# (In)visibilizing Vulnerable Community Members: Processes of Urban Inclusion and Exclusion in Parkdale, Toronto

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## Abstract

The visibility and invisibility of vulnerable individuals or groups in public space have been extensively used as a conceptual tool to assess the "public" character of space. This article analyses the case study of the Parkdale neighborhood in Toronto demonstrating how public space is constructed in a path-dependent territorial process where different layers play a dynamic constitutive role: a material, a discursive, and a policy dimension. It argues that urban visibilization and invisibilization in public spaces extensively affect the dynamics of urban inclusion and exclusion, particularly when they are used in specific territorial stigmatization and destigmatization processes. The investigation enables to better understand the socio-spatial conditions comprising the "denial" and "recognition" of certain groups and individuals at the neighborhood level by understanding how local policies and community-based practices influence the complex dynamic of "seeing and being seen" in an urban environment.

## Keywords

invisibility, public space, urban inclusion, urban policies, visibility

## Introduction

Urban space is at the core of the construction of difference. Many authors have highlighted how cities provide resources for various groups to construct themselves differently within urban space (Amin & Thrift, 2012). In this process, public spaces epitomize the complexities of urban societies: As the social realm has transformed, public spaces have also changed, becoming part of fragmented urban environments (Mandanipour, 2010). Public space is assembled in an everyday reciprocal dynamic relation that is rich with symbols and power, where differences such as gender, class, and ethnicity are imbued in representations and social constructions (Valentine, 2008). This offers a new perspective through which to examine the relationship between society and space (De Backer et al., 2019).

Public space seems to be the *locus* that best epitomizes the capacity of difference to question traditional spatial hierarchies and forms of belonging (Mandanipour, 2010; Wijntuin & Koster, 2018). Public spaces are neither intrinsically places of fear nor automatically places of

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encounter—they are open social and political fields, where physical and symbolic dimensions both play a fundamental role (Cancellieri & Ostanel, 2015). Public spaces are filled with signs, symbols, and markers that are variously interpreted by socially positioned, culturally distinct people. As a result, public spaces might mean completely different things for different groups (Lownsbrough & Beunderman, 2007) and can become a reference point for a specific population from which others perceive they are excluded.

Many scholars have described how specific populations in cities are accused of surpassing the upper threshold of correct visibility (Brighenti, 2010; Sezer & Maldonado, 2017). Their bodily presence combined with the level of visibility of their unconventional uses of urban space defies a spatial order that is essentially taken for granted as the right way. Ash Amin coined the term "phenotypical racism" to describe the contemporary European xenophobia that divides "pure" bodies from "impure" bodies concerning the right to use and even to be present in public spaces. According to the author, this form of biopolitics is a "biopolitics of catastrophism" (Amin, 2013, p. 6) that is able to personify excluded groups as the ones producing social disorder and economic insecurity. At a local level, the perception of this sort of "socio-geographical transgression" occurs when others are considered to be "out of place" (Cresswell, 1996). The visible nature of difference becomes hypervisible, and public discourse creates periods of "moral panic" (Cohen, 1973) in which dominant social groups act out hysterically, depicting otherness as a threat to the appropriate use of urban space. The active environment somehow renders the strange familiar and the familiar strange (Amin, 2008).

Based on these premises, this article analyses the case study of the Parkdale neighborhood in Toronto, Canada. It argues that urban visibilization and invisibilization in public spaces extensively affect the dynamics of urban inclusion and exclusion, particularly when they are used in specific territorial stigmatization and destigmatization processes. More specifically, it illustrates how specific narratives on the use of public space can augment the exclusion of the most vulnerable populations in the name of redevelopment schemes enhancing beautification, securitization, and control. In a similar vein, different narratives can be used to support planning alternatives based on recognition and civic participation. The analysis demonstrates how public space is constructed in a path-dependent territorial process where different layers play dynamic constitutive roles: a material one (the appropriation of spaces, the signification of spaces, and the consequent urban inclusion and exclusion dynamics), a discursive one (the narratives mobilized in both public discourse and policy documents), and a policy dimension (considering how local policies and community-based actions use or contest dominant narratives). The investigation enables to better understand the socio-spatial conditions comprising the "denial" and "recognition" of certain groups and individuals at the neighborhood level by understanding how local policies and community-based practices influence the complex dynamic of "seeing and being seen" in an urban environment.

The work here presented is based on field research conducted in Toronto between November 2017 and May 2019. Field research started in Parkdale in February 2018 based on a qualitative approach. The research focuses on a territorial and policy level by using a multi-method approach: More specifically the field research has conducted in-depth interviews with key stakeholders (community allies, policymakers and politicians, foundations, and other key informants); participant observation to key urban spaces; in-depth interviews with policy officers, policy document analysis; participant observation to key stakeholders' meetings and decision-making processes.

## Parkdale in Toronto

Toronto, one of the most hyper-diversified cities in the world, has appeared to be an interesting subject in this case study. Its socio-spatial polarization is proceeding at a rate much greater than elsewhere in Canada. Formerly middle-income neighborhoods are transforming into having

either high or low income (Walks, 2009). Toronto has become a strikingly segregated city, with visible minorities concentrated in low-income neighborhoods and white residents dominating affluent areas in numbers far higher than their share of the population (Hulchanski, 2009).

In this context, Toronto is experiencing sustained gentrification and advanced suburban restructuring (Walks & August, 2008). Toronto's urban changes are strongly impacted by the global economy more than by the capacity of local policies to govern them (Lehrer, 2006). We witness a policy context where the local government is constantly retreating from investments that give room to private corporations' ventures, making the social production of space strongly influenced by property rights (Lehrer & Laidley, 2008).

Many scholars have demonstrated how territorial stigmatization processes provide a pretext for justifying gentrification-led displacement (Kallin & Slater, 2014; Maloutas, 2009; Sakizlioglu & Uitermark, 2014; Wacquant, 2008). Other scholars have already proven this extensive occurrence in Toronto, particularly in the Parkdale neighborhood (August, 2014; Horgan, 2018; Slater, 2017). While Parkdale was once considered one of the least affordable downtown neighborhoods for ethnically diverse community members, this is now rapidly changing. The 2016 census data show the recent immigrant population (people arriving in the previous 10 years) is shrinking and the non-immigrant population is growing. The population of low-income persons and recent immigrants has decreased, while the population of older Canadian-born working adults has increased. The resident occupations are shifting away from middle-income blue-collar jobs towards business/professionals (including low-level office workers). Apartments removed from the regular rental housing stock and made available for short-term rental, through services like Airbnb, have doubled in Parkdale in the past three years.[1] Advertised asking rents increased drastically over the 2015–2017 period by over $426 per month, or 36% (Leon, 2019). Low-income people—together with populations suffering from mental illness and addiction experience, refugees and recent immigrants, and people facing homelessness—are all strongly affected by rent increases, gentrification processes, and the resulting changes in the use of public spaces.[2]

While the inclusivity of the Parkdale neighborhood is at risk, community-based activism is getting stronger. In the last few years, diverse organizations and community allies have built a social infrastructure that promotes the empowerment of diverse community members in a condition where land-use decision-making is particularly market-driven, compartmentalized, and privatized (Parkdale Community Economic Development, 2016).

Over the years, community-based activation in Parkdale has increasingly taken into account the root causes of social and spatial inequalities, as well as fostering much-needed conversations across scales, going from the micro (everyday resistance to neighborhood change) to the macro level (policy changes and rethinking of planning regimes; Ostanel, 2020). The cultural politics of agency at neighborhood levels (Rankin, 2009) deploys alternative symbols and images to indicate changes in the mainstream narratives and policy measures. The de-stigmatization process particularly occurs around who has the right to manipulate (and inhabit) the urban space.

## Public Spaces in Dynamics of Urban Inclusion and Exclusion

In this analysis, I consider public space an actor (Gotham, 2003; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2010): urban public space can be both a potential bridge-building feature and a boundary creator, dense with symbolic representations and capable of having material effects on social inclusion and exclusion dynamics. Public space can become a place of exclusion, from both the inside and the outside. In other words, public space is a constitutive element of boundary construction with both visible barriers (environmental design, beautification, and control) and invisible ones (the "transgression" of the most vulnerable groups).

The analysis of public space permits a renovated pragmatism in the analysis of the city that should be more grounded and interpreted in particular settings and practices, rather than solely

asserted as political or ethical aspirations (Fincher, 2015). Public space offers the concrete possibility of exploring how difference is experienced and negotiated on the ground as well as how social relations and social actors' identities are shaped and re-shaped in the processes of urban inclusion and exclusion.

Public space can, therefore, be considered a fertile entry point to assess the contemporary city because it epitomizes its own complexity. It is a fruitful layer where one can assess how the process of urban inclusion and exclusion occurs, moving beyond an often normative approach (Ahmed, 1992). The reposition of the everyday experience at the center of analysis provides crucial information about how the process of appropriation and making sense of space occurs within the contemporary urban context. De Backer and other scholars have recently dedicated a special issue to "The Everyday Politics of Public Space" (De Backer et al., 2019). Gotham (2003) has already taken us beyond the space-as-container ontology, affirming that a full understanding of human actions requires the recognition of the spatial nature of human agency, since space is an assemblage of spatial uses, practices and representations "involved in the production and reproduction of social structures, social action, and relations of power and resistance" (p. 724). In this sense, urban space is much more than a mere container for social interactions.

In contemporary cities, the public character of the space is a consequence of the competition over its access, which can determine the public's identity in a particular space (Iveson, 2013). As De Backer et al. (2019) highlighted, the struggles for power on public spaces not only take place in space, they are *of* space. Based on Massey's (1992) theoretical backdrop, De Backer et al. (2019) highlighted how the political nature of public space resides in related bordering practices. The territorial nature of public space implies that it is shaped in an uneven and contested process (Ince, 2012) where political, cultural, economic, and social trajectories matter (Valentine, 2008). The policy context can also play a major role in this process (Ostanel, 2015). I have demonstrated how specific government tools (Le Galés & Scott, 2010) used on public spaces are designed to manage poverty and social inequality as mere problems of social order and urban aesthetics (Cancellieri & Ostanel, 2015). However, in a different manner, other scholars highlight how policies can restore justice by unlocking social capabilities through the empowering of autonomous groups in manipulating the urban space (Iveson, 2013). Nikšič and Sezer (2017) illustrated that in the academic, governmental, and public arenas, there is increasing interest in public space as a facilitator of urban justice and that urban justice is not an abstract concept but can have relevant policy-practical implications.

The production of public space cannot be separated from time (Massey, 1992) and its representation (Friedmann, 1999; Garfinkel, 1967; Park, 1921). Transforming public space is a patterned ground that proves essential for actors to make sense of the space; such patterning is the way in which a public space is domesticated (Amin, 2008). Particularly in periods of moral panic (Cohen, 1973), dominant social groups act out hysterically, depicting minorities as a threat to the appropriate use of urban space (Douglas, 1980). Brighenti (2007) has extensively analyzed how visibility is a relevant angle to look at the everyday production of public space. The author has used two nodes of visibility—recognition and control—to understand the process that assures or prevents the publicness of urban space. Observing public space is a way to witness contemporary, social, and spatial agency (Ince, 2012).

As De Backer (2019) argued, visibility and invisibility can "easily transform into the other or present themselves simultaneously" (p. 1). Cities and specific parts of them can become battlegrounds for contesting the presence of problematic groups in public spaces, and movements towards their recognition are not guaranteed to translate into achieving citizen rights to the city (Hörschelmann & van Blerk, 2012). Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2010) recognizes the relevance of human spatial agency as a means to ask for recognition in public space in urban society. Emergent spatialities thus represent the ways in which citizens imagine spaces that will house the life they fight for. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos sees spatial justice as the move to "possess" the

right to space, even though this space seemingly belongs to others, in the hope that this move will be "held up" by the space itself (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2010). However, the contemporary city also witnesses specific processes of individualization and self-organization practices (Watson, 2018) which lead us to consider a reality where the individual dimension is becoming the center of social action, no longer only produced by defined collective social actors.

When analyzing public spaces and related processes in(visibilization), we should bear in mind that structural elements are able to shape access to the urban space, and local policies can play a role in supporting or preventing it. Urban inclusion/exclusion often embodies the allocation of space, somehow mirroring disparities to access social, economic, and political rights; in some cases, they also trigger a process of domination of certain areas (and the groups located within them) over other parts of the city (Iveson, 2013). The organization of property markets, housing distribution, taxation, and subsidies are some policy domains in which unjust measures can be implemented to dominate minority groups. Ignoring the dynamics that draw rigid boundaries and cause or contribute to the domination/repression of certain groups means ignoring structural spatial dynamics of injustice in access to public space (Dikeç, 2012; Iveson, 2013; Ostanel, 2015). Public space is not neutral, it is the corollary of democracy: Conflict is not something that befalls an originally, or potentially, harmonious urban space but urban space is the product of the conflict (Deutsche, 1992). Amin has already stated that

[P]eople have to enter into public space as rightful citizens, sure of access to a means of life, communication, and progress. Without this guarantee, speaking about the right to be in public spaces, will amount to no more than tinkering on the edges of meaningful discourse. (Amin, 2008, p. 23)

## Visibilization and Invisibilization Processes in Parkdale, Toronto

### Parkdale: A Battleground for Visibilization/Invisibilization Processes

This article analyses Parkdale neighborhood in Toronto as a battleground where different stakeholders have alternatively used visibilization and invisibilization processes to support both "safety and surveillance" but also "recognition and civic participation."

Most vulnerable populations in Parkdale have historically been depicted as the ones "surpassing the correct threshold of visibility," thus destabilizing a taken-for-granted spatial order. In the wake of psychiatric deinstitutionalization in the 1970s, Parkdale, located next to the one of Canada's largest psychiatric facilities, developed the reputation of a neighborhood rife hosting poverty, crime, drugs, homelessness, and large numbers of people living with mental illness (Slater, 2004). Further analysis showed how public discourse is constructed around bachelorette (very small bachelor apartments) and rooming houses because these inexpensive rental housing options "threaten the stability of family neighborhoods," "destroy streetscape," and "bring a host of social problems because of the often rowdy transients they attract as tenants" (Whitzman & Slater, 2006, p. 687). In this framework, the overconcentration of social services and rooming houses/bachelorette in the neighborhood was considered the cause of an abundant number of drugs. The Municipality of Toronto strategically used these narratives to support the gentrification process from its onset (Slater, 2004).

In the same period, some organizations active in the provision of social services conveyed a counter-image: In their view, the main challenges of Parkdale were related to high unemployment and there was an increased need for the provision of more social services and social housing. The Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre (PARC) was among the most active community-based organizations supporting a different narrative about working in collaboration with other dynamic social agencies in the neighborhood, including West Neighbourhood House (WNH), Sistering, and Parkdale Intercultural Association.

The tension between the two alternate visions for the future of Parkdale erupted in 1996 in response to the Municipal "interim control bylaw" that prohibited any rooming house/bachelorette development or conversion in the southern Parkdale Ward.

An immediate effect of the top-down rezoning proposal by the city was an alliance among stakeholder groups in Parkdale. The Parkdale Common Front was established in 1996 to support the idea that Parkdale Village should remain a diverse neighborhood, accessible to low-income people. Many non-profit organizations became part of this association, including the Bachelorette Owners Association. This proposed rezoning resulted in the creation of an unusual alliance among stakeholder groups in Parkdale, including alliances with city-wide organizations, such as the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP).

The level of conflict was so high that in 1998, Toronto City Council decided to institute a formal conflict resolution process in Parkdale, aiming to open up a dialogue with all stakeholder organizations. Different organizations and the city staff met for 12 months in order to discuss the approach that the city should take on the existing illegal rooming houses and bachelorettes. In 1999, the Toronto City Council drafted and adopted a report with recommendations. A Parkdale Housing Committee and a Pilot Project Group were created and initiated into the neighborhood. In 2000, the recommendations started to be implemented, and 266 illegal properties were identified for potential legalization (Barna, 2007). In 2004, however, the City of Toronto abandoned the Parkdale Pilot Project. The reasons why the Parkdale Pilot Project was abandoned by the City of Toronto ambiguous. Barna (2007) highlights the lack of long-term support by the city, from both financial and political point of view, as one of the main reasons for this lost opportunity. However, Slater's (2004) analysis points out the lack of political willingness of the city to reduce the percentage of single-person housing.

## Safety and Surveillance

While Parkdale Village was going through a conflict resolution process, a regeneration project began in the adjacent Liberty Village. In the mid-1990s, Liberty Village—a progressively underused manufacturing area—shifted into a hub for creative and cultural industries. This shaped a strong public discourse encouraging the development of new forms of entrepreneurship in Liberty Village, supported by the private sector (in particular real estate investors), trade associations (i.e., Liberty Village Business Improvement Area [LVBIA]), and the local government. Liberty Village was defined as a neighborhood in the neighborhood, a very different urban environment compared to the rest of Parkdale. In public discourse, Liberty Village could offer specific competitive advantages: a functional and strongly branded neighborhood, a secure and beautiful space (with private security guaranteed by LVBIA), and safe, fully lit sidewalks and public spaces, as opposed to the adjacent Parkdale Village (Liberty Village Business Improvement Area, 2006). Liberty Village's redevelopment was strongly based on the creation of an alternative image (i.e., an emerging creative district) compared to that of Parkdale Village (an insecure neighborhood plagued by drug addiction, prostitution, and mental distress). Beautification and anesthetization of public spaces were considered a key strategy in guaranteeing the sense of security for new inhabitants and entrepreneurs. To give a sense of the intensity of this effort, private security forces also accompanied employees to public transport bus stops, checked on "abandoned vehicles, removed graffiti, or prevented other forms of vandalism in public spaces" (Catungal et al., 2009). Beautification and surveillance were considered key elements in creating a corporate-friendly urban space (Catungal et al., 2009). The image of beauty, functionality, and security was conveyed and juxtaposed to Parkdale Village to better support the insertion of a creative upper-middle class in the neighborhood. This primarily private-led regeneration project was then supported by specific local policies ultimately supporting this vision, such as the Culture Plan for the Creative City in 2003 and the Agenda for Prosperity in 2008. Consequently,

low-income populations (as well as independent artists and the non-profit organizations who had supported the regeneration process at the very beginning) were expelled from the neighborhood with a visible consequence on the uses and character of public space.

## Recognition and Civic Participation

Parkdale Village's rapid changes affect many elements. Housing affordability is difficult to achieve, and commercial and public spaces are becoming more and more dedicated to a high-income target rather than resident populations. Processes of visibilization and invisibilization are also modifying accordingly.

Capitalizing on the long-term history of local activation, PARC has progressively changed its mission over the last 10 years. Starting from a mission related to more traditional drop-in services, PARC has increasingly built efforts to organize against eviction caused by gentrification pressures.

In 2010, PARC started to work on activating a Community Land Trust Model to be applied in Parkdale; in 2012, an interim board for Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust (PNLT) was formed with the contribution of different organizations. In 2014, a non-profit organization was incorporated and run by a board of directors consisting of local non-profit organizations and groups that represented the diversity of Parkdale.

Since February 2015, the Parkdale Community Economic Development Planning Project, now named Parkdale People's Economy Community Planning (PCED) was initiated by PARC to support community participation in planning and organizing in the face of gentrification. Through the community land trust model, PNLT acquires land and use it to meet the needs of Parkdale by leasing it to non-profit partners who can provide affordable housing, furnish spaces for social enterprises and non-profit organizations and offer urban agriculture in open spaces. In addition, PNLT promotes community participation in guiding how land is used to benefit the community and keeps Parkdale affordable and diverse.

The PCED action was designed to contribute to the preservation of diversity, affordability, equity, and inclusion in Parkdale's neighborhood. A participatory planning process has been organized and implemented envisaging community action research, stakeholder engagement, and community planning to develop future visions of Parkdale as well as community strategies to carry these out. In the process, Parkdale's members have raised concerns about a loss of local democratic control over how neighborhood change is taking place in Parkdale. The ultimate mission of the PCED is to find solutions to mitigate gentrification pressures, thus avoiding the exclusion of more vulnerable community members and the social services they need. All Parkdale residents (and marginal groups particularly) have been encouraged to mobilize in the planning process with the aim of enhancing their engagement and direct representation in a situation where land-use decision-making is particularly market-driven (within a failure to prioritize community needs), compartmentalized (without coordinating with other stakeholders and competing priorities), and privatized (within a lack of transparency and accountability; Parkdale Community Economic Development, 2016).

The PCED describes its action as a community-planning initiative envisaging different tools for action: (a) community-based research and community development, (b) direct action, demonstrations, and community vote, (c) community benefits framework, and (d) letter writing and media campaigns. Community working groups have been set up to cover the areas of interest envisaged by the planning study: decent work, participatory democracy, community finance, affordable housing, food security, cultural development, and community health. The working groups were designed to facilitate the direct participation of residents beyond the planning table, which was more directed toward stakeholders. Community groups set up their own agendas and plans of action to incrementally implement the planning actions envisaged before eventually revising them.

In all these actions, marginal groups are encouraged to take an active part with the aim to reduce mediation between inhabitants and community organizers, thus supporting a stronger commitment and a broader adherence to community member needs.

The recent opening of Vegandale in South Parkdale epitomizes the most recent dynamic in the visibilization/invisibilization process. An entire block dedicated to vegan culture and food, Vegandale opened in 2018 with the declared aim of rebranding the neighborhood. The campaign logo used to promote the company was "morality on tap": discourse was based on the idea that bringing moral people in the neighborhood would have a positive impact. Similarly to the past, the Vegandale considered the visibility of more marginal groups a problem. Therefore, the company hired a private security force to control the "mecca of ethically-minded" people and possibly remove disturbing populations.

When Vegandale announced the opening of its restaurant, the PCED called for an assembly in which to deliberate a series of conditions to be presented to its owner. The assembly, in which about 250 citizens participated, decided to oblige the business to stop "Vegandale" branding and expansion in Parkdale, remove all moral imperative messaging from the exterior signage, commit to a long-term financial contribution to existing food security/justice initiatives, commit to 60% local and equitable hiring, remove all unnecessary security guards and stop investment in security technologies. The coalition of community-based organizations and inhabitants stated their concern about a "moral imperative that excludes resident voices, community-based organizations, and interfaith groups that have been organizing around community principles that guide local coalition building and social justice work" and declared that "the rebranding campaign works to erase and invisibilize the diverse communities that have traditionally made up Parkdale." They further argued that "this rebranding has been weaponized to depoliticize the organizing of working-class and racialized communities fighting for affordable housing and decent work in the face of displacement." Finally, they "objected to the securitization of Queen Street (where Vegandale opened) which puts marginalized Parkdale residents at risk of increased criminalization and violence."[3]

The coalition that has been recently set up in Parkdale demonstrates the presence of a group of citizens and community-based organizations supporting diversity, affordability, and equity in development while fighting gentrification pressures that alternatively require more marginal groups to be invisible.

Parkdale has always been characterized as a neighborhood where a constant negotiation about *who* has the right to be visible and to manipulate the urban space has occurred. In Parkdale, spatial relations are strongly defined by private interests in a condition where the local government is constantly withdrawing from investments and social policy has been neoliberalized (Hackworth & Moriah, 2006, p. 511).

## Concluding Remarks

This article argues that visibilization and invisibilization processes in public spaces extensively affect the dynamics of urban inclusion and exclusion, particularly when it is used in specific territorial stigmatization and destigmatization processes. In Parkdale, specific narratives on the use of public space have alternatively enhanced the exclusion of the most vulnerable populations in the name of redevelopment schemes or gentrification processes that enhance beautification, securitization, and control. Over the years, different narratives have been mobilized by community-based initiatives to support planning alternatives based on the recognition and civic participation of most excluded groups. The analysis contributed to a better understanding of the socio-spatial condition for "denial" and "recognition" of certain groups and individuals at a neighborhood level by understanding how local policies and community-based practices influence the complex dynamic of "seeing and being seen" in the urban environment.

Since the mid-1980s, "newspapers, magazines, and websites have regularly proclaimed that Parkdale as the next hot area for middle-class renovators who are proud to renovate bachelorettes and grubby rooming houses in a colorful and funky spaces with incredible access to central Toronto and the waterfront" (Whitzman & Slater, 2006, p. 676). Since the 1990s, Liberty Village has been strongly portrayed in the public discourse as an economic space set apart from the city—a creative campus and a secure space compared to the disruptive surrounding neighborhood of Parkdale. Both in Liberty Village and Parkdale, specific narratives depicting vulnerable groups as the ones "out of place" have been used as an excuse for "inner-city redevelopment schemes" (Mayne, 1993). A discourse around public space and its conventional or non-conventional use has been deployed to support different neighborhoods' labels over time, such as "suburb," "declining slum," and "resurgent village" (Whitzman & Slater, 2006, p. 1).

If we consider the visibility of individuals or groups in public space as a conceptual tool to assess the public character of space, Liberty Village's publicness of urban spaces has been reduced by the use of specific tools for safety and surveillance. Public spaces have been planned to be securitized spaces (specifically designed to counter crime and incivilities) in the attempt to attract the creative class to the neighborhood. Environmental design, beautification, and control have been consistently used as a materialistic and symbolic boundary. This has contributed to the anesthetization of public space (Blomley, 2004) as well as the shaping of comfort spaces for very specific collectives (i.e., the creative class) that lead to exclusions of otherness. Liberty Village's renewal led to the marginalization of independent artists, non-profit organizations, and traditional inhabitants, mostly working class. The neighborhood witnessed an increasing commodification, circumscription, and privatization of public space (Blomley, 2004; Gans, 1995). Liberty Village's redevelopment scheme was strategically used as an appositive image to Parkdale neighborhood to support the creation of comfortable public spaces for the creative class.

In Parkdale, the public discourse overtime has "over-visibilized" the "transgression" of more marginal populations and community spaces that offer services to them. Therefore, poverty and social inequality have tended to be portrayed as mere problems of social order (Gans, 1995) and urban aesthetics. This vision has been questioned over time by a group of community-based organizations active in mitigating the negative effects of neighborhood change; they have contributed to portraying any kind of difference as something to be recognized as well as empowered.

The case study of Parkdale led us to examine how "stakeholders, driven by their own interests in neighborhood change, adapt and deploy prevailing symbols, images, and rhetoric about the city to facilitate restructuring practices that portend dramatic changes in the social and physical environments" (Mele, 2000).

Public space lets different individuals and groups enlarge their "portfolio of places" and search out the symbolic and material resources allowing them to feel at greater ease. In this process, disparities in accessing social, economic, and political rights are mirrored. We witness a dynamic relation between emplacement and displacement practices (Caglar & Glick Schiller, 2018), but this process is not symmetrical. First, power relations matter. The article has shown how in the everyday life of low-income groups in rented accommodation, people at the margin of the society for different reasons and the working class, as well as independent artists, have been erased from the widely accepted narrative, and policies have extensively used it to justify unequal urban transformations. This process involves both a discursive dimension and a material one: The unequal access to affordable housing is one of the most important features that shapes a diverse access to public space in the context of growing segregation. This is particularly true in Toronto, where public benefits are provided to attract those who are most desired to build a more competitive environment (Lehrer & Winkler, 2006). Meanwhile, the privatization of urban space (and development planning mechanisms) increases the displacement and marginalization of certain groups of people. In Toronto, the relation between the social production of space and property rights is also important (Lehrer, 2006).

The organizations active around the PCED initiative are alternatively supporting an equity lens that should be at the base of every redevelopment scheme.[4] Their action is directed towards not only the creation of an alternative public discourse on visible minorities (which happened in the Vegandale case) but also specific policies and practices towards the pragmatic creation of more inclusive local societies.[5] They have recognized that the attack on the most vulnerable groups was performed in not only public spaces but also affordable housing access.

If we consider human agency an important feature in shaping different accessibilities in the contemporary city, the role of community-based activism in this process is of utmost importance. When community-based activism does not become service providers and apolitical moderators between citizens and the state (DeFilippis et al., 2010), it can play a relevant role in designing more inclusive and *just* urban neighborhoods and public spaces. However, a key concern regards the ultimate capacity of the local government, in a context like Toronto, and of regulating private investments particularly in neighborhoods where diversity, affordability, and inclusion are increasingly at risk due to gentrification and real estate speculation.

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## Notes

1. Data analysis was developed by The Neighborhood Change Research Partnership. http://neighborhoodchange.ca/
2. Parkdale is a neighborhood approximately 4 kilometers west of the downtown core. Queen Street, an important commercial artery for both Parkdale and Toronto, runs east–west through the neighborhood, is used as the dividing line between North and South Parkdale. In this study, South Parkdale is the focus of the investigation. Data have been collected considering census tracts 4, 5, 7.01, 7.02. Liberty Village neighborhood has been analyzed considering the impact of its transformation into a hub for creative and cultural industries in the late 1990s on South Parkdale.
3. See Parkdale community demands at http://www.pnlt.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Parkdale-Isnt-Vegandale_CommunityDemandsfull.pdf
4. For more information, please refer to Parkdale Community Benefits Framework at https://parkdale-communityeconomies.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/parkdale-community-benefits-framework1.pdf

5. Besides the Parkdale Community Benefits Framework, a pilot project on the preservation of rooming houses has been pushed by the community-based organizations active in Parkdale and approved by the City Council in 2018.

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