Understanding 'Inclusiveness' in Public Space:

Learning from Existing Approaches

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Special Thanks

Land Acknowledgment

I would like to acknowledge that this report and the research behind it have been produced on the traditional, ancestral, unceded and occupied territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səl̓ilwətaʔ (Tslei-Wututh) First Nations.

With a focus on public space inclusivity, any discussion around this topic should critically engage with the colonial history of ongoing displacement and inequity in Vancouver. I am humbly grateful for this opportunity to learn, unlearn, reflect and share any knowledge gained through this research project with others. I hope this report can raise awareness to the complexity of this topic, and encourage more in-depth conversations around decolonizing urban public space.
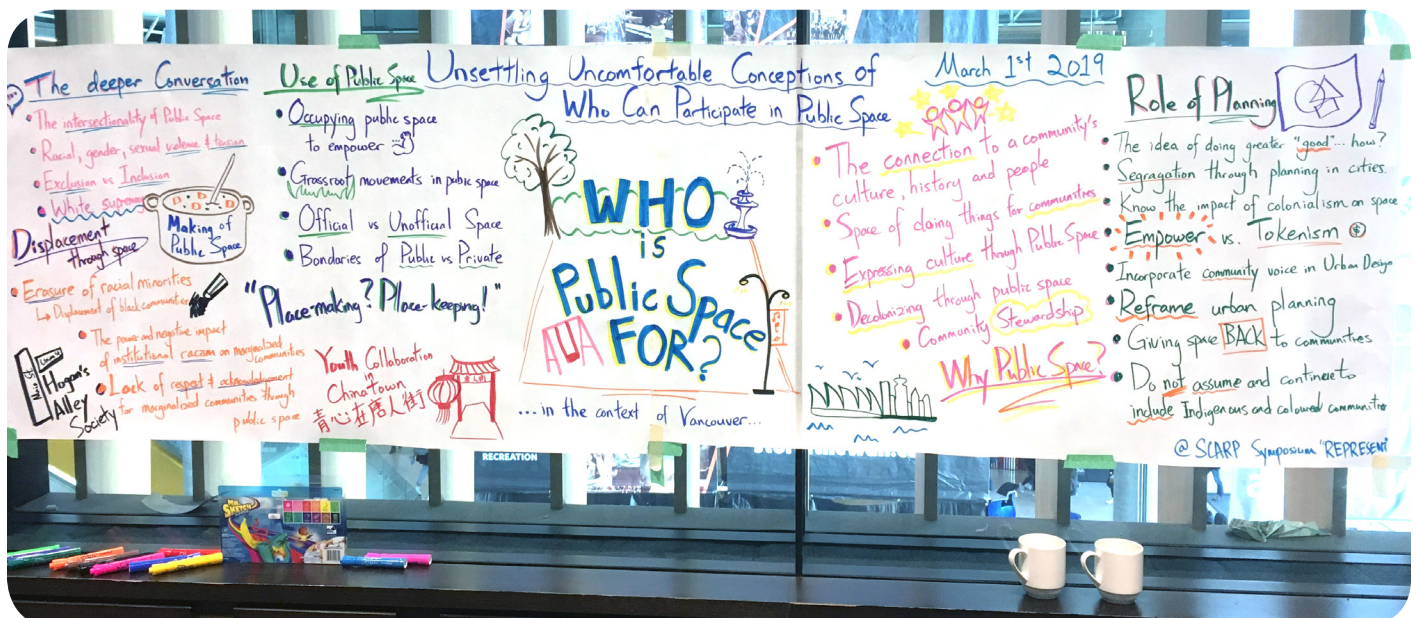
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August 2019

Photo Credit: Jordan Magtoto

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Gazing into 800 Robson. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

Executive Summary

Public spaces are an integral part of our urban environment. They are the core of a city's public life and are often seen as a public asset that produces various public benefits and opportunities. Research has established that public spaces are perceived as beneficial for both environmental and social sustainability, economic development, promoting positive health outcomes, and building a stronger sense of community within neighbourhoods. Public spaces can also positively impact social well-being and enhance community resiliency by shaping people's perceptions of social connectedness, trust, welcomeness, and safety when they're in those spaces. Overall, public spaces offer a wide range of free and publicly accessible resources or services to people who access and use those spaces.

Generally speaking, an inclusive public space is often understood as a *"public space for all"*. It suggests that everyone should feel welcomed, included and not discriminated by their gender, age, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, socioeconomic status and/or personal values when being in a space.

Public spaces are not always designed and managed with inclusivity in mind, therefore not everyone gets the same outcome and benefits from using public space. It is very important to ensure that our public spaces are inclusive for all, because everyone should have equitable access to utilize the free valuable resources provided by public spaces. It is even more significant and relevant for a city like Vancouver to prioritize public space inclusivity, because of how culturally and socially diverse our population is. Inclusive public spaces are essential for marginalized and underserved neighbourhoods and populations, as they often do not have equal access to other paid services and commodified spaces in the city.

This research project, which is supported and guided by VIVA Vancouver, focuses on understanding the existing approaches to inclusive public space. It builds upon previous Greenest City Scholars' research, while aiming to produce outcomes that would support the goals of major City policy plans such as the Greenest City Action Plan and Healthy City Strategy. The purpose is to learn from current and existing approaches on how public spaces are being assessed, and explore the feasibility of developing an evaluation framework for public space inclusivity in Vancouver.

This report highlights the importance of inclusive public spaces; it also provides the knowledge foundation needed to understand what factors affect public space inclusivity, and facilitates critical discussions on how inclusive public space can be measured and achieved. Through analyzing research and academic studies, reviewing existing methods and practices, and interviewing various public space organizations, advocates and related City staff, the report outlines some of the major challenges and barriers to achieving and evaluating public space inclusivity. It summarizes these findings into lessons learned, and provides a set of recommendations that would advance public space inclusivity research and assessment in the City.

Although this report does not provide an actual framework for evaluating public space inclusivity, it does help build a better understanding on how to mitigate and approach some of the barriers and challenges identified in the research. Partnership building and community engagement will be essential in this process. This report will provide critical insight on how the City could work towards providing more inclusive public spaces for all Vancouverites and visitors alike.

1.0   Introduction

1.1 About this project

This project is a collaborative initiative between the City of Vancouver's VIVA Vancouver program, within the Street Activities branch in Engineering Services, and UBC Sustainability Greenest City Scholars program. It aims to examine current approaches to evaluating public space, with a focus on inclusivity. Research has established that public spaces are perceived as beneficial for environmental and social sustainability, economic development, promoting positive health outcomes, and building a stronger sense of community within neighbourhoods. Research also suggests that public spaces can positively impact well-being by enhancing people's perceptions of social connectedness, trust, welcomeness, and safety when they're in those spaces. This work seeks to explore, examine, summarize, and build upon this and other previous work – to inform City of Vancouver public space policies, programs, projects, processes and future public space studies.

1.2 Research objective

The central research question is:

What are the current best practices and methods in assessing and evaluating public spaces with a focus on inclusivity and equity?

Additional research questions that support the main research objective are also discussed in this project:

► What is an inclusive public space and how is inclusivity defined?
► Why are inclusive public spaces important?
► How are inclusivity and social equity being assessed in public space?
► What are the methods for evaluating public space inclusivity?
► What are the barriers and challenges to achieving public space inclusivity?

What is public space inclusivity?

Generally speaking, an inclusive public space is often seen as a *"public space for all"*. It suggests that everyone should feel welcomed, included and not discriminated against by their gender, age, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, socioeconomic status and/or personal values when being in a public space. In this report I will be using this definition as a basic starting point for engaging in more in-depth and critical discussions on what public space inclusivity means and how it can be achieved.

Summer Music Vancouver. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

1.3 Why are inclusive public spaces important?

Public spaces are the centre of public life and an important part of our urban built environment. It is often seen as a public asset that produces various public benefits and opportunities (UN Habitat, 2015). These include, but are not limited to: better physical and mental health outcomes, space for social interactions and political movements, promoting local economy and opportunities to foster sense of belonging and improve community resiliency. This is why it is so important to ensure that our public spaces are inclusive for all, because everyone should have equitable access to utilize the free valuable resources provided by public spaces. Inclusive public space is also particularly significant for marginalized and underserved neighbourhoods and populations as they often do not have equal access to other paid services and commodified spaces in the city.

Public spaces are not designed equally, therefore public space inclusivity is difficult to achieve since not everyone receives the same outcomes and benefits from public space. In addition, the increasingly diverse and globalizing urban population makes inclusivity a complex social issue. As the largest municipality in British Columbia by population, as well as one of the most diverse and multicultural cities in Canada, Vancouver is often the centre of discussion when it comes to social inclusivity. The City of Vancouver is situated on the traditional, ancestral and unceded land of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səlilwətaɬ (Tslei-Wututh) First Nations, of whom have been on this land since time immemorial. We are also a city of settlers, immigrants and newcomers from around the world with various ethnic, cultural and heritage backgrounds. This process of colonization and globalization contributes to the diversity of our city's population.

Social inclusivity, including equitable and representative participation in public life and public space initiatives should therefore be a top priority. Public spaces need to be fully accessible, both physical and socially, while being inclusive of everyone. This means having the right to feel safe, welcomed, and having a sense of belonging in any public space regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds and self-identities. Moreover, they should feel empowered and encouraged to participate fully in the city's public life, including public space identification, creation, activities, programming and stewardship processes. Only then can everyone take full advantage of the various benefits and opportunities produced by public spaces.

Public event sign under Cambie Bridge. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier.
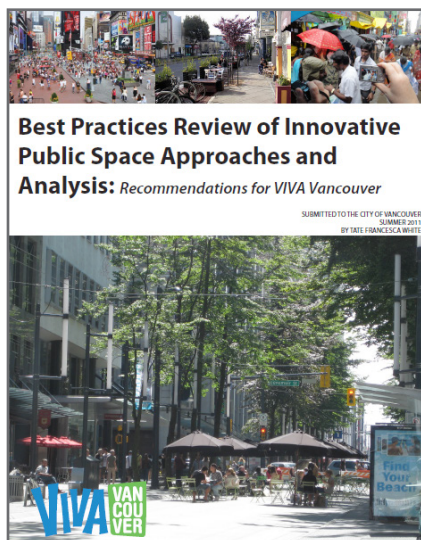
1.4 Related policy context

This research project is supported and guided by VIVA Vancouver. VIVA is the City's tactical urbanism and public space innovation program. VIVA works with community partners to create great public spaces, test new ideas, and break down barriers to participation in public life. VIVA's program goals are to: build community, promote social inclusion, encourage active transportation and support local economies. VIVA Vancouver also carries out research projects, evaluates public space initiatives, and engages with communities on emerging public space issues. Previous Greenest City Scholars who have worked with VIVA have completed research informing a range of public space initiatives. These research projects include:

► Best Practices Review of Innovative Public Space Approaches and Analysis (2011) – **Tate White**
► Creating a Square in the Heart of the City (2013) – **Ryan O'Connar**
► Moving Forward – Opportunities for Vancouver's Digital Wayfinding Map (2014) – **Robert W. White**
► How Do We Fund the Stewardship of public Plazas (2017) – **Sasha van Stavel**
► Think Big, Work Small – Enlivening Vancouver Streets from Parking to Parklet (2017) – **Celia Winters**
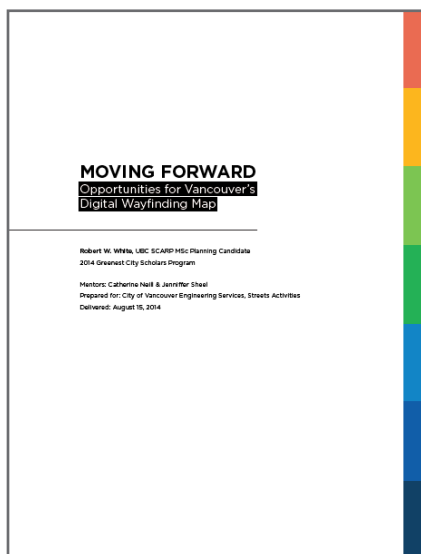
This project aims to build upon this previous Greenest City Scholar research. It also aligns with and supports the goals of the following council-approved City policies on the next page:

Greenest City 2020 Action Plan (2012;2015;2019)

► **Goal 4:** Green Transportation
  › Make the majority of trips by foot, bicycle, and public transit.
  › Reduce avg. distance driven per resident by 20% from 2007 levels.
► **Goal 7:** Lighter Footprint
  › Reduce Vancouver's ecological footprint by 33% over 2006 levels.
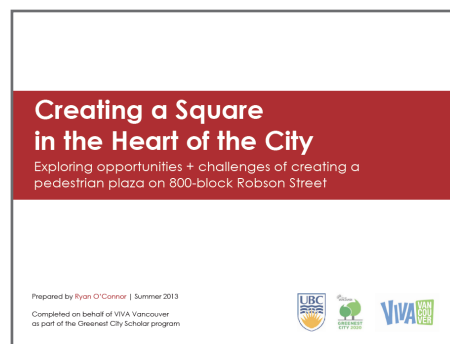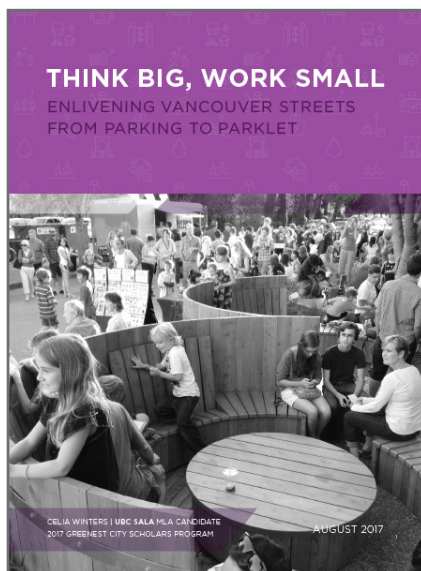
Transportation 2040 Plan (2012)

- **Social Vision:** Healthy citizens who are mobile in a safe, accessible, and vibrant city.
- **Goal to support vision:** Support vibrant public spaces that foster a culture of walking, cycling and social interaction
- **Public Space Policies:**
  - Enable and encourage creative use of the street
  - Create public plazas and gathering spaces throughout the City

Healthy City Strategy (2014)

- **Guiding principles 3:** Health and well-being for all
- **Guiding principle 10:** monitor, evaluate and communicate
- **Goal 6:** Being and feeling safe and included - Vancouver is a safe city in which residents feel secure
- **Goal 7:** Cultivating connections – Vancouverites are connected and engaged in the places and spaces that matter to us
- **Goal 8:** Active living and getting outside – Vancouverites are engaged in active living and have incomparable access to nature
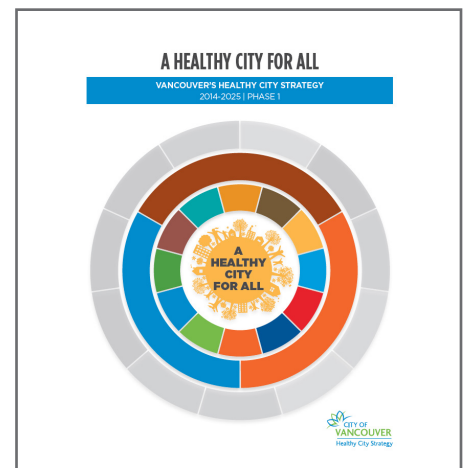
Women's Equity Strategy (2018)

- **Vision:** making Vancouver a place where all women have full access to the resources provided in the city and have opportunities to fully participate in the political, economic, cultural and social life of Vancouver
- **Principles:**
  - Inclusive of the voices of all women
  - Intersectional lens
  - Criteria for inclusion

This project will assist in advancing these policy goals through encouraging full participation in public space and public life.
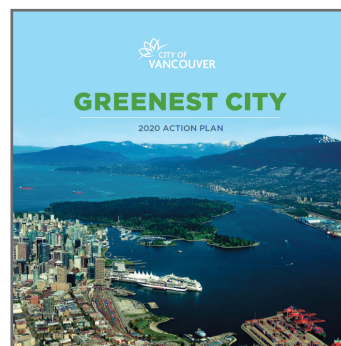
1.5 Methodology

For this project, inclusivity in public space was examined in three ways.

1.Literature review on public space research with a focus on social equity and inclusivity
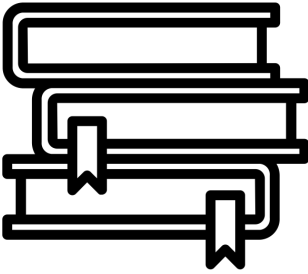
A literature review was conducted to provide background context on public space inclusivity and highlight the importance of having inclusive public space. Readings are selected either because they contribute to the fundamental concepts and theories in public space research, or because they explore the relationship between public space and social inclusiveness. This includes articles published by spatial theorists and scholars such as David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey and Edward Soja; and public space studies carried out by academic researchers from around the world. This literature review helps unravel some of the public space theories related to social inclusivity and explains the many benefits of having inclusive public space

2.Analysis of public space evaluation approaches with a focus on methods used to assess the inclusivity of public spaces

It is valuable to learn from the successes of existing evaluation frameworks and other approaches to evaluating and/or achieving inclusive public spaces. By looking at some current practices and methodologies on evaluating public space, we can learn and improve from their strength, challenges and limitations. The results from this analysis contribute directly to the final recommendations as they help identify some of the potential best practices that could inform future work on public space inclusivity in the City.

3.Interviews with public space/placemaking advocates and organizations
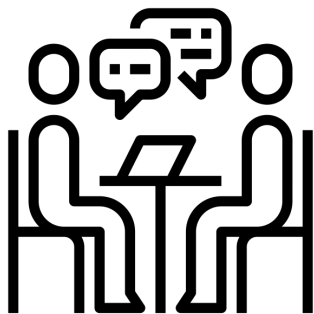
Interviews were conducted with individuals who work directly on public space projects, initiatives and programming. This includes public space advocates from non-profit organizations, City staff working on social inclusion policies, and people who shape public spaces through urban design projects or public events. Many of the interviewees wear multiple hats and provided different perspectives on public space inclusivity. These interviews reflect how and if the lens of public space inclusivity is incorporated in real life public space projects and initiatives. They also reveal the many challenges and barriers toward public space inclusivity observed and experienced by people who are directly involved in public space work.
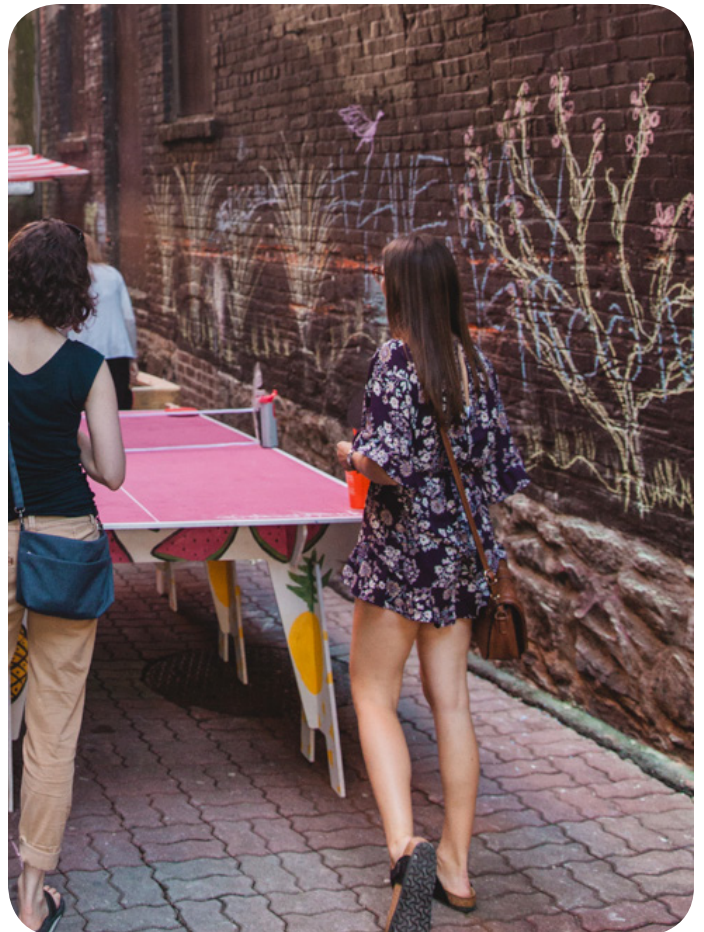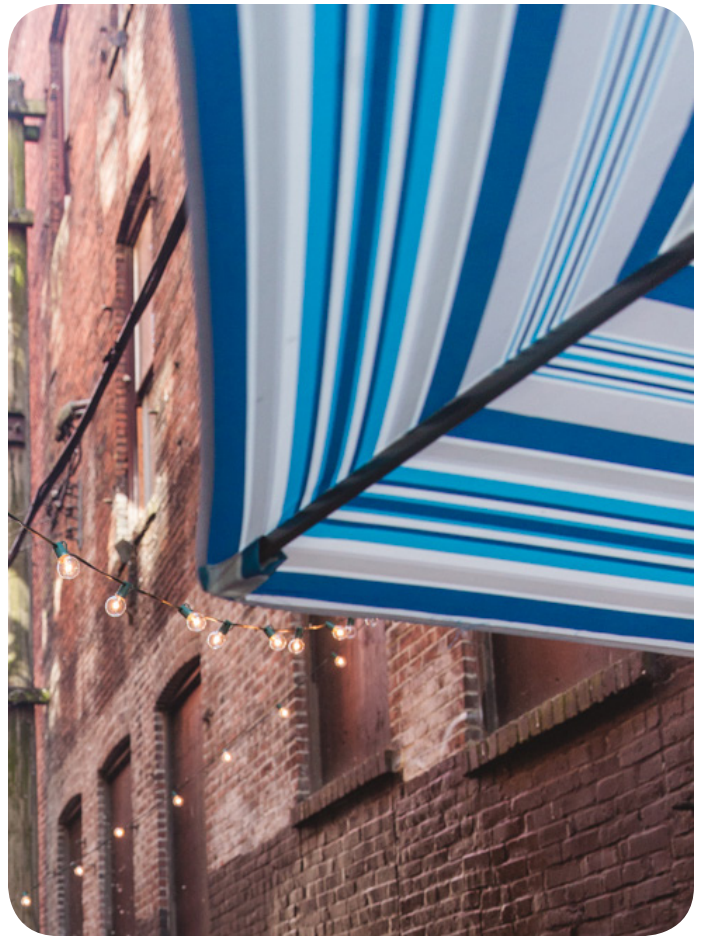
Backyard BBQ in laneway. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

2.0   Project Background

Bike on sidewalk. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

2.1 The importance and benefits of public space

In 2015, UN-Habitat released a Global Toolkit for Public Space where they listed a set of arguments on why advocating for high-quality public spaces should be a priority for all cities:

► *Public space is the banner of urban civility*
► *Public spaces are our urban commons*
► *Public spaces promote income, investment and wealth creation*
► *Public spaces enhance environmental sustainability*
► *Public space increases transportation efficiency*
► *Public space improves public health*
► *Public space enhances urban safety*
► *Public spaces promote equity and social inclusion*
► *Public spaces are tools for gender and age-friendly cities*
► *Public spaces offer ideal opportunities to generate citizen involvement*
► *Public spaces make for great cities*

This list summarizes some of the benefits provided by public space. Currently in the western world, we are facing challenges in terms of public space inclusivity, because many of them are designed and managed in ways that exclude certain people, hence reducing social and cultural diversity (Low et al, 2005). Back in the 1990s, many urban studies scholars even claimed that public spaces were dying in North America due to the commercialization and privatization of public space (Bondar, 2015; Harvey, 2006). When public spaces are only friendly and accessible to certain people, it is no longer just an issue of accessibility, but a challenge in social justice and equity. For example, access to high-quality public space, such as urban parks, becomes an environmental justice issue when only people of more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds can benefit from them (Wolch et al, 2014).

One of the most significant benefits of public space is its influence on public and individual health. The interest in the connection between the built environment and health first emerged around the 1980s. Since then, creating neighbourhoods and public spaces that support healthy living has become a recognized way to achieve better health outcomes, while potentially reducing the pressure and cost on health care systems (Frank & Engelke, 2001).

Ideally these public spaces would help people become healthier through either directly impacting their physical health and well-being, or indirectly affecting health through moderating people's health behaviours. It could take the form of increasing one's physical activity level, improving neighbourhood walkability, making active transportation more accessible, increasing neighbourhood destinations, and encouraging social interactions. It should be noted that one's health status is not limited to physical health outcomes, but also their mental health and social well-being (Wolch et al, 2014), which can also be influenced by one's socioeconomic status and identities An inclusive public space should therefore have the ability to facilitate various healthy behaviours leading to a range of positive health outcomes. If public spaces are planned, designed and animated with inclusivity in mind, then more people would have equitable access to the resources and services provided by public spaces (such as the ones listed above by the UN-Habitat). For example, when someone has full access to an inclusive public space, they are more likely to use that space, therefore taking better advantage of what it can offer. The person may adopt a healthier lifestyle, become more active, interact more with others, and have better access to other places in the neighbourhood through that public space (Wolch et al, 2014). These can all result in positive physical and mental health outcomes, and having a better sense of belonging and social-wellbeing.

Free public yoga at 800 Robson. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

2.2 Sense of inclusivity and the perception of space

In order to understand how public spaces could be more inclusive, we need to first try to untangle the relationship between sense of inclusivity and the perception of space. One thing is clear: the sense of inclusivity is a subjective feeling rather than an objective measurement. That is not to say that objective physical factors such as the design of public space and surrounding infrastructure don't impact sense of inclusivity. In fact, there are multiple overlapping dimensions of different factors that can affect sense of inclusivity in public space, which will be discussed more in details in the next section; but personal experience and perception is an essential part of this discussion. It is very similar to a sense of safety, sense of belonging and sense of empowerment, because these feelings are connected to the intersectionality of personal identities and lived experiences. Our perception of public spaces is not limited to their design and physical form. We attach meanings and emotions to public spaces after interacting with them, and these feelings may change over time as we continue to experience these public spaces. For example, merely knowing a public space's name and location on a map or viewing a picture of it is very different from actually visiting it; the perception changes when it is experienced firsthand. Space is a concrete and also abstract concept; it exists both physically in front of us and imaginatively in our minds. In order to understand how to evaluate social inclusivity in public spaces, we need to first explore how our own positionality and personal experiences may influence the way we interact with public spaces and how we perceive its inclusivity.

Raincity Block Party under Cambie Bridge. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

Many philosophers, geographers, political ecologists, sociologists and urban studies scholars have tried to understand the relationship between physical space and people's perception of space. Some of the notable scholars in the field of space perception include Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, David Harvey and Edward Soja, as their work helped establish some of the foundational concepts on social inclusivity and space, and provoked other academics to explore this topic. One of the most well-known concepts around space perception is Lefebvre's 'spatial triad' and Soja's 'third space'. In particular, Lefebvre started connecting physical space to individual social perceptions back in the 1970s. In *"The Production of Space"* (1974) Lefebvre argues that space is a complex social construction based on people's values and social production of meanings. Lefebvre was able to link space representation and imagination with one's identity, and suggest how physical space shapes that dynamic process. Lefebvre, however, didn't consider race and ethnicity in his argument (McCann, 1999). On the other hand, Soja's theory of 'third space' and 'spatial justice' refers to the critical thinking and interpretation of space as socially produced and constructed (Soja, 2010). He suggests that space should not be approached in a binary way, but as somewhere in between material and mental space, hence space is both real and imagined. This is why he argues that the social and individual perception of space is closely related to the injustices and inequalities spaces produce (Borch, 2002).

Social inclusivity is a deeply nuanced and complicated subject to understand, because our cultural representations, personal identities and lived experiences influence how we perceive, construct and interact with the physical environment. We need to acknowledge that places are no longer just spatially bounded, but instead defined by the interactions of different cultures and multiple identities within and beyond the static space (Massey, 1993). When people use a public space, it becomes a process of transforming a built form into a meaningful place with collective memories and a mixture of identities. An inclusive public space should allow people to feel both physically welcomed and psychologically included; hence being in a public space is both a physical and emotional experience. For example, a public space can be physically designed to be accessible and welcoming to all; but if the space is dominated by one certain group of people, then that space actually becomes socially and emotionally exclusive to others who don't feel like they can resonate with that dominant user group. This is also why public space inclusivity is challenging to evaluate, because it is affected by both the tangible physical environment and intangible psychological experience, in combination with other factors such as historical process and neighbourhood context.

Sidewalk in Yaletown. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

Public spaces are also increasingly commodified, particularly by commercial businesses and people who are socially privileged wanting to assert authority over public space (Harvey, 2006). Often times this is true, because people who are socially privileged have more impact on the planning process of public spaces. For example, some argue that contemporary public spaces in North America are mainly created by the white middle class; therefore, they have produced a homogeneous, instrumental and ahistorical narrative that exercises state power and free flow of capital while alienating other ethnic groups and people of lower socioeconomic statuses (McCann, 1999; Low et al, 2005). If designed and used with political intention in mind, public spaces can function as places for social control. Who has power in and/or authority over a public space and how much power/authority they have becomes an important indicator of how exclusionary the space will be.

Since public spaces are often designed, implemented and stewarded by planners, landscape architects, urban designers, engineers, and other municipal staff, our actions and decisions often influence the level of inclusiveness of those public spaces. Major stakeholders and active members of the public who are involved in the decision-making process can also impact the inclusiveness of that space. This adds to the complexity of who has power over the planning and decision-making process of public spaces. We need to understand that no public space is perfectly neutral, and the lens of intersectionality and equity should be applied when evaluating the inclusivity of public space. This includes, but is not limited to, trying to understand all the different conflicts, tensions, competing interests, and dynamics within an existing public space. If a framework only captures the sense of inclusivity and equity from the perspective of a particular group of people, it would generalize and exclude others who also use that space. Therefore, apart from noticing who is already in that space, it is also important to realize who is absent or not using that space and try to understand why. Sometimes what feels ideal and welcoming for a specific group might be emotionally alienating for others (Rishbeth, 2001). We have to think critically and carefully on how different people and their perceptions are involved in the making of public space inclusivity.

Public event sign under Cambie Bridge. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier.

2.3 The dimensions of public space inclusivity

In their study "*More inclusive than before - The tale of a historic urban park in Ankara, Turkey*", Akkar Ercan & Oya Memlük (2015) conclude that public space inclusivity is complex because public space issues are 'multiple', 'site specific' and 'interrelated'. This results in having a range of different factors that can shape and influence public space inclusivity. After all the research and analysis done for this project, I have come to an understanding that most factors affecting public space inclusivity fall under three different but interconnecting dimensions:

▶ *The Physical Environment*
▶ *The Personal Experience*
▶ *The Process & Context*

Physical Environment

Personal Experience

Process & Context
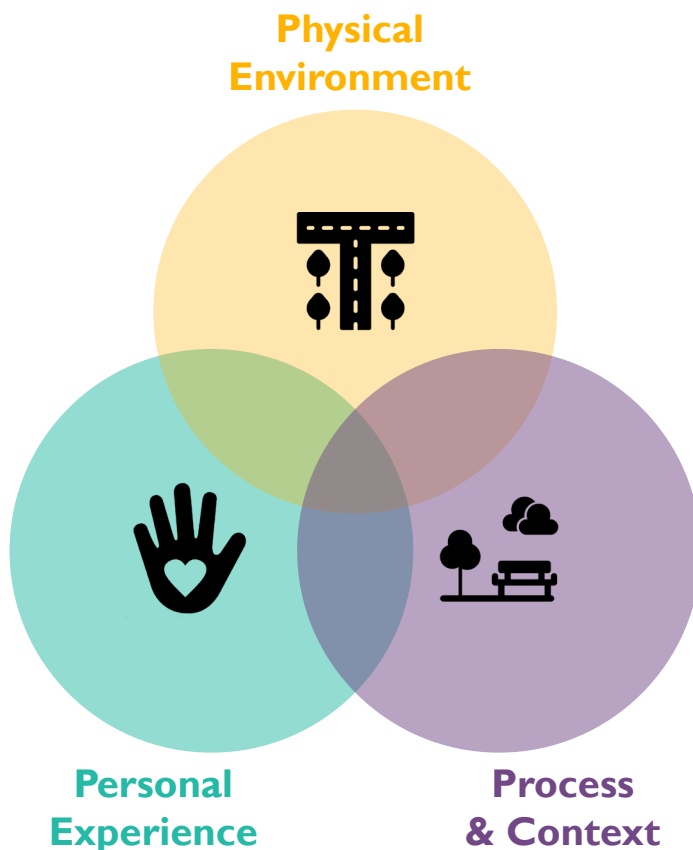
The Physical Environment

As mentioned above, the way a physical space is planned and designed can directly affect our health and well-being through affecting our physical behaviours and interactions with the built environment. Factors under this category are mostly tangible and can be measured or observed objectively, making it easier to evaluate. For example, the design of a public space can determine its level of inclusiveness through aspects of accessibility. This may include, but is not limited to:

▶ **Physical access** – 'universal design' or physical features that make the space usable by people of all ages and abilities. (e.g., ramps, crossing-lights, openness, lighting)

▶ **Social access** – Having social or visual representation in the space that resonate with people and create sense of safety, comfort and empowerment. (e.g., local art, cultural elements, historical representation)

▶ **Access to activity** – The space is multi-functional and able to accommodate different activities. (e.g., hosting performances, space for social movements and gathering)

Apart from the three dimensions of accessibility outlined above, other larger scale built environment features can also impact public space inclusivity:

▶ **Transportation connectivity** – available options for active transportation

▶ **Neighbourhood walkability** – how accessible is this space by foot

▶ **Available amenities** – public washrooms, water fountains, sufficient seating within the space or nearby.

People friendly urban design and the level of surveillance in the space are also considered as part of physical environment.

The Personal Experience

This dimension explores the relationship between personal experience and public space. It considers all factors that may influence one's perception of space and sense of inclusivity in public space. As mentioned earlier, every lived experience is uniquely different, and we should always apply the lens of intersectionality in all public space inclusivity work. Interlocking factors such as gender, age, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, socioeconomic status, personal values and lived experiences can all affect how people interact with and perceive public space. It also affects how people interact and perceive others in the same space.

When two people are using the exact same public space, their personal experience and sense of inclusiveness in that space can still be substantially different. As such, qualitative methods and analyses are often used to document the diversity of individual experiences in public space. It is also important to not generalize individual experiences in public space. Conventional inclusivity often oversees people that are marginalized from the mainstream public space inclusiveness conversation. This results in dominant users taking over the narrative of inclusiveness in a given public space.

For example, when a public space is constantly being programmed with the same event (e.g., outdoor concerts, public markets, parties involving alcohol), over time it would only attract users who were targeted as event participants. People who do not feel like participating in that programming or could not benefit from the held events would feel pushed out and excluded in that space.

The Process & Context

Apart from the built form of public space and the personal experience that comes with each public space user, the process and context is also a significant dimension of public space inclusivity. Just like no two people are exactly the same, it is also not possible to have two public spaces that are identical. Knowing the specific context and process (e.g., historical, political, planning) of a public space can help us understand what factors are affecting its inclusiveness. Some local processes and context of a given public space may include:

▶ **Neighbourhood context and background** – overall demographic, income distribution, household type, and other information available through census data
▶ **History and development** – what is the historical significance of the space? How was this space created?
▶ **Management and control/stewardship** – Who has authority and control over public spaces? Who is managing and maintaining the space? Is the planning, design and implementation process participatory? Is there ongoing involvement with local community members through this space?

Apart from the three factors listed above, the broader political context may also affect public space inclusiveness. Certain policies may shape and change a public space depending on the political agenda at that time. Not only does local political context impact public space inclusivity, but global trends and political climate can also create an impact. For example, Muslim women are often discriminated against in North American cities, because their *hijab* is a visible symbol of Islamic beliefs expressed in public (Johnson & Miles, 2014). This inevitably makes them more vulnerable and can feel less included in public spaces due to negative stereotypes against Muslims and anti-Muslim sentiments under the current global climate. Global political tensions and deeply embedded cultural biases and prejudice may impact the sense of inclusiveness in local public spaces.

Mural festival on Main St. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

3.0   Existing Methods and Practices

Mapping. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

3.1 Why look at existing methods and practices

In order to learn from successful approaches and understand the challenges in assessing public space inclusivity, it is valuable to learn from existing frameworks used by researchers, local governments and public space advocacy groups. Based on available online materials, there seems to be a lack of focus on public space inclusivity within city guidelines, policies and plans from municipalities in Canada and the United States. Nonetheless, there are still some local governments and organizations that have produced reports, frameworks or guidelines on how they measure and evaluate public space. By looking at what works successfully and what the challenges in existing methods and practices are, we can identify what Vancouver can learn, adopt and improve upon. The list of reviewed public space studies and public space evaluation frameworks can be found in Appendix 1. They were selected for review either through recommendations from public space workers, or through basic online search on what is available in terms of public space evaluations.

3.2 Summary of common methods and practices

After reviewing the selected studies, reports, frameworks and guidelines on public space assessments, the common practices and methodologies can be summarized as follows:

Context research

Most studies and frameworks suggest some degree of context research. Usually the purpose of doing context research is to collect neighbourhood statistics on demographics, income, health, environmental conditions, and public assets of where the public space is located. One study even utilized archival materials and did a thorough examination of all the historical plans, policies and processes that shaped the public space (Akkar Ercan & Oya Memlük, 2015). Overall, context research can be done using the following methods:

► Analysis of census data
► Archival research
► Retrieving data from public institutions and agencies such as health data, transportation data, program reports, consultant reports, etc.

Observational research

Gathering observational data through field observations is probably the most straight forward and common practice for public space studies. The data collected can either be quantitative such as various counts, traffic flow, or number of interactions happening within that space; or it can be qualitative, where user activities and behaviours are recorded through field notes, photo stories, mapping or simply having volunteers monitor the space over a time period. William H. Whyte's street life project "*The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*" (1980) even used time-lapse videos to observe how people use a public space. Other well-known public space work such as Jan Gehl's "*Life Between Buildings*" (1971) and "*How to Study Public Life*" (2013) also provide examples of observational studies. Here are some of the methods used to collect observational data based on the reviewed public space studies, reports, guidelines and frameworks:

- ▶ Counts and flow during different times and days – pedestrian, cyclists, traffic, etc.
- ▶ Behavioural and activity mapping, and recording of public space users' interactions
- ▶ Ethnographic field notes and drawings on the design and physical features of public space

Qualitative information

Since sense of inclusivity is connected to personal experiences, it is challenging to measure using quantitative methods. Qualitative approaches can help with the interpretation of subjective and intangible perceptions associated with one's public space experience. Surveys and interviews are the most commonly used methods on collecting qualitative information from public space users. Studies have also utilized digital technology such as walking tour phone apps and social media hashtags (Negami et al, 2018; Hollander et al, 2019). Here is a list of different types of survey and interview methods used in public space studies and frameworks:

- ▶ Traditional surveys (either administered in person at public engagement events or online)
- ▶ Intercept surveys in and around public spaces
- ▶ Structured and semi-structured interviews
- ▶ Focus groups
- ▶ Public and community workshops
- ▶ Reports on public space initiatives produced by government agencies and institutions (e.g., VCH, Translink), local business, community groups or consulting firms

Mapping. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

Community engagement in Chinatown. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

3.3 Highlights from case studies

The following case studies were selected from reviewed studies and framework for a more in-depth analysis on their methodologies, strength and challenges. They were chosen as case studies for the following reasons:

- ▶ *Public Space Public Life Studies* – **Gehl Studio**
  - ➤ One of the most well-known public space evaluation approaches in the world that has been carried out in many cities. The PSPL study is a mixed methodology approach towards analyzing public space performance at a macro-level.

- ▶ *Inclusive Healthy Places – A Guide to Inclusion & Health in Public Space: Learning Globally to Transform Locally* – **Gehl Institute & Robert Wood Johnson Foundation**
  - ➤ A recent research-based publication by Gehl Institute & Robert Wood Johnson Foundation with a unique focus on bridging the gap between health equity and public space inclusivity. It contains an extensive matrix with a set of guiding principles, drivers and indicators to evaluate public space inclusivity.

- ▶ *Urban Planning with a Gender Perspective* – **City of Barcelona**
  - ➤ The only public space inclusivity framework discovered for this project that is produced by a local government. It focuses on looking at urban planning from a gender perspective, with a manual on how to approach various planning projects such as public space interventions and transformations.

Cambie and 18th Pop-up Plaza. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

Public Space Public Life Studies
– Gehl Studio

Summary of public space study or framework

Gehl's Public Space Public Study (PSPL) methodology is designed to be used as a mixed method, macro-level, comprehensive approach on analyzing and understanding public life/public realm (White, 2011). It was originally implemented in Copenhagen and has since been employed by many cities across world. This includes Melbourne, New York City, San Francisco, Seattle, Toronto, and most recently in Vancouver for the City of Vancouver's "Places for People Downtown" project in 2017 and 2018. The PSPL methodology combines traditional quantitative techniques such as pedestrian traffic counts, along with qualitative methods such as intercept surveys and behaviour mapping.

Focus of framework

The PSPL methodology reflects Gehl's philosophy of making "cities for people". They collect public space data and analyze the results to better understand what is happening in a public space throughout a given time period. Gehl also believes in "People First Design", which is often informed by existing usage patterns in public spaces.

Methodology and approach

When Gehl Studio is employed by cities to conduct a PSPL study, they work closely with staff on developing and delivering the tailored PSPL methodology. Based on Vancouver's "Places for People Downtown" project, there are two major components to the PSPL study:

- ► PSPL survey
  - ‣ Stationary mapping and user counts
  - ‣ Intercept surveys
- ► Public Space assessments
  - ‣ Mapping of structural characteristics and activity, built form, street and sidewalk conditions, etc.
  - ‣ Public Space quality assessment

In Vancouver, around 35 public spaces in downtown were observed. These observations occurred between 8:00am to 10:00pm on a weekday and a weekend day.

Public Disco event in laneway. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

Lens of inclusivity

The intercept survey captures qualitative information such as ethnicity, income level and subjective experience in a particular public space, including sense of safety. Combined with all the counts and field observations, this mixed method approach creates a comprehensive approach that aims to support "people first" public spaces.

Highlight of strengths

▸ Gehl's PSPL method has been tested and used by many other cities around the world. It is relatively robust and well-rounded with many case studies to learn from.

▸ Data collection for PSPL is often quite extensive. For example, in Vancouver they collected data from 35 public space locations and over 250 volunteers were involved in the process. This helps to produce a macro-level understanding of how public spaces are performing in a large city area.

▸ PSPL generates both quantitative data through pedestrian traffic counts, and also collects qualitative data through intercept surveys and behaviour mapping. This type of mixed method study provides more context and details on the patterns of public space performances.

Challenges and considerations

▸ The PSPL methodology is time and labour intensive and relies heavily on volunteers to carry out all the data collection processes. It also required a lot of city funding and resources to conduct such an extensive study.

▸ Data collected mainly reflects what was happening in that space during the time of data collection. It reflects how the space is being used at a certain time, but there is lack of emphasis and consideration on the more unique contextual qualities of each space. These are things such as neighbourhood characteristics, historical context and planning process, and what is the level of community involvement for that space, which are all important factors contributing to public space inclusivity.

▸ The PSPL methodology only captures people who are in the public space itself, but doesn't engage with those who are not using or missing from that space.

▸ It is unclear whether the intercept surveys at each city are conducted in languages other than English. If English is the only option, it may exclude people who feel uncomfortable or unable to answer questions in English, but might still be active public space users.

Autumn Leaves. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier
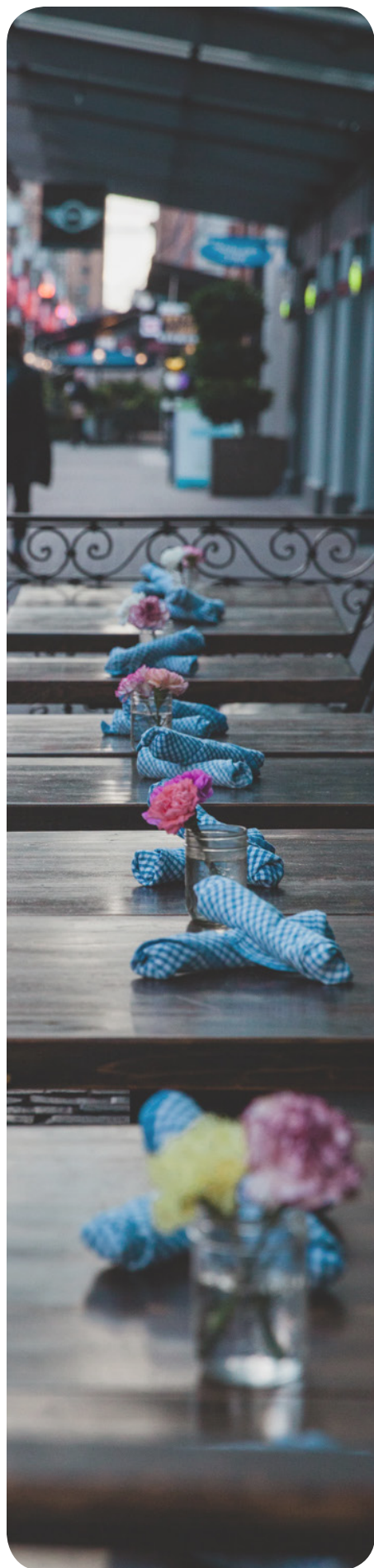
Curbside patio. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

Inclusive Healthy Places
A Guide to Inclusion & Health in Public Space: Learning Globally to Transform Locally – Gehl Institute & Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Summary of public space study or framework

The Inclusive Healthy Place (IHP) is a framework that is developed to address the gaps between public health and urban planning in regards to public space. It aims to serve as a conceptual framework on how to improve health equity through public space inclusivity. IHP is not designed to be a step-by-step guide, but instead as a set of various drivers, indicators, and metrics that can be adapted by other practitioners such as planners, health professionals, designers, policy makers etc., in their own field of work.

Focus of framework

The IHP framework focuses on the intersection between health equity and public space inclusivity. It highlights the importance of prioritizing communities and neighbourhoods that have traditionally been neglected, marginalized and disenfranchised in public space conversations. All the themes and connections identified within the HIP framework helps readers to better understand health equity and public space. Their goal is to assist practitioners from different fields in applying the lens of health equity and inclusion in public space projects and encourage more cross-sector collaboration

Methodology and approach

The IHP framework contains a matrix that is very detailed and extensive. It includes four guiding principles, 16 drivers and 52 indicators, each with multiple metrics to measure them (see appendix 2). The four main guiding principles are as follow:

▶ **Guiding Principles:** "Four distinct yet interrelated concepts that integrate inclusion and health equity into the analysis, planning, design, programming, and sustainability of public spaces"

▶ **Drivers:** "activities, and/or interventions that create pathways for achieving health equity in the context of public space."

▶ **Indicators:** "A quantitative or qualitative measure derived from observed facts that simplifies and communicates the reality of a complex situation."

▶ **Metrics:** "Units or standards of measurement. Each indicator is supported by one or several metrics. A metric reflect a single, specific type of data."

Lens of inclusivity

► The lens of inclusivity is the core focus of the IHP framework. It threads through the whole guide and is embedded in all four guiding principles.

► The IHP defines inclusion as "The leveraging of resources (such as power, time, and money) and assets (social, cultural, and physical) to continuously reduce and eliminate systemic barriers to access, focusing on underserved and historically overlooked or excluded populations."

► The IHP stresses that cities must tailor the framework according to local context instead of using it as a step-by-step guide/toolkit. They emphasize the importance of working collaboratively across different professions and with communities.

Highlight of strengths

► The IHP framework is highly flexible and can be tailored to apply across different cities and project scales.

► Inclusivity is approached from different dimensions based on their four guiding principles of context, process, design & program and sustain.

► The IHP framework ties inclusivity closely to health equity and emphasizes that public inclusivity is essential for all kinds of positive health outcomes.

► The IHP framework encourages partnerships and collaborations with local communities to co-create public space.

Challenges and considerations

► Since the IHP framework matrix is extensive, it is nearly impossible to execute all the drivers and indicators in reality. City staff, researchers, and others studying public spaces will need to tailor their use of the IHP framework in accordance with time and resources available.

► The IHP framework would benefit from a more comprehensive acknowledgment of, and approach to how intersectionalities and personal experiences based on gender, age, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, socioeconomic status, personal values, and lived experiences shape how they participate in public life and experience public space.

Cambie and 18th Pop-up Plaza. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier
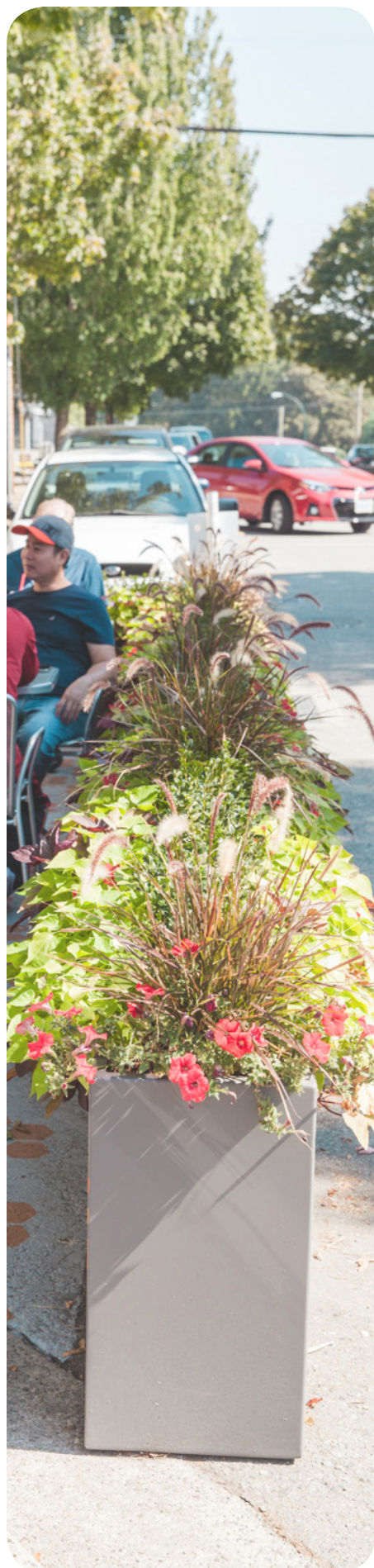
Urban Planning with a Gender Perspective – City of Barcelona

Summary of public space study or framework

In February 2019, Barcelona City council published a government manual titled "*Urban Planning with a Gender Perspective*"(UPGP). It is a set of measurements on how to integrate a gender perspective into all urban planning policies in order to achieve a fairer, more equal and safer city without barriers. They developed a set of gender indicators and interventions for some of their pilot projects at different urban scales. These measures are currently being applied in many neighbourhood projects in Barcelona, such as in the transformation of Superblocks and Meridiana Avenue.

Focus of framework

The whole manual focuses on how to incorporate a gender lens into all aspects of urban planning in the city. This includes, but is not limited to, public space projects, transportation mobility projects, neighbourhood plans, and other city policies and plans. For their public space projects, they want to ensure that public spaces in the city address the needs of all genders (especially women) equitably. This measure/manual also helps introduce new perspectives beyond traditional public space planning views. The manual aims to address inequity issues in all areas of urban planning in Barcelona, with an emphasis on co-creation and participation from all.

Methodology and approach

The UPGP borrowed methods and approaches from many established frameworks, including the Gehl's PSPL methodology and Project for Public Spaces (PPS). Therefore, their approach shares similarities with existing frameworks, yet is tailored to fit the urban process and context of Barcelona (appendix 3). The UPGP manual contains six major steps:

1. Define area of study
2. Includes two concurrent steps:
   ➤ To ask: listen to as many voices as possible, taking into account the opinions from people of different age, gender, culture, profession and socioeconomic backgrounds
   ➤ To observe: conduct observational research and take notes on the different qualities of the public space
3. Collect data information through asking and observing
4. Conclude results and form recommendations
5. Prepare line of actions
6. Drafting of projects based on research

Parklets replacing parking space. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

Lens of inclusivity

The lens of inclusivity in UPGP focuses mainly on the gender perspectives, but it still emphasizes the importance of hearing all voices and including people from all backgrounds. Working in collaboration with local communities is also highly encouraged. The UPGP aims to ensure that Barcelona works towards becoming a fair, safe and barrierless city without discrimination against different individuals.

Highlight of strengths

▶ The UPGP is very action oriented, making their measures and indicators easy to incorporate in pilot projects because they are not too abstract or complicated.

▶ Its methodology can be used not only in evaluating public spaces, but is also applicable in other planning projects related to the built environment (e.g., transportation mobility, neighbourhood infrastructure, urban ecology).

▶ Since this manual is mainly led and produced by the city, it creates a standardized and comparable approach towards assessing public spaces across Barcelona.

Challenges and considerations

▶ The indicators in their observational research are based on a series of criteria check-lists, which can over-generalize and simplify some of the contextual details of public space characteristics and how people behave in that public space.

▶ There may be elements of inclusivity that cannot be captured through only inquiries and observational methods. Information such as neighbourhood characteristics and demographic statistics, historical processes and significance, and local policy context would require extra background research.

▶ The manual itself is produced only in Catalan, making it difficult to be used as a case study for other cities to learn from.

Public event under Cambie Bridge. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

4.0   Inclusivity on the Ground

4.1 Interviews with public space organizations and advocates

Knowledge, theories and approaches from literature and research studies may be different when applied in real world situations. In order to better understand how public space inclusivity works on the ground, over ten interviews were conducted with public space organizations, advocates and City staff. The interviewees were selected because their daily work revolve around social inclusivity and public space planning, design, engagement or programming. They strive to make the public spaces they work in more inclusive. The interviews are around 30 minutes long and mainly focusing on the following two questions:

► *What do you think is an inclusive public space and how can it be achieved?*
► *What are some of the challenges and barriers towards inclusive public spaces that you have observed or experienced?*

Overall, most interview participants provided more insights for the second question compared to the first one. This may be indicating that the first question is harder to answer due to the complexity and uncertainty in defining inclusivity. It also shows that there are many multilayered barriers towards achieving more inclusive public space. The two sub-sections below highlight some of the comments noted and paraphrased from these interviews, and they are grouped by themes.


Chinatown Hot & Noisy Mahjong Event. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

4.2 What is public space inclusivity and how is it achieved

Welcoming and inclusive for all

▶ Inclusive public spaces are places where people feel comfortable and have a sense of belonging regardless of their gender, age, ability, sexuality, race, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, religion, profession, etc.

▶ An inclusive public space is where grandparents with kids, people who pick up bottles, and young couples can all feel comfortable being together in the same space.

▶ All public spaces should be inclusive to begin with. They create opportunities for social interaction and promote urban diversity.

▶ It is impossible to create a public space that is 100% inclusive at all times, but there are always ways to improve on it and make as many people feel included as possible.

▶ There should be no cost or other types of economic barriers to use public space.

▶ Each public space serves a different set of purpose and functionality, some more specific than others (e.g., dog park, skate park, playgrounds, etc.) Therefore, it is not up to one particular public space to take the full responsibility to become 'inclusive for everyone'. There needs to be a network of public spaces within a neighbourhood, so they support each other to produce an inclusive public realm or inclusive public space ecosystem.

Multifunctional and diverse

▶ No space has only one single characteristic. Each public space should have pockets of different characteristics, and the communities can decide what they want to highlight.

▶ Public spaces are not designed equally, and they shouldn't be. They are all unique and site specific. They should also reflect the local communities and environment they are located in.

▶ A public space should allow for different levels of engagement. People should not have to interact with a public space in the same way.

▶ There needs to be a 'scale' of engagement within a public space so people can interact and engage with public space in the way and level they want to.

▶ Public spaces should be multipurpose throughout day and night. They are dynamic not static.
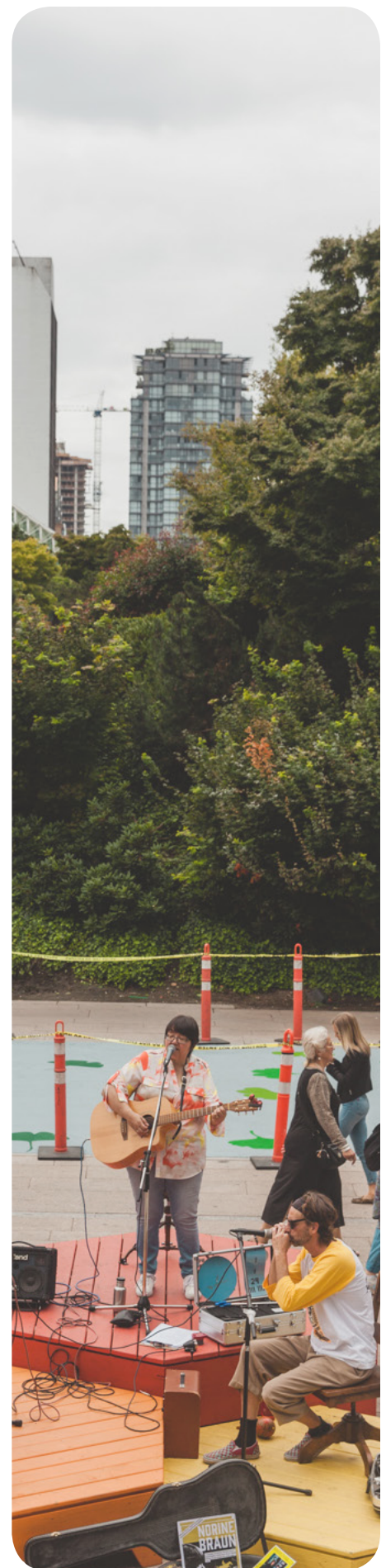
Three-piece band. Photo Credit: VIVA

Mural in laneways. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

Organic, flexible and community oriented

► Public spaces have to be organic. If the basic design pieces are there, then it should allow users to interact and interpret the space in their own way and customize the space.

► Public space reflects income level. If a place is too manicured it automatically excludes lower-income communities and becomes a space for more affluent groups.

► Although public space programming and activations help enhance a space, they shouldn't be the solution for improving inclusiveness. A public space in itself should be inclusive without too much intentional programming or activations.

► Public space inclusivity should not need to rely on large scale design change, but instead utilize small things that make them unique and people friendly.

► Public spaces that are over-planned and extremely manicured are less inclusive. People should be allowed to interact with and interpret public space in different ways.

Inclusive planning process

► The planning process should be grounded in the community. Engage people who live nearby to be involved in the decision making, design, management and programming of the space.

► Community-led decision making should be the priority. Let those who will be impacted the most make the decisions, because they are the lived experiences of that space.

► People are the heart and soul of public spaces. Humans need to be involved.

► Lived experience is valuable, if not more valuable than academic and professional knowledge.

► Identify the community 'expert' and who has connections with those local experts.

► Think about how to reach out and engage with people who don't always engage with the City.

4.3 The challenges and barriers towards public space inclusivity

Design of physical environment

▶ The scale of a public space can affect people's experience in it. For example, smaller scale public spaces such as parklets and neighbourhood parks are cozier and easier to occupy, therefore people may feel more comfortable in those spaces.

▶ Public space inclusivity is often focused on physical accessibility because it is easier to measure and design for. This focus leads to a lack of culture and identity being reflected in public space, especially for marginalized communities.

▶ It is difficult to make everyone feel included at the same time. For example, when there is litter and trash in a public space, many feel uncomfortable to use the space; but if it is very clean, bright and manicured, it excludes people who may feel vulnerable and exposed in those conditions. There needs to be a balance in how a space is designed and maintained.

▶ Designs of public spaces have become increasingly generic and they no longer reflect community values. The lack of uniqueness in a public space makes it seem like there was not enough thought going into the planning process (e.g., community input, neighbourhood-based design, cultural elements etc).

▶ Lack of basic amenities such as public washrooms, water fountains, shelter from rain, benches, charging stations, etc. discourages people to linger and stay in public spaces.

Kids playing at Vancouver Art Gallery North Plaza. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

Different perspectives on inclusivity

► Dominant culture tends to determine who is included and who is not. Let people who are actually impacted the most determine what inclusivity means for them.

► It is nearly impossible to create a public space for 'everyone'. If a public space aims to be 'all-inclusive' and for 'everyone', it might actually end up being a bad project because it becomes so 'watered down'. (e.g., When a space is designed without a particular audience or concept in mind, it becomes generic and not meaningful, such as an empty plaza space versus a plaza featuring artwork by local artist or reflecting local history.)

► Even when a public space aims to be inclusive for 'everyone', you still have to define and understand who and what 'everyone' means in that particular public space context. Think about it in terms of equity instead of equality.

► People who design and shape public spaces must acknowledge that they are always going to be privileging certain people in each space. This does not mean that it is okay, but we must first acknowledge that biasing exists both intentionally and unintentionally.

► Understand the difference between inclusivity and accessibility. Physical accessibility is almost like the bare minimum for the design of a public space, whereas inclusivity is more about the qualitative things about a space and how people feel.

► Accessibility is the basis to achieving inclusivity.

Lack of public space inclusivity discussions

► When it comes to public space projects, there is often a fear of gentrification, displacement and how to engage with disenfranchised communities in a meaningful way. This prevents in-depth conversations on how to make public space more inclusive as no one wants to create negative consequences by not doing it 'right'.

► People, whether they are professionals or the general public, tend to shy away from engaging in critical conversations on public space inclusivity due to its complexity and uncertainties.

► Not knowing where to start the conversation is a challenge. It is very overwhelming to talk about inclusivity, so discussions on this topic are often hard to bring up. It is like the elephant in the room.

Kids painting. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

Who determines the inclusiveness in public spaces

► We are working from a perspective where the narrative of the dominant group (and the power they maintain) is in charge. For example, members of local communities who hold certain roles or positions may dominant the narrative of a public space, because their voices are being heard the most. People who are not being seen or welcomed as part of the neighbourhood (e.g., homeless population, new comers, visitors, etc.) are often left out of public space conversations.

► Public space inclusivity should not be about how the more privileged group is trying to "include" others who are not in the mainstream society. It's not a "feel-good" action. Think carefully about who gets to determine how inclusive a public space is.

► Income policing is an issue. Some public spaces are designed in a way that reflects affluence, therefore excluding people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

► Even when you design a public space without a specific group or audience in mind, often times the space will still end up being dominated by a particular group of people.

► Users reflect the public space. You can design a public space with good intentions in mind, but people will continue to shape the space through their interactions. Therefore, dominant users usually have a larger impact on how a public space changes and evolves over time because they interact with the space the most. People who are marginalized in that space may continue to be overlooked and have less influence on how the space develops.

► Making public space Instagram-able is becoming a trend, but it is also a loss of good opportunities. It is not the best example of public life in reality because "on-line" public spaces only generate interactions online. It mainly attracts people who use social media to those internet trendy public spaces, therefore making it less inclusive for locals use.
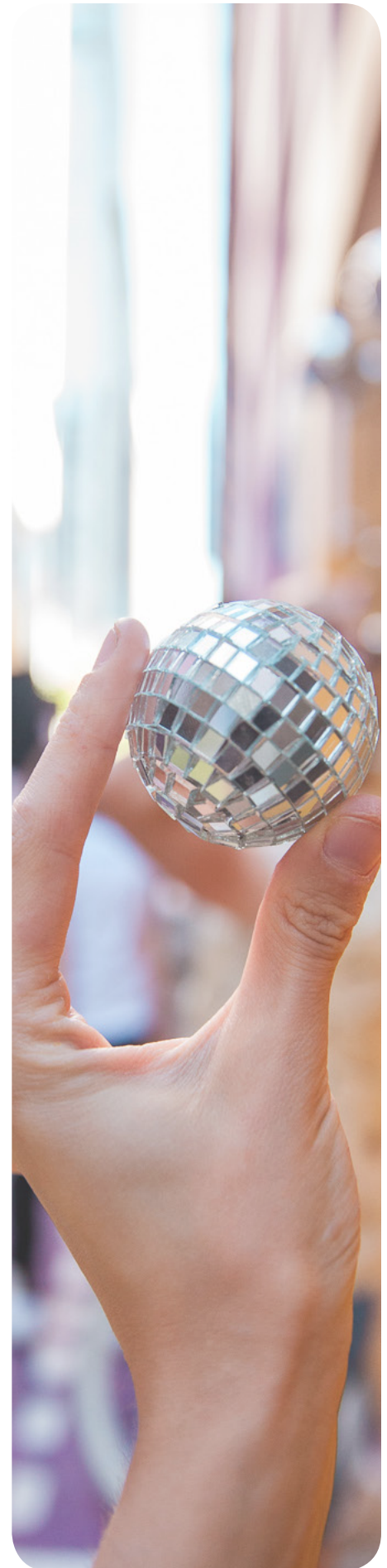
Public Disco Event in Alley Oop. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier
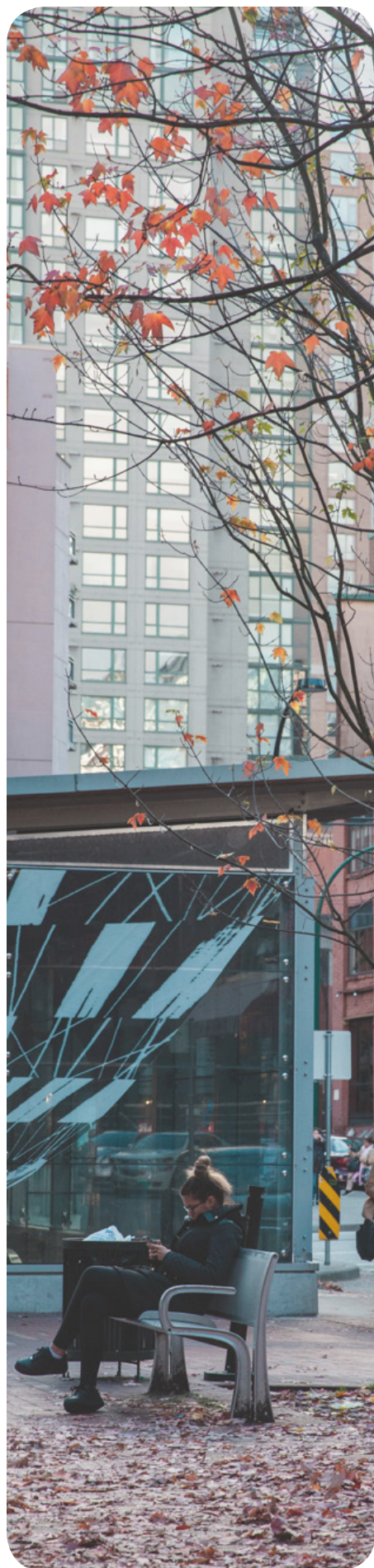
Bureaucracy for public space planning

► Sometimes community members might want very specific amenities or features in a public space (e.g., charging station, public washrooms, food stalls etc.), but those can be difficult to implement due to City regulations and permitting.

► Servicing requirements such as contacting the City for space clean up, getting required permits, garbage and recycling requirements, and simply understanding what is allowed in a public space is a big barrier in public space planning. This discourages non-City organizations and community-led groups to design, program and steward a public space effectively. There should be more clarity on the process of public space activations, and also more capacity building for non-City groups who want to plan, design and animate public spaces.

► It takes too long to get something approved by the City, such as getting a special event permit, food permit, busking permits etc. If it is already difficult for public space organizations, then it must be even more challenging for community groups to do so. This discourages community involvement in public space as they often don't have the time and labour capacity to navigate through all the permitting processes by themselves.

► Bureaucratic processes make public space planning more reactionary instead of proactive. Due to all the related permits and approvals needed to design or program a public space, many public space designers and organizers tend to engage with the public after most things are approved instead of brining creative ideas to the table early on. This limits what can be done in a public space and how inclusive it can be since conversations on its design and functionality come in at a later stage with a shorter time before implementation. It's no longer based on what people actually want to see happen in that space, but rather what could possibly happen with the given time and approvals for a project.

► Neighbourhoods are changing so quickly, and the local communities are changing too; therefore, sometimes public space projects cannot catch up to local needs because of how long the planning and implementation process takes. For example, if a public space is designed for a specific neighbourhood, but then there is a sudden influx of newcomers and refugees settling in that area due to global crisis, how can we quickly adjust public spaces in that neighbourhood to serve the immediate needs of this new community?

People sitting on bench. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

Planning process of public space

▶ Disseminating information is difficult. There is no one single channel to get the word out, making it hard to keep people informed on what is happening to a public space in terms of programming, design change or opportunities for involvement.

▶ Whenever there is an open house or engagement event, try to know who is not participating in the decision making process and understand why. Identify who is not present in the room and reach out to those people

▶ There is no one size fits all in terms of community engagement. Tailor the process towards the local communities and reduce the barriers for them to participate.

▶ For lower-income communities, there is a decrease in digital and traditional literacy. It is not inclusive to only rely on digital means of advertising to get people involved in public space planning processes and events.

▶ Since there is a universal design for accessibility, and many guidelines for people friendly urban design, there are no longer excuses to create non-inclusive physical space. Public space inclusivity is more about things you 'cannot see' such as having inclusive planning process, equitable opportunities for engagement, and diverse representation of who is in the space.

▶ Representation is not tokenizing. People need to see "themselves" in public space for them to want to participate in the process.

▶ Get people involved early in public space projects, and be very clear about how their contributions will be used in decision-making processes.

▶ Long-term trauma in disenfranchised communities contributes to their lack of trust in local government and institutions.

▶ Be mindful of who knows the community well, who is interested in public space but also know who isn't interested and understand why they refuse to participate in the process. This could be due to many factors such as long term disenfranchisement, lack of trust, lack of interest, language barriers, cultural and political differences etc.

▶ Inclusivity from the *"get go"*. It is better to start thinking about inclusivity even before planning or making any changes to a public space.

▶ Observational studies help to understand who is using the space and collects valuable data, but how can we go beyond data collection and identify who is missing? Don't just observe who is using a space, figure out who is missing and/or not represented.


Biking along Seawall. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

Social justice and equity

► For people who are underhoused or living on the streets, public space is their last resort. It is for their survival. They have no where else to go and public space becomes their living room. Public space inclusivity is not a choice for them.

► Knocking door to door or to getting to know who the potential users are is a good idea, but how about people without doors? People out on the streets are part of public life too.

► Community members with lower socioeconomic status are often left out in public space decision-making process. How to support people who never gets the opportunity to access the benefits provided by public space?

► Sense of security doesn't necessarily mean security guard or cameras, but can mean presence of similar others in the space so people feel comfortable and not alone.

► The perception of space and who is part of the "community". If public space discussions or involvement opportunities within a neighbourhood are always dominated by a particular group of people, then it discourages others from participating.

► Public space programming is often created by a particular group of people for specific audiences. Public space programming should be varied and intersectional, representing the diversity of people in a community.

► The success of a public space should not be measured by numbers, it is both quantitative and qualitative. Just because there are only two people participating in a public space event doesn't mean the programing isn't successful. Numbers don't tell the whole story.

Hogan's Alley Public Space Activation. Photo Credit: Luka Cyprian
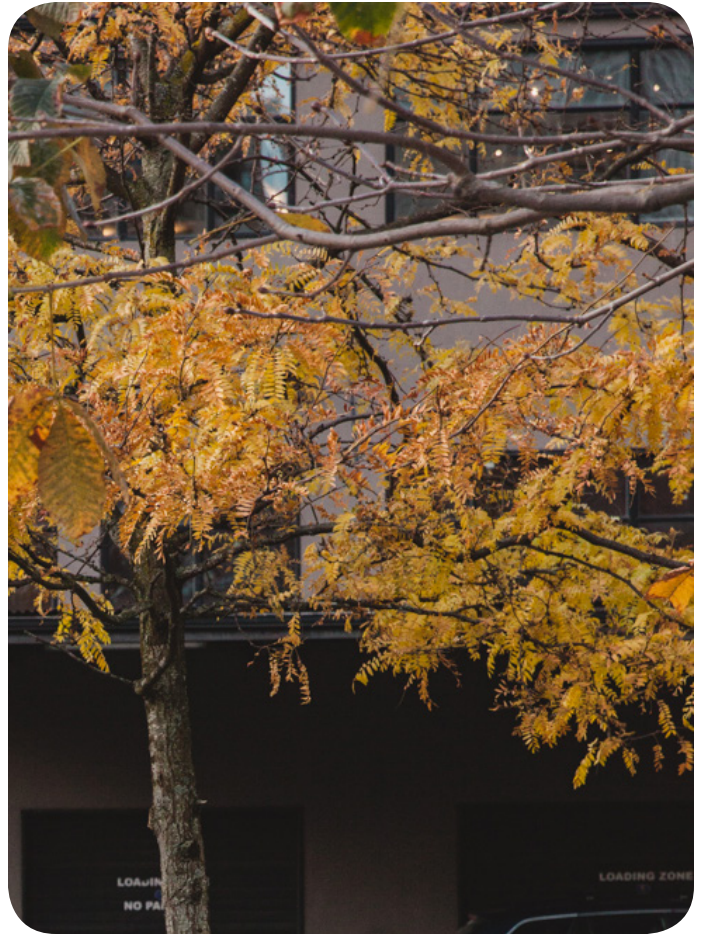
Reading book on a bench. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

5.0   Lessons and challenges

5.1 Lessons learned from research studies and existing frameworks

Processes and contexts are difficult to understand comprehensively

It is difficult to document the various processes (e.g., political process, historical process, planning process, etc.) and context related to a public space because they can be time consuming and labour intensive to analyze (e.g., archival research and census data comparison). In addition, process and context research become more complicated when local political agenda and global political climate are involved. (Please refer to section *2.3 The dimensions of public space inclusivity*)

Beyond collecting data through observational methods and surveys

Observational methods and surveys are great ways to understand a public space, and they are commonly used to quantify some of the behavioural characteristic. They help evaluate who is using the space, how many people are interacting with the space and what people are doing in the space. Intercept surveys can also capture some of the subjective feelings and personal experiences. However, observational data and surveys may not accurately represent unique personal experiences as they are designed to quantify large amount of qualitative information. Over quantifying and generalizing might be an issue.

Many existing public space studies and frameworks are not that applicable in a local context

Most research studies and existing frameworks either suffer from being too comprehensive and high-level, or being too specific on analyzing a certain public space that it becomes hard to apply to other places. The Inclusive Healthy Places Guide is probably the only existing framework that allows for a lot of flexibility and adjustment as it serves as a toolkit. That being said it still requires a lot of adjustment and adaptation when applying to local context.

Relaxing in laneways. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

5.2 Lessons learned from public space organizations and advocates

Defining public space inclusivity is difficult

It is easier to list the challenges and barriers towards more inclusive public space than it is to define what an inclusive public space is. This is because everyone has slightly different perspectives and unique personal experiences regarding public space inclusivity.

It is more than just the physical space

The physical inclusivity of a public space is not the most difficult challenge in our city because many public spaces are now designed or improved with the different dimensions of accessibility in mind. There are also a lot of existing methods and approaches to evaluating the physical aspects of public space inclusivity. The focus should therefore shift towards understanding how personal experiences, local context, and various processes such as planning, programming and maintenance of public spaces can affect the level of inclusiveness.

Public space events and programming should also be inclusive

Although a public space should not rely on programming and events for it to be inclusive, it is still crucial to make sure that any programming or events happening at a public space are as inclusive as possible. They moderate and enhance the physical features of a public space and help shape users' experience in that space. Public space events or programming that take advantage of the physical design of that space can make people feel more inclusive (e.g. utilizing stairs as seating for street performances

Age and gender isn't everything

Current discussions on public space inclusivity still mainly focus on gender equity and age friendliness. They are definitely significant components of public space inclusivity, but there needs to be a more critical approach on the intersectionality of one's experience in public space. Other factors such as sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, socioeconomic status, personal values and individual lived experiences are often overlooked.

Bute-Robson Trial Plaza. Photo Credit: VIVA

Who defines public space inclusivity

Often times it is the local government, an institution or an organization trying to define and understand public space inclusivity so they can come up with some kind of framework or evaluation method to 'improve' and 'enhance' its inclusiveness. Instead of taking charge on approaching public space inclusivity, City staff should engage and empower the public, local communities and different individuals through encouraging them to define what public space inclusivity means to them.

Process is as important as the public space itself

In order to have an inclusive public space, the planning process itself should also be inclusive in order to empower communities and support them to shape their public space experiences. Since the planning process has a significant impact on the end results, it would helpful to understand if the process was also inclusive. Only evaluating the inclusiveness of the current public space performances wouldn't be enough to understand the overall inclusivity since the process can have a long-lasting impact. All steps in public space-making, from early engagement with the public to ongoing stewardship of the space, impact inclusivity.

The equity in public space planning

There is always going to be a dominant group and voice in a public space and it is important to not let them take over the whole narrative. People who are traditionally marginalized and not given a voice should have more chances to provide their input in shaping public spaces. It is important to be proactive and reach out to all people that might be potential users of that space, especially make extra effort to engage with people who are usually left out of public space conversations.

Public engagement at Bute-Robson Trial Plaza. Photo Credit: VIVA

5.3 What are some of the most challenging aspects of approaching public space inclusivity?

Definition of inclusivity is place and people specific

Although there is a general definition for public space inclusivity, which is a public space where people feel welcome and included regardless of their intersectionalities and lived experiences, the sense of inclusiveness still varies depending on where the space is located and how people interact with it. Therefore, it is challenging to approach public space inclusivity because you often need to further define it on a case by case situation.

The significance of each public space is different for every person

It is crucial to recognize that public space means something different to everyone. For many of us, public space is a common space designed for leisure, recreation, social gathering and social interactions. It is a public asset that we access from time to time or on a daily basis. Public space is also a significant space for all kinds of social movements and protests. However, for people who are under-housed and living on the streets, public space becomes places of refuge and survival. In this case, public space inclusivity should be evaluated very carefully; any conclusions or decisions made on these public spaces can severely impact the livelihood of people who use these spaces as their home and living rooms. Any guidelines and interventions to advance public space inclusivity should first support those who relay on public space for survival.

Public spaces vary in size and typology and each public space is unique

Public space inclusivity cannot be approached in a singular perspective, and one of the reasons is because there are many different scales and types of public space. If we look at public space by its size and main users, Robson Square would function very differently from a neighbourhood parklet. Therefore, the approach towards evaluating the inclusiveness for these two public spaces should also be different. Similarly, assessing inclusivity would be very different for "privately-owned public space" (POPs), which are technically accessible by the general public but owned by private entities. Because public spaces are so varied, approaches to assessing the inclusivity of them need to be flexible or adaptable to each unique situation.

Kids drawing at open house. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

### The three dimensions of public space inclusivity are hard to balance

Although the three dimensions of public space inclusivity (physical environment, personal experience, process and context) are interconnected, they are usually not weighted equally. The physical environment tends to be overemphasized and over-analyzed as evidenced by the amount of methods and tools developed for evaluating the physical aspects of public space inclusivity (e.g., the Universal Design Guidelines, Gehl's PSPL methodology, etc). Factors that fall under "Personal Experience" and "Process and Context" are less often studied because they are harder to document and capture in an evaluation process (Please refer to section *2.3 The dimensions of public space inclusivity*). Unlike measuring and evaluating the physical environment of public space, these two dimensions are more intangible and dynamic. They are more abstract and constantly changing. The biggest challenge is to come up with a comprehensive yet appropriate set of methods and indicators for these contributing factors.

Limited work done on public space inclusivity by other cities

During this project, it was quite difficult to find case studies from other municipalities. Most cities have urban design guidelines for their public spaces and mention that public spaces need to be inclusive. However, the only city identified in this project that has an official framework for approaching inclusivity is the City of Barcelona. This shows that public inclusivity might be an emerging area of public space planning. Vancouver is starting an important conversation on public space inclusivity among North American cities. This also means that there aren't many municipal case studies that Vancouver can learn from.

Reaching out to people who are not present in public space

All the research studies and existing frameworks emphasize on studying the existing users of public space. Often times it is a lot more difficult to identify and understand who is excluded or not present in a public space due to time constraints or lack of appropriate resources. It would be more effective to understand public inclusivity if we could identify those who are not using public spaces but live in the neighbourhood, and then seek to understand why they are not actively using that space.

Seating space at parklet on Robson St. Photo Credit: VIVA
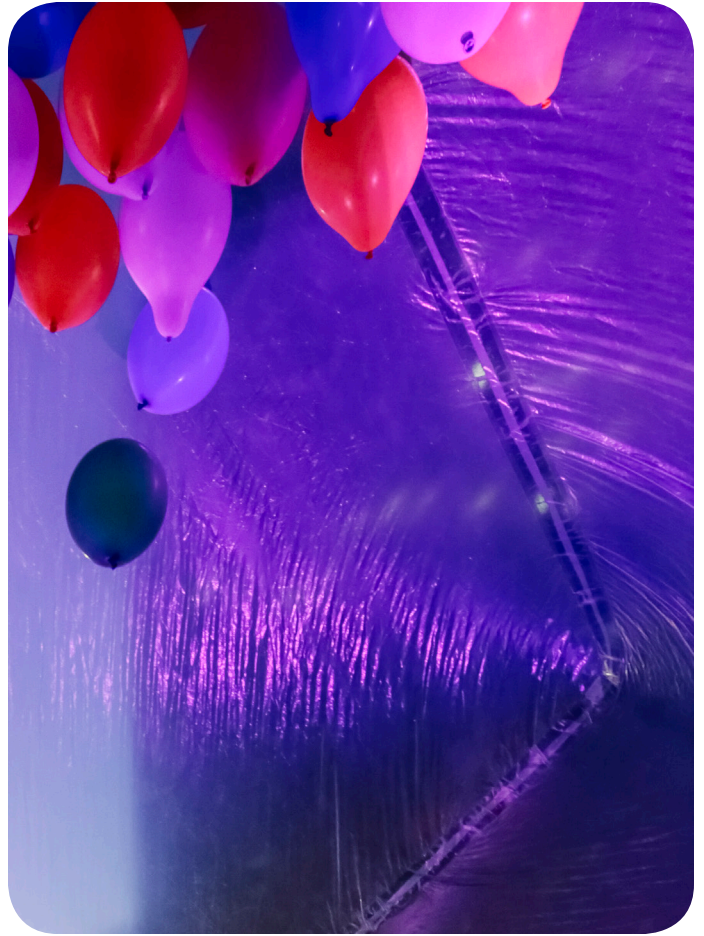
Music DJs in a bubble. Photo Credit: Jared Korb.

6.0 Recommendations: Beyond Evaluating Public Space Inclusivity

Based on the research and analysis done for this project, here are three areas of recommendations for the City on how to approach the assessment of public space inclusivity:

6.1 Public space inclusivity as a mindset

These are possible immediate actions around public space inclusivity:

Discussions around public inclusivity should be encouraged within the City

Different City departments might have different approaches and understanding around public space inclusivity. Street Activities is not the only branch working on public space-related projects, so it is important to communicate between different teams, branches and departments and establish a common overall understanding on how all City staff can approach public space inclusivity. This will affect how public space inclusivity is conveyed to the public by the City, and prevent confusion among different City departments.

Raise awareness and plant the seed early for critical conversations on public space inclusivity among the general public

Although public space inclusivity is a complex topic, the City should actively engage the general public in this conversation early on for any public space projects. As mentioned earlier, people tend to shy away from talking about inclusivity due to sensitivities; however, it is crucial to engage in this discussion. This will help us advance public space inclusivity in the long run, and also encourage people to think more critically about the public spaces they use every day.

Public engagement. Photo Credit: Jared Korb

Start every new public space project with inclusivity in mind

Apart from thinking about how to evaluate public space inclusivity for existing public spaces, every new project should already have the lens of inclusivity incorporated from the very beginning. Planning for public space inclusivity should be proactive. In addition, try to look at public spaces from the perspective of a supportive public space network or ecosystem. A new public space shouldn't just be inclusive on its own, but also complements the inclusiveness and functionality of surrounding public spaces in the neighbourhood.

Develop a basic framework or design guidelines for the physical inclusivity of public spaces

Although it is difficult to evaluate public space inclusivity in terms of personal experiences, and the process and context, there are foundations and studies done to start developing a framework for physical inclusivity. This framework or set of guidelines will mainly focus on the physical aspects of public space inclusivity, including the surrounding built environment, accessibility and people-friendly urban design features. It could become the basis for future public space inclusivity frameworks and studies since achieving physical inclusivity should be the minimum requirements for our public spaces.

6.2 Public space inclusivity as a process

There are some short term actions that would support long term goals:

Engage local communities early on in the process and conduct thorough research on the local context and related processes

Inclusive planning processes are more likely to produce more inclusive public spaces. Aim to engage local communities in the early planning processes of a public space instead of waiting to host an open house towards the end. Identify who are the key community collaborators and have them involved throughout the process. Remember to compensate community members for their valuable time and contributions.

Reach out to people who are usually left out of public space planning processes

Often times when the City engages with local communities, certain community members may dominate the room. Although their input is valuable, they might only be able to speak on behalf of people who are similar to them. A neighbourhood usually consists of multiple communities, some of them more marginalized and disengaged than others. It is important to reach out to community members that are usually neglected or do not feel comfortable connecting with the City due to reasons such as lack of interest, lack of trust, long term disenfranchisement, language barriers, lack of support and resources etc. It is the City's responsibility to bring the process to them and develop trust and connections with them to shape their public space experiences. This outreach process is especially crucial when those who are left out from public space discussions are often people who rely on public spaces the most. Every lived experience matters.

Reduce unnecessary barriers and challenges for engagement opportunities

Whether it is the initial planning process or the ongoing involvement, maintenance and management of a public space, the City should reduce unnecessary barriers for community members to participate in these processes. Since public spaces are dynamic and forever changing, the process is ongoing. Having local community members constantly engaged with the planning/management/stewardship processes help build up resiliency for that public space. These barriers could include unclear bureaucratic processes, complicated permitting issues, uncertainty about what activities are allowed in a public space, or lack of communication by the City on important information etc.

Busking at public plaza. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

6.3 Public space inclusivity as a never ending goal

These are long term goals and visions for public space inclusivity in the City:

### *Support the public and local communities in defining their public space inclusivity*

Instead of trying to define and approach public space inclusivity as City staff, approach local communities and engage them in defining what inclusivity means for their public spaces. This is also why a standardized public space inclusivity framework would not work for the whole City. Any inclusivity framework developed in the future must be highly flexible and allow local communities to define their own public space inclusiveness; but also keep in mind who are and are not represented by those local community groups. People living in those neighbourhoods are the actual lived experience of public spaces, City staff can only initiate or facilitate that conversation.

Continue to review and learn from relevant studies and other cities around the world

Keep a library or inventory of public space inclusivity work done in other places to allow City of Vancouver staff to continuously learn and improve City policies, frameworks and guidelines. This library/inventory will also support future research projects on public space inclusivity and prevent repeating work on the background and context.

Build towards a potential framework to evaluate public space inclusivity in the City

Although I have stressed how complicated and difficult it is to approach and assess public space inclusivity throughout this report, it is worthwhile to start thinking about how to evaluate our existing public spaces in the City. This report will hopefully become the knowledge foundation of a potential evaluation framework on public space inclusivity. The framework can be broken down into a set of different strategy and guidelines that covers the various dimensions and topics of public space inclusivity (e.g., inclusive physical design, inclusive programming, inclusive public space governance/management/stewardship, etc.) Start by getting support and consensus on prioritizing public inclusivity within different City departments and branches. It is crucial to start the discussion now and start early because the process will be a long and ongoing one.
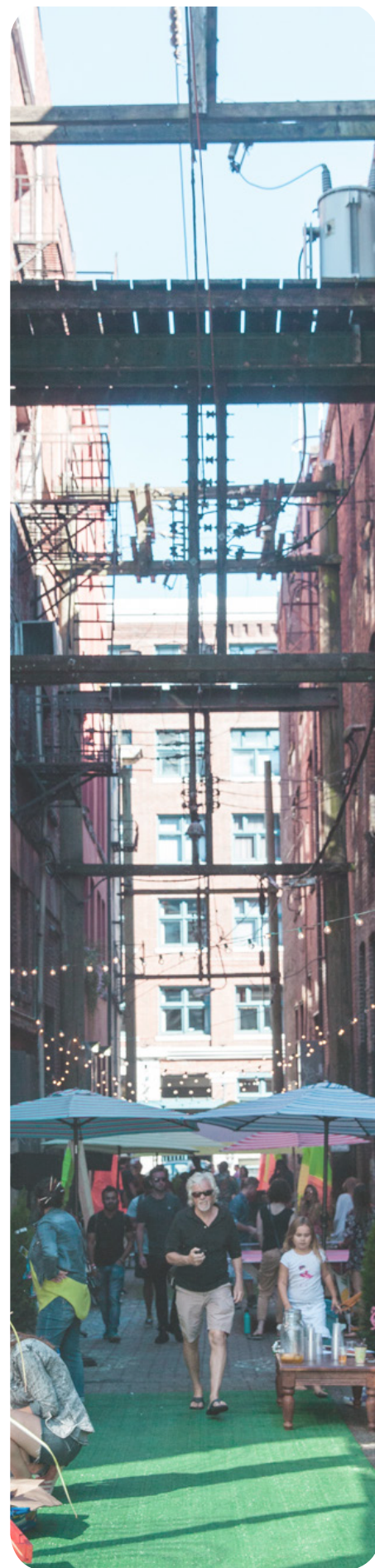
Public event in laneway. Photo Credit: VIVA

6.4 Potential methods for assessing public space inclusivity

Neighbourhood canvassing

Canvassing, which is often used as a campaign technique, can be useful for community outreach and identifying who is not using public space. By knocking door-to-door and approaching people individually, we can gather valuable qualitative information. It also shifts the focus from who is using public space to identifying who is missing from public space. While canvassing a neighbourhood, we can gain a better understanding of the gap between who lives in the area and who is observed to be using public spaces. Keep in mind that not everyone has a door to knock on. People who are underhoused or living on the streets are also part of the community and their input should be valued too.

Comparing big data to human data

Census data is often underutilized by municipalities despite it containing extensive amounts of neighbourhood information down to neighbourhood blocks. Although it can be time consuming to comb through and analyze census data, the work can provide insight into neighbourhood context. It is especially useful when comparing census data to human scale observational data. This helps to identify any correlations or inconsistencies between what the neighbourhood is like and what is happening in a public space – confirming observations or inspiring new questions. The same method can be applied when comparing big data retrieved form online social media platforms to on the ground observational data. For example, what hashtags are associated with public spaces in the City? Who is posting about public spaces? How are public spaces being perceived online? Comparing that information to what is being observed on the ground would be a very interesting approach on assessing public space inclusivity.

Movie Night at Vancouver Art Gallery North Plaza. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

Build a platform for local public space champions

With the amount of existing public spaces we have in the City, it is impossible for City staff to evaluate all of them within a reasonable time frame. This report has also established that the City should not be approaching public space inclusivity without public input and participation. Therefore, building a dedicated platform where City staff can connect and interact with local public space champions would support better information gathering and build a mutual understanding and collaborative approach towards public space inclusivity. This platform can be hosted online using social media or other means, and also offline in public spaces using suggesting boxes or bulletin boards for better accessibility. It can provide the means and opportunities for public space users to reflect and share their personal experiences with the City any time they want. Think of it as having a crowd-sourced review platform for public spaces in Vancouver, where people can share what they hear, see and experience in each public space. It is an interactive way to collect information on individual public space without having to monitor it 24/7.

Bike rack design jam. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

7.0   Conclusion and Moving Forward

7.1 Conclusion on this project

The concept of public space inclusivity is multilayered, complex, interconnected and influenced by many factors that are highly subjective and mostly intangible. Interviews with public space organizations and advocates also provide insight into the challenges to achieving inclusive public spaces. This is perhaps why only very few cities around the world have tried to explore this topic (e.g., Barcelona's Urban Planning with a Gender Perspective).

Although complicated in nature, most factors influencing sense of inclusivity in public can be categorized into three dimensions. This includes "physical environment", "personal experiences", and "process and context" as described earlier in the report in section 2.3. Out of these three dimensions, the "physical environment" aspect has well established evaluation methods and approaches towards assessing the physical inclusivity of the surrounding built environment, urban design and accessibility. Therefore, it is possible to develop a public space inclusivity framework focusing only on the physical aspects. The other two dimensions require more in-depth research, information gathering and community engagement process to come up with the most suitable set of methodologies that would work well in the context of Vancouver.

In conclusion, the most urgent matter is perhaps not to focus on developing a comprehensive evaluation framework for assessing all public spaces in the City; instead, it is time to take a step back and think about how to build towards it piece by piece with the public and local communities involved. That being said, there should still be some effort put into thinking creatively about how to evaluate public space inclusivity and test some of methodologies along the way. The goal being to contribute to a knowledge foundation for evaluating and advancing public space inclusivity, including a set of field tested tools and methodologies, and extensive amounts of community input to support a well-rounded framework. It is not going to be an easy journey since achieving public space inclusivity would require more than just small urban design interventions, but also breaking down systemic barriers and understanding what or who has been overlooked and neglected in the public space decision-making process. This report will hopefully support the potential development of a framework on evaluating and achieving inclusive public space. It would serve as a valuable knowledge foundation for future research while provoking more conversations and awareness on public space inclusivity.

Rancity Block Party under Cambie Bridge. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

7.2 Reflections and limitations

Public space inclusivity is a complex social justice issue

As mentioned and emphasized throughout this report, the topic and concept of public space inclusivity is an extremely complex social justice issue. Many scholars and academics have been exploring this topic, with Henri Lefebvre's *"Production of Space"* in the 1970s being one of the most well-known theories on the perception of space. Although public space inclusivity has been discussed and studied a lot in academia, there are different opinions and perspectives on how to approach the subject. This made researching public space inclusivity very interesting and overwhelming at the same time due to the amount of information available. I learned, unlearned and relearned many things throughout this process, so it has been a very rewarding experience for me despite the challenges.

Depth versus breadth – balancing time and capacity

Since this is a Greenest City Scholar's project, there is a set time frame and hours for project completion. With a topic so interesting and complex, I often find myself contemplating about the depth versus breadth of my research. In some cases, I had to compromise some depth of a sub-topic for a more comprehensive overall understanding, and vice-versa. If this project could have a longer time frame or if it was a group project, some sections could become more in-depth and more informative. Also, since summer is a busy period for public space organizations and advocates, I likely wasn't able to schedule in as many interviews as I could have during a less busy time of year.

Public seating at Vancouver Art Gallery North Plaza. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier.

Translating research into something applicable on the ground

Knowledge translation is often a challenge for most research projects in the field. There are usually two major knowledge gaps within planning: one is from academics to planning practitioners (planners), and the other is from planners to the general public. This report fills the first gap in this relation, which is gathering information from academic research and translating it into something tangible for planners to work with. However, the second gap should not be ignored because, for the public to contribute meaningfully to city-building policies, processes, and projects, they must understand the potential impact of their contributions. This is important because their understanding of what public inclusivity means and how it is achieved would directly shape and influence the inclusiveness of a public space.

Public space, occupied land and steps toward reconciliation

The City of Vancouver is established on the traditional, ancestral, unceded and occupied territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səl̓ilwətaʔ (Tslei-Wututh) First Nations. As a settler on this land with limited knowledge on the ongoing displacement and inequity of our urban Indigenous population, I was unable to critically discuss the relationship between public space inclusivity and reconciliation. However, this is a great opportunity to explore the possibility of partnering and collaborating with Indigenous communities to take ownership, reclaim public spaces and work together towards reconciliation. I hope that this report would raise awareness on the complexity of related issues, and encourage more in-depth conversations around decolonizing urban public space.

Park(ing)day. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

Parklet space. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier

7.3 Moving forward and future opportunities

There are still a lot of research potentials and unexplored perspectives on the topic of public space inclusivity. The following are some suggestions for future research projects that can be carried out by either a Greenest City Scholar or other City staff at Street Activities.

Develop a public space inclusivity framework focusing on the physical elements

With the amount of research and methodologies available, it is highly feasible to develop a public space inclusivity framework focusing only on the physical aspects. This not only includes physical accessibility, public space surveillance and people friendly urban design, but also looking at the surrounding infrastructure and built environment of a public space (please refer to section *2.3 The dimensions of public space inclusivity*). With this framework, the City can use it to evaluate and make sure that our existing public spaces are at least physically inclusive for everyone.

Explore creative methods for assessing public space inclusivity and test them

Current methods for assessing public space inclusivity rely mainly on observational research methodologies such as counts, mapping and ethnographic notes; or using all kinds of survey methods, interviews and focus groups. There is a lot of potential for exploring more creative methods that can capture public space inclusivity both effectively and thoughtfully.

Interview and engage with more public space organizations and advocates

There are many public space organizations and advocates in Vancouver and other municipalities. They are the ones that actively program, monitor and engage with public spaces and often have a lot of valuable knowledge and experience to offer. They also offer a different perspective from City staff as they don't work within the same bureaucratic system.

Partner up with Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, Business Improvement Associations, community groups, local champions and other City departments

Many public spaces within the City are not directly managed or monitored by the Street Activities branch. Partnering up with other City departments and also the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, neighbourhood Business Improvement Associations, community groups and local champions on future projects can be very helpful.

Narrow down the research focus to a particular group of public spaces in the City

Since there are so many different types of public spaces within the City, having a research project focusing on just one particular group of them can contribute to a more in-depth understanding on public space inclusivity. For example, public space inclusivity for a large and centrally located plaza space would be very different from a neighbourhood parklet, so it might make more sense looking at them separately.

Summer music festival. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier.

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Public Disco in Alley Oop. Photo Credit: Alison Boulier
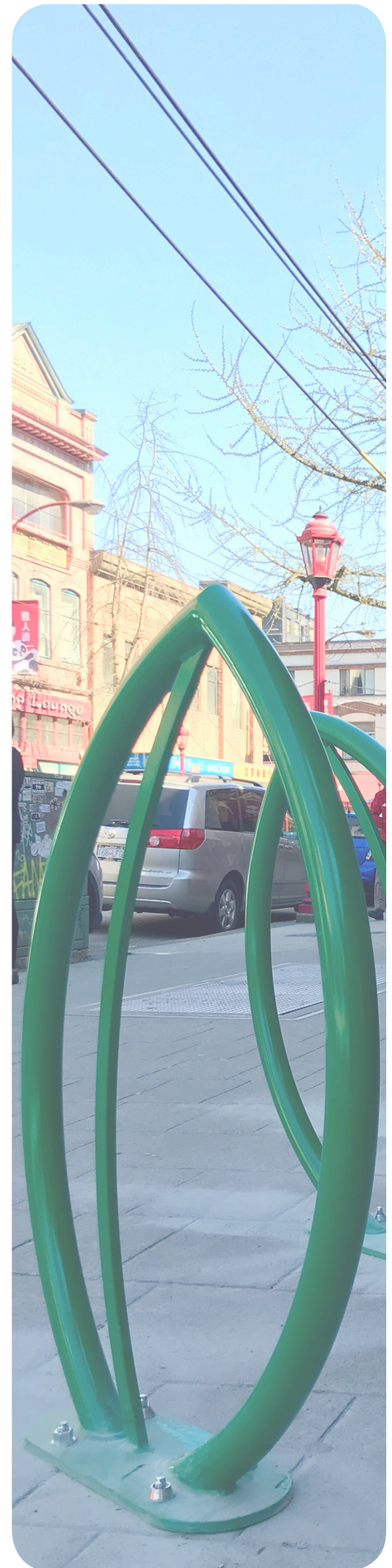
Appendices

Appendix 1

List of reviewed public space studies in Literature

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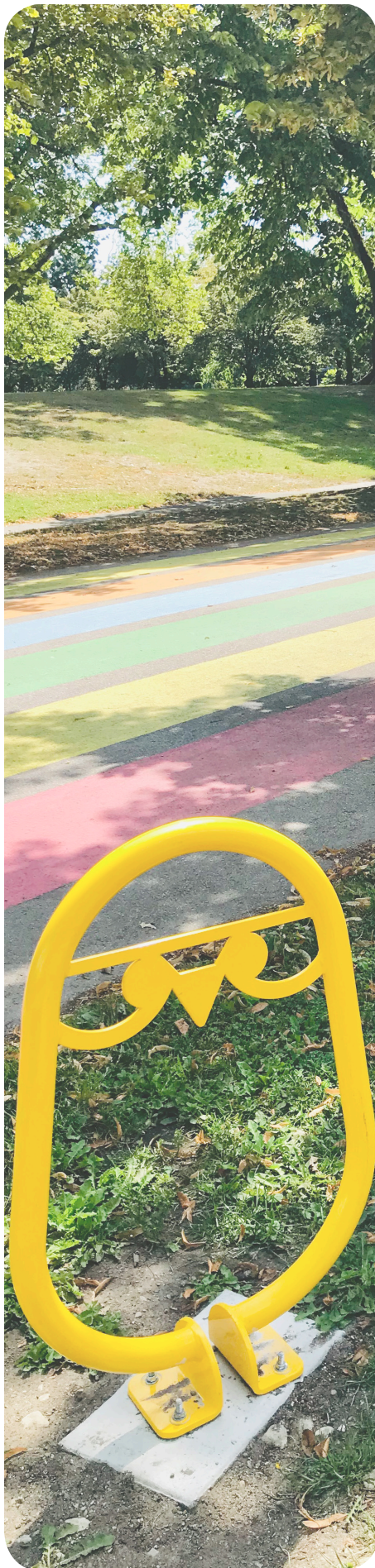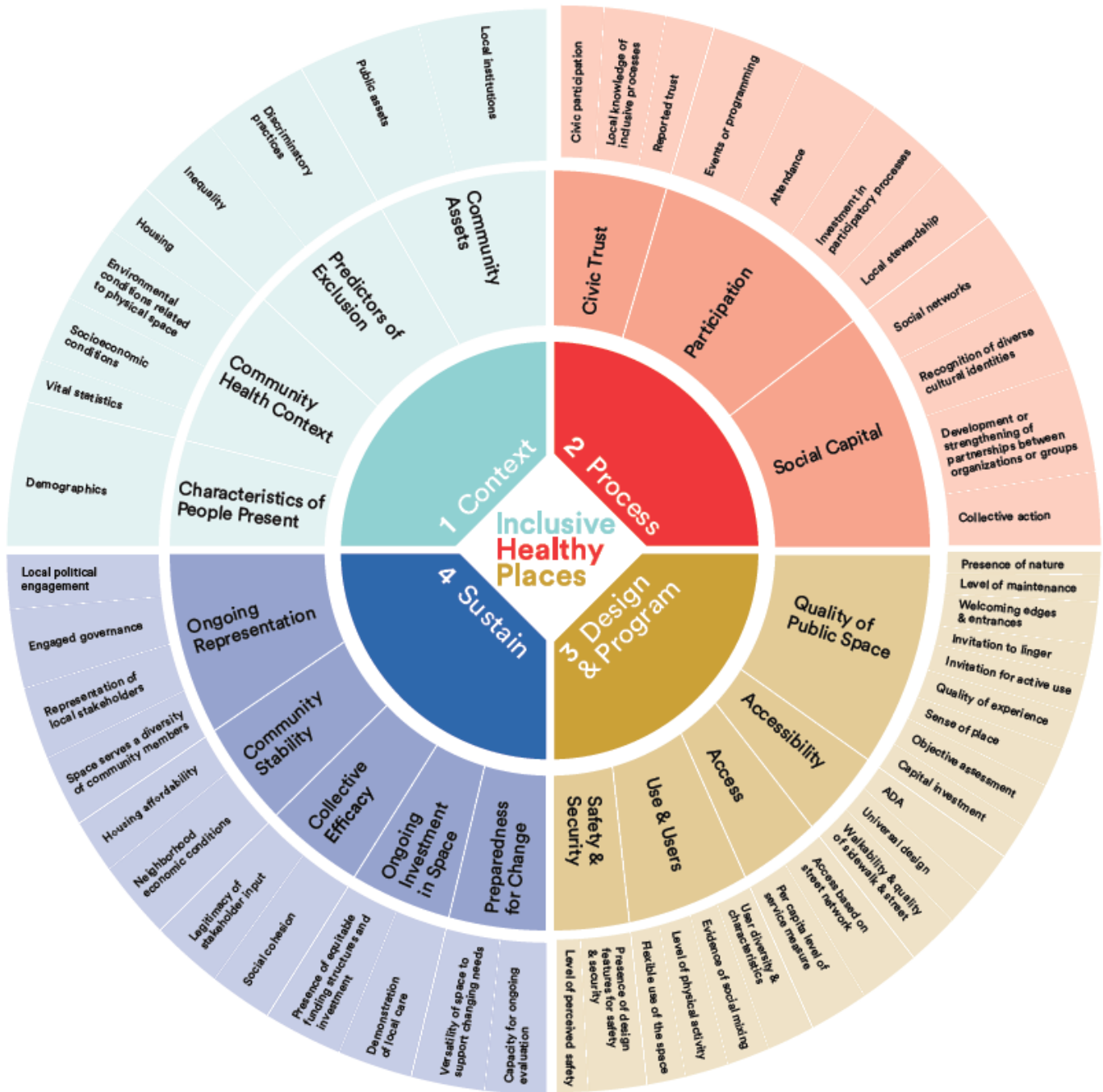
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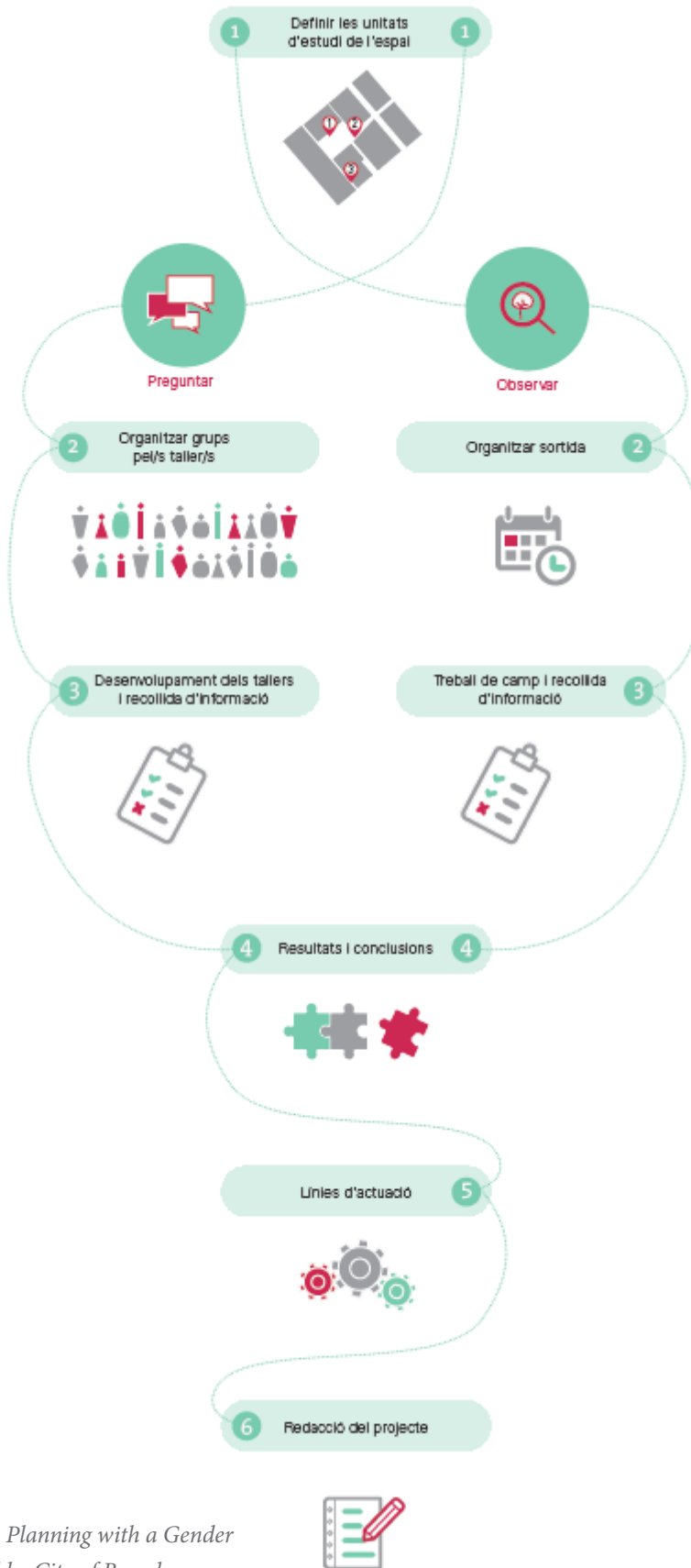
The Inclusive Healthy Places Framework

The inclusive Healthy Place Framework developed by Gehl Institute and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, showing the 4 guiding principles, 16 drivers and 52 indicators.

Appendix 3

Definir les unitats
d'estudi de l'espai

1   1

Preguntar   Observar

2   Organitzar grups   Organitzar sortida   2
     pel/s taller/s

3   Desenvolupament dels tallers   Treball de camp i recollida   3
     i recollida d'informació   d'informació

4   Resultats i conclusions   4

Línies d'actuació   5

6   Redacció del projecte

The 6 major steps of the Urban Planning with a Gender
Perspective Manual, developed by City of Barcelona.