

EVIDENCE BRIEF

SPACES OF SOCIABILITY: ENHANCING COPRESENCE AND COMMUNAL LIFE IN CANADA

About the project

Public spaces are central to the everyday life of cities. These include signature public spaces like public squares, parks, and playgrounds, and more overlooked spaces like sidewalks, street corners, and informal greenspaces. Public spaces are not simply physical infrastructure. As key sites for facilitating contact and sociability amongst users, and as spaces that we simply share others, they are an essential part of our shared *social infrastructure*— “the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact” (Klinenberg 2018: 5). Treating public spaces as social infrastructure requires planning, adequate sustained funding, cross-disciplinary and cross-community collaboration, participatory design, and ongoing care.

As concerns about social isolation and fragmentation increase, we need to better understand what creates, enhances, and sustains sociability between strangers, acquaintances, and neighbours. Public spaces can and should facilitate sociability.

To prepare this Evidence Brief, we examined how the best kinds of sociable public spaces work, to understand:

- social and physical elements of the public realm that facilitate sociable encounters
- public institutions (such as libraries) that enable and enhance sociable encounters
- ambiguously public/transitional zones between private and public space as staging grounds for neighbourhood-level sociability

Our recommendations are based on a comprehensive review of research literature and a series of multidisciplinary expert roundtables and individual interviews with 29 Canadian and international research collaborators. Our findings and recommendations are alive to the social and material features of public spaces that (1) facilitate people’s co-presence and (2) facilitate sociable contact across various forms of difference.

Key findings

Our findings emphasize key characteristics and contributions of sociable public spaces.

Sociable public spaces improve quality of life by increasing opportunities for social contact, play, learning, leisure, and simply sharing space. Some public spaces are disappearing as more open spaces are folded into restricted uses, private ownership, and commercial consumption-driven design. Policy and programming must respond by attending to different degrees and scales of

publicness. Understanding sociable public spaces' diffuse contributions to quality of life requires empirically grounded, multi-disciplinary qualitative and quantitative research.

Sociable public spaces facilitate interactions across social difference and create belonging. Good public spaces support diverse uses and users; the best cultivate belonging. Many public spaces are accessible in principle, but inaccessible in practice. Heavily planned, regulated and/or commercialized public spaces favour dominant users and uses, impacting belonging and accessibility. Exclusion happens along different lines, including age, gender, ability, race or ethnicity, and/or socio-economic status. Accessibility eliminates economic, physical, social and cultural barriers. Not all spaces can be used by all people at all times, but the best provide multiple opportunities for participation and belonging.

Sociable public spaces are planned *and* flexible. Public spaces must mediate many tensions: planned vs unplanned; formal vs informal; risk vs safety; predictability vs. unpredictability; convivial vs. conflictual. How tensions take shape is context-specific, both impacting and impacted by design, planning, programming, uses, and user experiences. Supporting diverse uses and users is a fine balance; overplanning and overregulating impacts accessibility and sociability. Facilitating spontaneous, free use and flexible physical arrangements increases user diversity.

Sociable public spaces can have different designations. Not all public spaces are formally designated as such. The boundary between public and private can be blurry; there are ambiguously public spaces that also provide opportunities for sociability: shopping malls and public-facing privately-owned spaces (porches, patios, balconies) share some characteristics with public spaces. These ambiguously public spaces are often at risk of displacement or erasure in gentrifying or highly commercialized neighborhoods. Policy makers might not always see where and how people use such spaces, or how they can be supported.

Sociable public spaces need information and participation. Residents require information and tools to create good public spaces, especially when private and commercial interests are in play. To enhance resident and community understanding and participation in planning, zoning, design, and decision-making processes, municipalities should create legible, accessible toolkits. Meaningful consultation must happen at all stages, and must engage the history, context, and diverse uses and users of space. Supporting dialogue and participation is key.

Policy Implications

Observe. Ask. Listen. Learn. Municipalities need better data on the social life of public spaces. Take *social* research seriously. Follow what public spaces users do. Attend to historical, social, cultural and community contexts—consider *actual* uses, users and immediate needs alongside desired outcomes.

License to Linger. Rather than cracking down on loitering, provide license to linger. The right to linger takes many forms, from sidewalk seating and park benches, to essential amenities like

water and washrooms, to play and recreational equipment, to collaboratively-programmed art and culture events. Enhancing opportunities to linger facilitates sociability.

Be spontaneous. Formal programming is important, but so are spontaneous uses. Support informal unanticipated uses, unplanned interactions, accidental public and semi-private spaces, and improvised events. Develop guidelines for non-punitive responses to unsanctioned uses of public spaces.

Play beyond playgrounds. Plan, design and program for mixed-age users and uses within and beyond playgrounds. Support everyday intergenerational sociability by centering play in policy and planning.

Take a walk. Develop public space networks that encourage mobility. Active transportation facilitates encounters between people in ways that cars and roads simply cannot. By weaving locales together, walkability enhances sociability.

Back to basics. Attend to basic human needs: fully accessible 24-hour washrooms, water fountains, diverse types of seating, and shelters for all types of weather. Recognize and reinforce public libraries as mixed-use service centres that support diverse populations.

In sum, to support sociable public spaces **be flexible, creative, inclusive, and playfully serious.**

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