate of commutation from its suburbs. About 50% of these workers take public transit which is a growing trend that replaces previously higher levels of automobile commuting. It is thus clear that downtown Calgary’s gleaming office towers serve as a major employment center. What is equally remarkable is that housing options in the core have been poor reinforcing the commuting mode and creating an 8 hour downtown that has lacked vibrancy beyond the working day.

The Downtown is easily identified geographically as bounded territory by the Bow River on the north side and train tracks on the south side (see Figure 1). The Beltline to the south of the railroad tracks is increasingly viewed as part of the downtown because of new developments there but technically is not part of the core and for our purposes is not included. The 14<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge to the west and a 40 acre historical park (Fort Calgary) to the east create clear boundaries in those directions. In many ways, the downtown core and its fringes have displayed all the characteristics of Burgess’s CBD and zone in transition in that where older single detached houses owned by absentee landlords formerly existed, there are currently none left. Either redevelopment for commercial purposes has already occurred or vacant lots providing parking stand testimony to anticipation that it will soon do so. While development has proceeded incrementally within the downtown area, there is one section in which redevelopment had not occurred, and that is the east end now rebranded as the East Village. In many ways, this is perplexing because it is immediately adjacent to the historic City Hall and the modernist Municipal Building, the Olympic Plaza, and many other government buildings. In contrast, the east end appeared as a “no man’s land” or uncontested territory with many derelict buildings or vacant lots, two high rise buildings on its fringe for low income seniors, two shelters for homeless people, a hostel, and an active drug and prostitution culture on the streets and vacant lots. Here were thirteen blocks of prime riverfront land in the thriving downtown of a growing city serving largely as a containment zone for the city’s underclass.

Yet the City of Calgary did not want it that way. In the 1960s, it had identified the area as a place for urban renewal and even started buying up and tearing down property to rid the area of blight, but nothing was built in its place. In the late 1980’s, a Task Force on Housing in the Downtown identified the East Village as a target area for redevelopment but the private sector showed little interest. In a city experiencing dramatic growth with a vibrant downtown for commercial redevelopment, the lack of visionary plans for redevelopment for the

Figure 1. The East Village in the Context of Downtown Calgary





area were intimately related to how this urban space was imagined as stigmatized space resistant to change. A negative branding of place occurred meaning that the area had become less attractive for buyers, renters, or reinvestment in a process known as community obsolescence (Hiller and Moylan 1999). This paper provides an analysis of how the East Village became labelled in the public imaginary and how the effort to transform that image is related to presenting a more sanitized image of place that is more appealing for a variety of forms of consumption. Much of the city's motivation for this transformation came from the fact that the derelict image of this location contrasted sharply with the image of the rest of the newly built downtown core. While a political economy perspective would focus on land values and capital investment, the approach taken here is to use the tools of urban semiotics to explain how urban spaces take on meaning and how meanings are manipulated and transformed. The reinterpretation being given to the east end of the downtown in Calgary provides an important case study of the conditions and methods under which meanings of urban space can shift.

After explaining how semiotics—the study of signs and symbols and their interpretation—can be useful to areal analysis, the East Village will be discussed historically in order to understand how and why it became stigmatized space. Since stigmatization is essentially an outsider's perspective, the paper will then focus on the strategies used to change the representations of this space for potentially new residents rather than focus on how existing residents define the space or react to the proposed changes. Documents and on-line presentations by the Calgary Municipal Land Corporation (CMLC) provide rich evidence of how this space has been redefined in a manner that facilitates the integration of new residents with the existing population.

### Socio-Semiotics as an Analytical Approach

Urban semiotics understands the city as a text (or pseudo-text) in which spatial patterns and structures generate meaning (Gottdiener and Lagopoulos 1986). The term semiosis refers to a social process in which people assign meaning through signs and symbols. Whereas a sign is a physical representation of reality, the meaning embedded within that sign is called a code. For example, a building might be called a homeless shelter because it houses homeless people (the sign) but it is the meaning attached to that physical structure (e.g. “it helps me survive,” “it houses losers”) that reflects an interpretive code. The city then is interpreted differently by different people depending on their situation in life and the social groups to which they belong, and these interpretations are done through connotative codes (additional meanings beyond literal meanings) rather than denotative codes (explicit literal meanings). While material objects are the vehicles of signification, it is the symbolic codes and discourse which develop both in everyday conversation as well as in design plans, bylaws and property codes, and real estate descriptions that reflect deeper meanings.

Urban semiotics emerged at least partly in response to the work of Lynch (1960) whose cognitive approach to urban space conceived of the environment as shaping behavior. His well-known emphasis on perception is what led him to demonstrate how urbanites navigate the city through mental maps utilizing paths, edges, nodes, landmarks, and districts. Gottdiener and Lagopoulos challenged that approach by arguing that it is not just what you see that is important but how you interpret what you see (i.e. conception rather than just perception). It is not just what something literally stands for or how it functions but how it is interpreted that explains the city and its constituent parts. They preferred the notion of socio-semiotics to demonstrate that cognitive maps are the product of social interaction rather than just in the minds of individuals. As Gottdiener (1983:108) noted, the city is actually multi-coded with codes corresponding to the class system and not simply dependent on the codes developed by architects, planners, or builders. In fact, meanings given to structures may change over time and meanings developed by citizens may differ from what was originally anticipated or planned (Krampen 2011). Lagopoulos (2009) has more recently argued for a holistic approach that combines space as an external object with space as a more subjective phenomenon. When place is understood as a space with meaning, the result is a connotative social semiotics. In any case, meanings given to urban spaces are dynamic and are variable dependent on the social groups attributing meaning.

If meanings given to urban spaces are variable, they may also be open to manipulation. Place branding describes the process whereby meanings of urban spaces are manipulated in order to create a certain image in the mind of a resident or visitor. The goal of place marketing, on the other hand, attempts to create an action response in a consumer (Anholt 2010). For a resident, a location in a city may evoke memories or emotions but for a visitor, a location may be the result of branding and marketing which commodifies the same place. Metro-Roland (2011) demonstrated how a specific location, the Central Market Hall in Budapest, has dual

meanings when the market serving as an important location in the everyday life of a city resident collides with the market as a tourist destination. Typically, however, branding and marketing are used to describe how cities, rather than their constituent parts, brand and market themselves. But even here, some parts of the city may be highlighted, branded, and marketed while other parts of the city are ignored (e.g. Cape Town, Bickford-Smith 2009). Often this kind of branding and marketing is referred to as “imagineering” and it is linked to globalization processes whereby cities attempt to redefine or reimagine themselves for the global marketplace (e.g. Berlin, Cochrane and Jonas 1999; Orlando, Archer 1997; Montreal, Paul 2004; South East Asian cities, Yeoh 2005). The entrepreneurial city understands itself as engaged in a globalized competition in which inward investment and economic growth are linked to aestheticization of landscapes, theme parks, and various forms of consumption in which “image” is critical. While cities as a whole possess different levels of meaning for different people, when one interpretation overwhelms all others, hypercity theory views that image as being detached from reality (i.e. a hyperreality) (Nas, de Groot, and Schut 2011). For example, organizers of mega-events such as the Olympics may attempt to create a positive image of a city by transforming the areas surrounding the competition sites while ignoring the rest of the city (Rutheiser 1996, 1997; Eisinger 2000). This form of image manipulation is often referred to as “urban cleansing” or “sanitizing” the visitor site in direct contrast to different realities elsewhere in the city.

The concept of imagineering developed here seeks to understand how urban spaces are given an interpretive character and how that interpretation of space can be transformed or manipulated. Furthermore, the focus is not on cities as a whole and the imagery that is used in promotion and marketing but how different locations within the city are interpreted. One of the best examples in Canada is the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver, often referred to as “the poorest postal code” in the country with all the stereotypes of homelessness, poverty, and drug abuse, without understanding its meaning as “home” to thousands of residents (Campbell, Boyd, and Culbert 2009). A semiotic analysis examines the material symbols as well as the discursive symbols and narratives that give meaning to this particular area of the city. In fact, Nas, Jaffe, and Samuels (2006:3) refer to those parts of the city that conflict, challenge, invert, or subvert the dominant image of the city as the “shadow city” rather than the contrived “hypercity.” And in Vancouver’s case, the Downtown Eastside provides a sharp contrast to the image of the city as one of the highest ranking liveable cities in the world (Berlowitz 2005).

The literature suggests that the negative image that some parts of a city possess is related to the process of disinvestment and reinvestment (Smith, Duncan, and Reid 1989) as the result of capitalist processes and actions by financial institutions and the state (Harvey 2009; Massey 1995). Urban locations go into decline through conscious decisions such as bank redlining and government policies that then later set the stage for reinvestment when the area is reinterpreted as an urban frontier of opportunity and profit. The rent gap then begins the process of gentrification which leads to the displacement of existing residents as the area is “upgraded” through new construction of housing and leisure amenities. Sport arenas, cultural facilities, restaurants, and shops are understood to be the key to a convivial city—especially to attract the creative class. The process whereby this shift occurs as the result of economic factors relating to community obsolescence has been the focus of many studies (Lees, Slater, and Wily 2010). This paper takes a different approach in that regeneration or area transformation involves connotative processes. Meaning is not inherent in urban spaces but is the result of discursive narratives and social interpretations of symbolic landscapes which gives particular segments of the city its specific character. What is important to this analysis is how specific urban locations develop an image over time and what has to occur for these interpretations to be transformed.

The idea that urban spaces are not fixed but undergo a continuous process of change over time is not new. We are accustomed to developers taking greenfield sites and creating “named” suburban developments (e.g. “The Hamptons,” “Riverbend”) on uninhabited land that now has a specific identity and meaning as a marketing device. Other developers build high rise buildings and mixed use structures on brownfield sites or in urban renewal projects within the city and also use naming and architectural codes in order to create an identity to facilitate consumption. This complex process is the result of the imaginations of builder/planner/architect conceptions of urban space in relation to markets/financiers/consumers which led Jansson (2003:464) to describe the symbolic reproduction and change that occurs in cities as a “negotiated city image” in which users and transformers of these spaces oppose one another. While the knowledge and information economy has played a big role in the creation of more employment downtown, the role of amenities is also a well-known factor in making downtown living more desirable (Ley 1996). New housing and amenities become the drivers for reimagining a downtown as

consumer friendly which obviously means replacing people and structures not consonant with that goal. Indeed, Hyra (2012) found that the new focus on urban renewal in the United States is precisely to accommodate downtown expansion due to high wage workers wanting to live downtown, including middle class African-Americans. Attempts to provide housing for mixed income levels are largely token and are certainly a far cry from the old model of low income housing projects on the peripheries of downtowns. In Canadian cities, as downtown living has become more costly and gentrified, low income people are being pushed to the suburbs (Ades, Apparicio, and Seguin 2012). This is certainly the case in Calgary where an expanding downtown and the increasing gentrification of its surrounding communities have pushed new arrivals and low income people to suburbs located primarily in the northeast and southeast quadrants of the city. It is for this reason that the East Village is so interesting in that it remained a primary location for homeless shelters and seemingly resisted revitalization and gentrification for a long time. As will be demonstrated, the East Village provides a significant example not of renewal through complete site clearance as much as revitalization through rebuilding and reimagining while at the same time attempting to minimize displacement of the poor—a challenging task. If low income/homeless people are to be retained in the area and middle and upper middle class people are to be attracted to the area to live, a significant amount of energy would need to be placed into reimagining the area.

### **The Stigmatization of the East End**

The east end of what is now the downtown was where the city had its roots as a fort of the North West Mounted Police and then somewhat later as a maintenance facility for the Canadian Pacific Railway that arrived in the city in 1883 (see Figure 1). The railroad largely defined the shape of the city which was incorporated in 1894 with 4,000 residents because the location of the station marked the fulcrum, retail centre and therefore the downtown which was built westward from the fort. It was here where iconic landmarks of the early city such as the luxury Palliser Hotel, the Grain Exchange Building, and the Hudson's Bay Company store with its distinct colonnades and terracotta architecture helped to mark 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 1<sup>st</sup> Street as the core of the city. The railway line ran in an east/west direction between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue meaning that settlement and warehousing grew up along the tracks while single detached housing more typically occurred at a greater distance from the tracks. The area to the east of the downtown core towards the fort went through several iterations from initially serving as a pasture to being a mixed residential, commercial, and light industrial area. These mixed uses meant that it was an active site but the housing was of lower quality and the mix of commercial/industrial functions such as wholesale, warehousing, livery and blacksmiths, foundries, and lumbering was strikingly different from the central part of the core. Thus in comparison to other areas of the downtown, the east end began to serve a different function including prostitution and bootlegging. Already by 1941, the area was referred to as “skid row.”

Two developments in the 1960's had an impact on the area. One was that an interest in preserving the original site of Fort Calgary led to a land swap with the Canadian National Railways so that an interpretive centre could be established on the eastern edge of the east end (located across the Elbow River from the Inglewood residential community). The second development was the Downtown Master Plan adopted by the City of Calgary in 1966 which addressed the east end as an area of blight in need of urban renewal and tied to the Urban Renewal Scheme No. 1A (Sandalack and Nicolai 2006:106). The east end (larger than what we now speak of as the East Village and composed of thirty one blocks) was renamed Churchill Park in an effort to rebrand the area as the Plan noted that the housing had deteriorated and that the amenities for residential uses had been lost (City of Calgary 1965). Even a chain grocery store which took up a whole city block was closed and demolished. Over time, the area was largely cleared of many historic buildings. The area closest to the center of the downtown core in the east end was rebuilt as a segregated land use location known as the institutional district (Sandalack and Nicolai 2006:108) eventually housing the Public Library, the Federal Government Building, the Calgary Board of Education Building, the Glenbow Museum, the Convention Centre, and the Performing Arts Building. This meant that while the western part of Churchill Park took on a new identity as the institutional district and was integrated into the Downtown, the area between it and Fort Calgary remained an area of blight and mixed uses amidst decaying buildings. The name Churchill Park then disappeared as it no longer described the area—and especially the area of blight. In anticipation that new development might occur but also as a way of ridding the city of the problems and image of the area, many lots were eventually bought by the city, sometimes leased, and then ultimately razed creating empty lots and a “bombed out” effect in which

drug dealing and prostitution only accentuated the image of the area as a problem.

The fate of this location as the stigmatized east end was sealed by the construction of the new Municipal Building adjacent to the historic City Hall in 1985. This modern 14 story glass enclosed triangular structure was located in such a way as to open westward on 2<sup>nd</sup> Street to the newly created Olympic Plaza purposely built to accommodate and celebrate the city's hosting of the 1988 Winter Olympics. The new Municipal Building in relation to the Plaza created brilliant sight lines for both purposes, fit nicely into the boundaries of the institutional district, and linked well to the office and retail complexes of the Downtown on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue which was transformed into a pedestrian mall and renamed Stephen Avenue Walk. However, the municipal building's fortress-like character had the effect of serving as a barrier to the east end which emphasized its role as a "no man's land." Furthermore, while the central section of the east end exhibited evidence of abandonment—particularly as the city began to buy up property, the edges of the area housed/served a unique clientele. At the southeast edge, the type of superblocks typical of urban renewal strategies were built in the 1970's to accommodate low income seniors. These high rise structures stood like sentinels all alone on the edges of the area. At the northwest and southwest edges of the area, shelters for the homeless were built. The Calgary DropIn Centre had existed in the east end since 1961 to serve the needs of the homeless but had to relocate to accommodate the construction of the LRT northeast line. Rather than move out of the area as part of the site clearance process, an attractive, functional, and modern new building (sometimes referred to as "the homeless Hilton") was built a couple of blocks away in 2001. At the southwest corner, the Salvation Army built a new Centre of Hope in 2002 to also accommodate the homeless. Again, these new structures had aesthetic appeal but their proximity to old hotels (the Cecil, the St. Louis, and the King Eddy) which acted as rooming houses, vacant spaces such as the well-known "crack cul de sac" and the riverbank which provided lounging areas for the homeless, meant that the east end's reputation became even more stigmatized. The fact that redlining occurred in the area, the fact that the city owned 50% of the property, and the fact that existing community inhabitants were viewed as problematic for reinvestment meant that locational obsolescence continued. While the rest of the downtown had experienced unprecedented building expansion producing a dramatic shift in the city's skyline and creating a dynamic image of the city, the east end still languished.

### The Revitalization Paradox

On the one hand, the east end was very well placed. It had a beautiful riverbank setting along the Bow River and it was adjacent to the Downtown core and all its amenities. The area bordered on the green spaces of Fort Calgary and St. Patrick's Island and its riverfront. Access to office buildings employing thousands was excellent through either pedestrian pathways or the free fare zone on the LRT. The recently branded Olympic Plaza Cultural District was even closer with its access to performing arts buildings and restaurants. Shopping options were unlimited—all of which clearly supported a leisure consumption lifestyle, and yet the east end failed to flourish.

On the other hand, one dominant issue was that the existing population in the east end was viewed as problematic for reinvestment. While considerable physical site clearance had occurred which had removed much activity from the area, what remained were marginalized peoples (homeless and low income seniors) who had become even more entrenched with the construction of new buildings to house them. A study completed in 1992 pointed out that while the population in the area was around 1,000 people, it was difficult to account for people who stayed in the emergency shelters and were essentially transient (McDonald and Peressini 1992). In addition to the agencies operating there already listed, there was a single men's hostel and a youth hostel which accentuated the impermanence of its population. Somewhat separated from the homeless shelters at the other end of the area, low income seniors had some sense of community through their Golden Age Club. There was virtually no integration between these two population groups and the characteristics of belonging and interconnectedness associated with "a village" were largely absent. The village image represented anticipated images of the future more than current reality or perhaps even represented an imagery of denial about current slum-like conditions which predominated in the area. All in all, the area was defined more by its potential than its reality for more than half a century.

The Task Force on Housing in the Downtown appointed by City Council in 1988 had recognized the role which the East Village could play in providing more dwelling units in the city core (*Living in Calgary's Downtown*, City of Calgary 1992) but had hoped that affordable housing rather than emergency shelters with



its implied transience would be the future of the area. Nevertheless, the orientation of the Task Force was definitely in opposition to displacement of the homeless agencies and proposed redevelopment combining housing types and income levels. In short, gentrification was to be rejected if it meant displacement and instead, the goal of revitalization was to create a very mixed community which included significant low cost housing. Such a goal represented a marvelous ideal; but it also minimized issues in private investment and marketing which further delayed change in the area. The other matter that emerged in consultant reports was that future housing in the area would not likely appeal to families with children. The assumption was that families would always prefer suburban living given the local culture and that the nature of the community, including the lack of a school, would more likely be more attractive to singles, young couples, empty nesters, and retirees. For these reasons, it was expected that if and when redevelopment occurred in the East Village, the community would be rather unique in its composition.

In spite of these efforts in the early 1990's, and in spite of the fact that the City had identified the East Village as a development priority if not an eyesore, nothing happened. The goal of redeveloping the east end was clearly acknowledged by the 1970's and numerous proposals including the East Village Area Redevelopment Plan in 2005 yielded no results. In 2007, City Council adopted the Rivers District Community Revitalization Plan<sup>1</sup> which finally produced an entity to manage redevelopment. What was different about this initiative was that the City of Calgary created its own development company called the Calgary Municipal Land Corporation (CMLC) to provide the infrastructural changes that needed to be made *before* redevelopment could occur. Instead of expecting the private sector to engage in risky piecemeal development of individual sites (which was clearly not occurring), a commitment was needed to show that the City was dealing with issues in the area. Among these issues were flood proofing, road raising, and a RiverWalk pedestrian/bike path was designed along the Bow River—all of which was funded by a new mechanism called a Community Revitalization Levy (similar to Tax Increment Financing TIF) which segregates future taxes from the area to finance the improvements. The CMLC, however, went much further and redesigned the whole area including road realignment, sidewalk widening and streetscape improvements, a pedestrian bridge across the Elbow River and a new bridge to St. Patrick's Island, dealing with ground contamination, upgrading underground utilities, a 4<sup>th</sup> Street underpass connector to the Stampede Park area, and developing a plan for the revitalization of the heritage buildings that remained. Depending on how costs are apportioned, more than \$180 million was spent on improving the infrastructure over approximately five years (2007-2012) to make the area "safe" for further investment particularly by the private sector. All of these infrastructural changes provided the material basis to transform the area but they did not transform the image of the area as a place to live.

Fully 25 years after City Council first declared its desire for housing in the East Village, two major developers announced plans for high density housing in 2013 largely as a response to the efforts of the CMLC who understood the new residences as an important symbol of revitalization. A major hotel chain (Hilton Garden Inn and Homewood Suites) also announced their plans for construction of a hotel and funding was secured by the Cantos Music Foundation for the construction of a signature building to be known as the National Music Centre. These initiatives were all very visible signs of a new community being born but a shift in the image of the area in the popular mind was also required. Developers could not wait for complete build out for a thriving community to be present for the image of the community to be transformed naturally. Consequently, unprecedented efforts had to be made to change the image of the east end virtually immediately. The population was still only around 2100 people by 2013, most of whom were living in non-market housing, had incomes below the poverty line, and 95% were living alone. This was hardly the demographic needed to repopulate the area if the goal was 11,500 residents. Therefore, concerted efforts needed to be made to transform the image of the area through showing *how space could be reimagined by acting as though a community already existed there long before the new residents moved in* (occupation of the first residences was not expected before 2015).

### Reimagining the East Village

As has already been noted, there was a desire to brand the east end as the "East Village" for many years as though discourse and labelling was enough to transform it. It was obviously a preferred label to that of a "slum." Using the terminology of an urban "village" was a social construction of localism, human scale, and mixed use in anticipation of change (Franklin and Tait 2002; Bell and Jayne 2004) that was hardly enough to alter people's image of the area. Something further was required beyond expecting normal market forces to transform it as



occurs in typical cases of gentrification. After all, homeless shelters and low income seniors housing are not often thought of as compatible with upmarket condominiums. Reimagining the area then required a strategic marketing campaign undertaken by CMLC with a new discourse and a new interpretive scheme which can be analyzed in order to understand how the area was now being redefined and given new meaning.

The first objective reimagined the area with an identity of new characteristics but much more integrated with neighboring areas thereby breaking its isolation. The East Village was to be understood as “a master planned community” rather than developments that just evolved on a piece lot basis (CMLC 2009). The area was redefined as not merely the place where Calgary was founded but is today “where the future of Calgary’s downtown is unfolding.” It is where “walkability and livability” were to coexist in an “architecturally stimulated mid-rise harmony.” It was to be a location “inspired” by well-known neighborhoods in the world such as Soho in New York, Plateau in Montreal, and Gastown in Vancouver which were known for their vitality and bustle of mixed uses—all recognized urban villages. Furthermore, the community was to be known for its own leisure amenities which were to be facilitated by connectivity to other communities and the rest of the downtown through new streets, bridges, and pedestrian walkways. In other words, the East Village would have the elements necessary to form a distinct village with its own sense of locality and sociability but would no longer be isolated by being integrally connected to surrounding communities. The previous wall of isolation, impermeability, and stigma would be torn down and replaced by interaction. Symbolic of that linkage to other inner city communities was a new diagonal pedestrian walking path known as “The Riff” which would cross the East Village in a new pattern creating a link to neighboring areas. The revitalization of the area was also envisioned as a reversal of the westward shift of the city core now towards the east and south and contribute to the regeneration of nearby communities, Inglewood and Victoria Park East. Physical changes then would be intimately related to community interaction effects in transforming images of place.

The second initiative taken was to redefine who would live in the East Village. The prospective resident was not defined demographically by age or marital status or social class but by personality type and lifestyle. The target market was now given a new identity as “the urban explorer” i.e. someone who preferred urban vibrancy rather than the boring tranquility of the suburbs and who had “an interest in culture, events, restaurants, boutique shopping, and other stimulations of city life” (CMLC 2009). The urban explorer was a hypothetical character who was somehow different from other urban residents and who “lives life for its passions—sports, romance, friends, cuisine, art, entertainment.” The urban explorer or target resident of the East Village was to be “a breed apart” from suburbanites and prefer a lifestyle different from what is currently available in the city. Implicit in this profile was that residents would be more urbane by being tolerant of diversity particularly in this instance as defined by social class although that motif was submerged.

Third, the East Village was described more directly in terms of its people-focused vivacity and energy (a distinct contrast to its previous state) which had to be demonstrated long before new residents arrived. To be part of the community was understood not as a place as much as an existential “experience” or the EVExperience (EVE). A website was created around that theme and was central to marketing the area.<sup>2</sup> “EV is suited to people who like walkable neighbourhoods and close contact with others; urbanites who enjoy working near their living spaces and consider the city their entertainment, their home and their playground.” Again the implication was that this was the opposite of the suburbanite which heretofore largely defined residents in the city. Note the emphasis on the city core as a “playground” and place of entertainment. It was striking that the term “east village” was changed from a casual name to a trademark owned by the CMLC and that *the area became a neighborhood in discourse long before any new residents moved into it*. Elements of the sense of neighborhood were created by making major announcements and promoting local food retailers (a bakery, a coffee house, and restaurant in the historic Simmons Building, formerly a mattress factory now converted for leisure consumption) as “foodie heroes” *at least two years before they even opened in the area*. Announcements of a grocery store, park developments on St. Patrick’s Island, and the excitement of the National Music Centre (which would house the Canadian Music Hall of Fame among other things) were all mobilized as leisure amenities to change the image city residents had of the area *long before they were constructed or in operation*. Perhaps even more striking was the attempt to revision the area by *repopulating it even if only temporarily* by creating activity that brought new people in for arts and crafts and seasonal markets, movies, runs, concerts, and food. With creative names such as “Feast in the East,” “Taste the Trucks,” “Rock the Walk,” “Vintage in the Village,” “Light up Langevin,” “Fall for East Village,” “Glowb Ride,” and “Flow by the Bow” among others, more than 80 events and 120 days

of programming were held in the area bringing in more than 54,000 (2012) and 57,000 (2013) people and introducing them to the “new” East Village (CMLC 2012/2013). An operetta “The Pirates of Penzance” was staged outdoors to thousands of ticketholders. Marketing of the East Village was so intense that even Light Rail Transit cars carried massive signage claiming with exaggeration that “Everyone’s Moving to East Village.” Bringing new people into a previously forgotten space, even if only temporarily, created a sense of community vitality as a mechanism for changing conceptions of urban space. All of this intense reimagining happened years before anyone new had moved in.

But how would the new population be reconciled with the existing population? Community was defined by CMLC as “making everyone feel at home,” diversity was not perceived as a problem but as “fascinating” and was to be celebrated as “great neighbors” making “a healthy neighborhood” (CMLC 2013). The homeless shelters were defined as “caring institutions” and as places where you can volunteer and make a difference “right in your own neighborhood.” Even the 2013 flood which plagued the city and impacted this riverbank community was not explained as a threat but as something that made it “more cohesive and stronger.” Yet the realities of the homeless shelters with its transient populations (emergency and transitional housing and serving three meals a day) rather than permanent residents often challenged this imaginary. Modernist lounge chairs placed along the riverbank pathways by the CMLC in the community redesign effort were being used as campsites during the day and as sleeping stations at night. The high-tech washrooms installed in the area were being used for “unintended” purposes and were closed in 2014 and the lounge chairs were removed. The fact that patrons of homeless shelters were often loitering in the area, especially during the day, meant that sharing this space was indeed challenging.

The objective of making the area an attractive place for investment and the purchase of condominiums meant that “mixed housing” was defined as integrating the existing residents with the new property owners rather than building new non-market and affordable housing for additional residents. Revisioning the area could only occur through changing its image as attractive to a different class of people. It is whether existing residents felt integrated into this new image because it was imposed from outside.

## Discussion

The reimagining of the East Village was all about changing the meaning of urban space for the sake of outsiders and prospective residents rather than to focus on those already living in the area. All urban spaces are coded with attributed meanings based on perceptions and experiences (Frers and Meier 2007). As Seeley (1970) pointed out long ago, the term “slum” is a word imposed on local residents by people living elsewhere who bring their own values to bear on that area of the city. In other words, outsiders give meaning to specific urban spaces by bringing their own values to those spaces. But as Tuan (1977) noted, place has a different meaning if you inhabit it rather than just observe it. The difference between the insider’s perspective and the outsider’s perspective was clearly articulated by Anderson (1991) in her study of Chinatown by showing how outsiders played a major role defining the meaning of these spaces. The revisioning process for the East Village required changing the way outsiders viewed the space as well as changing outsiders to insiders by having people populate the area even if only temporarily to create an insider’s perspective of the space. Place-making then not only depends on perceptions but of experiences in that space that are essentially social (Castello 2010). In that way, places produce affects and affects are open to constant change and manipulation (Davidson, Park and Shields 2011). The goal of the image makers was to change the meaning of these spaces to produce a different kind of affect (emotion) in the target market which, as we noted in this instance, were defined as “urban explorers.” Coding of place was being changed from barren, criminogenic, and unappealing to lively, interesting, and interactive. Furthermore, the objective was to shift from representations of space as conceived by planners and architects to representational space as experienced and lived (Lefebvre 1995) or as Soja (1996) notes, third space that is fluid, dynamic, and can be restructured. But the end result is ultimately presented as utopian (Harvey 2000).

In the contemporary city, inner city communities become battlegrounds in the landscapes of power as new urban landscapes represent new social values (Zukin 1991). Old areas are reimagined and existing functions and residents are displaced as classically represented by gentrification. In the case of the East Village, non-residential functions had been squeezed out long ago and what remained were marginalized populations who were not likely to be relocated because the agency structures which they occupied were relatively new and failed the test of dilapidation. Furthermore, their residences/shelters were on the physical margins of the area meaning

that most of the area was available for comprehensive redevelopment. Since gentrification with displacement was also not considered good civic policy, redevelopment was reinterpreted as revitalization through a much more aggressive reimagining of the area than otherwise would have been required. While mixing of social classes is often viewed as the answer to deprivation and ghettoization, there is considerable debate over the success of such efforts in the building of social capital and sense of community (Arthurson 2002; Nast and Blokland 2013; compare Montreal, Damaris 2004). Moreover, arguing that social mixing is a sign of toleration may only mask what is in truth in the long term a process of invasion and displacement by a new social class (Lees 2008). In the case of the East Village, it remains to be seen how the existence of two prominent social agencies in the area will affect the community. The Calgary Homeless Foundation has an ambitious ten year plan to end homelessness with its “housing first” strategy through the provision of affordable housing and the expectation that no one should be in emergency housing longer than one week. Whether this strategy is successful or not remains to be seen but there has been considerable resources given to the creation of satellite shelters in other parts of the city which suggests that the size of the shelter population may be controlled because new options are being created away from the city center. In other words, while it is uncertain whether ending homelessness is achievable, a more sanitized community in keeping with the new class of people moving into the East Village will still present challenges to their coexistence.

The semiotic shift in redefining the East Village as a community has been successful to the extent that condominium sales have been brisk. Nevertheless, this redefinition of space invades the territory of the homeless and low income seniors. A fledgling East Village Neighborhood Association/Action Committee aims to represent the interests of all residents but its ability to do so has already been challenged by the loss of meeting space for the Golden Age Club. It is clear that while an upgrade of physical/material spaces has occurred, it is the social spaces between the characteristics and life style of the existing population and the incoming population which will be the ultimate test for the new community- in spite of the rhetoric and discourse.

## Conclusion

The evolution of the east end from “slum” to urban village has been a long and arduous process. While the imagineering of these spaces in public consciousness was more a mental construct in the past, municipally-led revitalization has created a new sense of place and a new narrative landscape utilizing a very different discourse. In true gentrification terms, the area is in the process of recolonization as the result of a deliberate strategy led by civic authorities but also dependent on private capital. However, avoiding displacement has called forth the need for a very aggressive campaign to change the meaning of this space that revitalizes it and not merely redevelops it. Branding the area as appealing to a unique urban character was meant to self-select as well as shape the behavior of a particular type of new urbane consumer who was sought to reside there (Johansson 2012) in a manner that hypothetically integrates with the existing population.

The semiotic process described in this paper identifies a particular point in time when a powerful mechanism was required to change public perceptions of urban space but also to legitimize the transformation which was envisioned in the face of an existing population. In many ways, the re-imagineering of this area has already become concretized and increasingly hegemonic. The first wave of new occupants arrived in 2015 as some high rise residential structures were completed and more are planned given the successful market uptake. The selection of this site for the new Central Library in addition to the National Music Center—both meant to have an iconic architectural role for the city, and the promise of other housing innovations (e.g. the city’s first parking-free condominium and apartments with onsite daycare) as well as a new boutique hotel and other commercial uses suggests that while the original occupants may not have been displaced, they are becoming overwhelmed. Even the discourse used to market the area has shifted from redefining its problematic history to emphasizing its cultural attributes.

The coexistence of new homeowners with the homeless and low income renters will be a critical test of whether the reinterpretation of space has been powerful enough to satisfy both segments of the new community. The way in which the East Village was marketed and revisioned would be consistent with locational attainment theories that neighborhood conditions reflect and drive social outcomes (Logan et al. 1996). Spatial assimilation approaches are based on the premise that neighborhoods are dynamic and that people move to places that reflect their status. The reimagining of the area was certainly meant to convey a particular type of status and lifestyle that attempted to resolve the contradiction between opposite social classes. As Allen (2013) puts it, perceptions of



physical disorder in a neighborhood lead to a less stable population. So if disorder is replaced by a new order of planned design and condominium owners, the East Village will serve as a good test of the outcomes of such a transformation on the marginalized that remain and who will be overwhelmed numerically on build out. To expect low income seniors or those lacking shelter to patronize the establishments that are promoted as instrumental to revitalization and “livability” seems unlikely. Should the community unfold in this direction, it would be consistent with the notion of demographic urban inversion (Ehrenhalt 2012) in which central cities are no longer populated by immigrants, minorities, and the poor but by the more affluent who can afford the housing and whose values embrace the amenities now being offered. It is precisely for this reason that the imagery and discourse in this semiotic analysis represents an important experiment in averting such an outcome.

All civic imagineering involves creating images in expectation that they will/do reflect reality (Cohen 2013). The unique mixed class challenges of the East Village demonstrates how themes of human revitalization are used to re-energize these spaces rather than to depend only on the typical material processes of renewal through redevelopment. It is possible that the reimagining of urban spaces needs to be strongest in periods of transition such as described here but that once the redefinition has taken hold, normal marketing discourse is typical. The impact on the pre-redevelopment population i.e.; the people utilizing emergency shelters and low income seniors remains to be seen. Potential future studies could address the experiences of these residents, as well as the organizations serving them to find out how whether the rhetoric resisting displacement is realistic or not.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term “Rivers District” was used because it was a plan with a larger focus including the area to the south of the railroad tracks along the Elbow River known as the Beltline or Victoria Park East in addition to the East Village.

<sup>2</sup> A number of the quotations in this section come from the website <http://www.evexperience.com> accessed in 2013.

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