

Parizeau, K. (2017). “Witnessing urban change: Insights from informal recyclers in Vancouver, BC.” *Urban Studies*, 54(8): 1921–1937.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0042098016639010>

### **Witnessing urban change: Insights from informal recyclers in Vancouver, BC**

#### **Abstract**

The perspectives of those most affected by urban change are often understudied, although these voices have the potential to inform academic understandings of the production of gentrified space. The Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood of Vancouver, BC is undergoing a period of intense redevelopment, raising concerns about the potential displacement of its predominantly low-income residents. In this study, informal recyclers (people who earn income from collecting recyclable or resalable items) share their observations of neighbourhood change based on their lives and work in the DTES. Informal recyclers’ observations reveal that diverse gentrifying processes are at play in the DTES, including restricted access to space, the social exclusion of othered bodies, and the symbolic construction of the DTES as a place of poverty that is in need of intervention. The inclusion of informal recyclers’ perspectives provides nuance to place-based processes of gentrification, and acknowledges the concerns of low-income urbanites most affected by urban change.

#### **Keywords**

gentrification, urban change, Vancouver, informal recycling, waste management

## **Introduction**

Vancouver, British Columbia is a city of contrasts. This city on the ocean is a high-volume tourist destination, due in part to its scenic location amid mountains and its cosmopolitan atmosphere. It is home to Canada's least affordable housing market, as well as one of its lowest-income neighbourhoods, the Downtown Eastside (DTES), often referred to as "Canada's poorest postal code." The DTES is home to approximately 18,500 people, many of them low-income singles living in single-room occupancy (SRO) housing. The median income in the neighbourhood is \$13,700, and more than half of residents are below the poverty line (City of Vancouver, 2015a). Vancouver is therefore both a site of affluence (e.g. high-income residents, tourists, commercial and investment interests), as well as a site of visible poverty in places like the DTES. The city is a site of intense urban change, and rising property values have led to the displacement of lower-income residents in many neighbourhoods, including the DTES. According to the Downtown Eastside Social Impact Assessment, property values in the neighbourhood increased 303% between 2001 and 2013 (City of Vancouver, 2014). High profile moments of conflict (such as the protracted protests of redeveloped sites) reveal the mounting tensions between exiting community members in the DTES and new entrants (e.g. Reynolds 2013).

The experiences of people living through gentrification and urban change are understudied, and their observations of changes in public space are especially under-documented. Informal recyclers (locally known as "binners") earn money from collecting beverage containers that can be returned for a deposit at recycling depots, and finding items they can resell, such as clothing or electronics. Most of these workers frequent the spaces where such items can be found, including parks, sidewalks with public garbage cans, and

back alleys where dumpsters are stored in commercial areas, and garbage cans are stored in residential areas. Not all informal recyclers live in the DTES, but many collect materials there or use the services of the neighbourhood, including the United We Can bottle depot (a social enterprise started by and for informal recyclers in 1995; see Dale and Newman, 2006 for an account of the depot's founding). According to Tremblay (2007), the diverse neighbourhoods where informal recyclers routinely work include both areas that are resistant to gentrification and those that have been undergoing gentrification for decades (see also Dale and Newman, 2009). Informal recyclers are therefore well positioned to observe urban change: they rely on public spaces in diverse neighbourhoods to collect materials and earn income, and their collecting activities place their low-income status in the public eye. They therefore both experience and embody stigma in changing neighbourhoods that they frequent, including the DTES of Vancouver.

### **Urban change and gentrification in Vancouver**

Vancouver is the third-largest city in Canada, and its housing market is the least affordable in the country (RBC Economics Research, 2015). Redevelopment and revitalization of the central city have been extensive in recent years. Ley and Lynch (2012) have observed increasing polarization across Vancouver's census tracts, with decreasing average incomes in areas of concentrated poverty (including the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood). Their analysis points to decreasing housing affordability across the city over time. They also note trends of displacement: "Currently, the poor and recent immigrants, two of the groups concentrated in the inner city, are being displaced and relocated because of neighbourhood gentrification and reinvestment in large downtown

redevelopment projects” (Ley and Lynch, 2012: 34). This description resonates with Hackworth’s definition of gentrification as the “production of urban space for progressively more affluent users” (2002: 815).

On a macro-economic scale, factors contributing to urban change in Vancouver have included postindustrial economic restructuring leading to the professionalization of the workforce, and an increase in the presence of creative class workers; these trends have also led to the polarization and marginalization of the regional economy (Barnes et al, 2011). Transnational flows of people and capital have also been implicated in urban change in Vancouver. Moos and Skaburskis (2010) describe how the migration of high-skilled and wealthy individuals to Vancouver has led to the decoupling of the housing market from local labour markets, leading to affordability concerns (especially in the context of reduced government funding for housing). Mitchell (2004) describes the flow of wealthy transnational migrants as a global neoliberal trend that has influenced the housing market: affluent migrants invest in housing, leading to increased prices, “monster homes,” and localized struggles over the landscapes of Vancouver’s neighbourhoods. Mitchell also unpacks the race politics implicit in these struggles (see Ray et al 1997, for further discussion of the racialized discourses of migration and urban change in Vancouver’s suburbs).

At the local scale, urban change in Vancouver has occurred as the result of a series of governance-based negotiations and compromises made between politicians, planners, community stakeholders, residents, and private developers (Hoyle, 2000; Hutton, 2004; Mason, 2007). Examples of municipal policy initiatives that have been implicated in the gentrification of the DTES neighbourhood include policies encouraging social mix,

designations of parts of the neighbourhood as heritage or revitalization areas, and a lack of policies to protect single room occupancy (SRO) housing – one of the few affordable options available for low-income residents of the neighbourhood (Smith 2003). In some cases, these compromises are made in an attempt to prevent the displacement of low-income urbanites, although they may facilitate the long-term dispersal of such communities.

Discourses of liveability and sustainability have long been invoked to legitimize urban change in Vancouver (Dale and Newman, 2009; Lees and Demeritt, 1998; Quastel et al 2012). Vancouver has a reputation as a “green city,” and mobilizes this discourse in its planning documents (e.g. The Greenest City Action Plan; City of Vancouver, 2015b). Kear (2007) theorizes that this particular mobilization of “sustainability” branding is linked to Vancouver’s status as a “consumer city” that caters to creative classes and other affluent urbanites, including tourists and mobile classes (see also Quastel, 2009 for a discussion of eco-gentrification in Vancouver). The place-branding associated with the 2010 Winter Olympic Games has also been connected to urban change and gentrification in Vancouver. In order to host this mega-event, an influx of infrastructure investment enabled the construction of public transportation systems, recreational facilities, and housing in the central city. These investments have been both lauded as effective revitalization by local decision-makers, and criticized by local activists, other civil society actors, and academic observers for enabling luxury consumption and displacement (Boykoff, 2011; Porter, 2009). Kennelly and Watt (2011) describe how homeless youth in Vancouver were pressured to leave higher profile parts of the city during the Olympics, and were often

displaced to the Downtown Eastside. This neighbourhood was then the focus of increased policing during the games, further marginalizing homeless youth in the city.

The Downtown Eastside neighbourhood has become an island of low-income living in an otherwise upscale downtown area. Located on traditional Coast Salish territory, the Downtown Eastside is one of Vancouver's oldest neighbourhoods. Beginning in the 1800s, the neighbourhood housed resource industry workers and other working-class residents. The DTES has been home to successive waves of marginalized ethnic communities. There is a long history of activism and advocacy in the neighbourhood, and a strong sense of community among local residents (City of Vancouver, 2005; Hasson and Ley, 1994). As Dale and Newman (2009) point out, the surrounding gentrification in Vancouver has led to the eventual concentration of poverty into a few blocks in this part of the city. The area has a reputation for a "culture of poverty," including drug use, survival sex work, homelessness, crime, and mental health issues; as Ley and Dobson (2008) suggest, these factors may serve to impede gentrification from encroaching into the DTES neighbourhood, despite its excellent location as an area for redevelopment. However, Burnett (2014) documents how the grittiness of the DTES is itself becoming an attraction, connecting the phenomenon of "poverty tourism" in this neighbourhood to commercial (and particularly culinary) gentrification.

Affordable housing in the DTES has been protected by community organizers and sympathetic legislators since the 1970s, although the retrenchment of federal funding for affordable housing from the 1980s onward has placed increased financial pressure on municipalities to address local housing needs (Ley and Dobson, 2008). Facing redevelopment pressures in the DTES neighbourhood, the City of Vancouver continued to

work toward preserving low-income housing in the DTES throughout the 2000s. The Vancouver Agreement (a multi-scalar government plan in effect from 2000-2010) put forward a Downtown Eastside Economic Revitalization Plan (Vancouver Agreement, 2004), which called for “revitalization without displacement.” Furthermore, the Housing Plan for the Downtown Eastside notes that “[n]o loss of low-income housing stock and no displacement of residents are fundamental objectives of the Plan” (City of Vancouver, 2005:3). However, increasing development pressures became evident in City Council’s approval of the Local Area Plan for the DTES in 2014, wherein both displacement and affordability were redefined. Although the plan aims to “[c]reate 4,400 new social housing units in the DTES” in the next 30 years, it also provides one definition of “social housing” as:

“rental housing... [i]n which at least one third of the dwelling units are occupied by persons eligible for either Income Assistance or a combination of basic Old Age Security pension and Guaranteed Income Supplement and are rented at rates no higher than the shelter component of Income Assistance” (City of Vancouver, 2015a: 206).

In essence, a building (and all of the units it contains) can now be considered “social housing” if at least 1/3 of units are rented at income assistance rates, even though the vast majority of units are rented at potentially much higher rates. Activists and community organizers believe this redefinition will lead to the effective removal of at least 36% of current residents from the DTES neighbourhood as redevelopment proceeds. Combined with the plan to create additional affordable housing outside of the DTES, they have dubbed the Local Area Plan a “dispersal plan” that will move people across the City of Vancouver (Carnegie Community Action Project, 2014; Wallstam et al., 2014), potentially heralding a new wave of gentrification in the DTES neighbourhood.

## **Informal recyclers as astute urban observers**

### *Excluded perspectives on gentrification*

Slater argues that some gentrification scholarship reproduces the invisibilization of those impacted and displaced by gentrification by instead focusing on the experiences of middle-class entrants to changing neighbourhoods, and concluding that “gentrification ‘isn’t so bad after all’” (2006: 739). Wacquant furthers this critique, describing the invisibility of the working class in public spheres as the “literal and figurative effacing of the proletariat in the city” (2009: 199), contending that this erasure is replicated by urban research that serves the interests of urban rulers and elites. These critiques invoke a moral imperative to conduct research that documents the effects of gentrification on displaced and otherwise affected residents of redeveloping neighbourhoods, and to re-politicize the impacts of urban change on marginalized urbanites. In this vein, some scholars have documented how the process of gentrification can invisibilize marginalized individuals, thus demonstrating the importance of seeking out and foregrounding these perspectives.

For example, Cahill’s (2006, 2007) research in collaboration with young women of colour in the Lower East Side of New York (the “Fed Up Honeys”) reveals the downward pressures that economic restructuring places not only on neighbourhoods, but on the bodies of young women too. In exploring local histories of place-making in a gentrified neighbourhood in New Haven, Connecticut, Blockland (2009) unearthed untold and previously absent narratives of “black poor” housing project residents that revealed their exclusion, stigmatization, and a precarious reliance on public spaces. Newman and Wyly (2006) used mixed-methods research to document displacement in gentrifying neighbourhoods in New York City, as well as residents’ efforts to resist displacement and



remain in gentrifying neighbourhoods. Rankin and McLean's (2014) collaboration with community-based researchers (residents of social housing and low-rent housing in the neighbourhood) in Toronto's inner suburbs led to the articulation of a "racialized class projects" in the Mount Dennis neighbourhood that was invisibilized by dominant narratives of urban change in the area. Mazer and Rankin (2011) carried out cognitive mapping exercises with people at risk of displacement (rooming-house tenants and proprietors of commercial outlets for affordable goods and services) in Toronto's Downtown West neighbourhoods, finding that social spaces in the neighbourhood were becoming increasingly inaccessible to low-income earners, and that different social groups lived separate lives, even though they shared some of the same spaces of the city. These researchers note: "A fundamental proposition of our research is that exploring how marginalized people experience neighbourhood upgrading allows us to critically examine and reimagine our knowledge of gentrification" (Mazer and Rankin, 2011: 823).

These studies accentuate two key findings from investigations of marginalized urbanites' lived experiences of gentrification: first, the scale of the body is imbricated with the multi-scalar production of gentrified space, and the politics of these bodies are not immaterial in gentrification processes. Second, the perspectives of marginalized urbanites can contribute to deeper understandings of the ground-level effects of gentrification on the urban sphere. The following case study draws on the perspectives of informal recyclers in order to better understand processes of urban change in the DTES neighbourhood, particularly pertaining to the neighbourhood spaces and functions central to their livelihoods and social reproduction (where and how they live, eat, recycle, socialize, etc.).

### *Informal recyclers and urban change*

Informal recyclers in Vancouver are low-income generators (~\$20-40 a day) who have often experienced a number of social and economic vulnerabilities, including language barriers, marginal immigration status, dependence on social assistance, addiction, and homelessness (DeBeck et al., 2007; Tremblay, 2007; Tremblay et al., 2010; Wittmer, 2014). (). Informal recyclers often face stigma and social marginalization (e.g. Gutberlet et al., 2009; Gutberlet and de Oliveira Jayme, 2010 report on this phenomenon in nearby Victoria, BC). Another indicator of informal recyclers' social vulnerability is the proliferation of work-related health problems that they report [Author, forthcoming]. Despite these vulnerabilities, there can be a strong sense of community among recyclers (Tremblay et al., 2010; Dale and Newman, 2008). Studies have also shown that informal recyclers improve waste diversion rates and thus provide a municipal environmental service (e.g. Ashenmiller, 2009). However, these contributions are not always acknowledged or appreciated by municipal authorities.

In Vancouver, Project Civil Society was introduced in 2006 by then-Mayor Sam Sullivan in preparation for the 2010 Olympics. This plan targeted "public disorder" in city streets, including homelessness, panhandling, the drug trade, graffiti, litter, and informal recycling (City of Vancouver Office of the Mayor, 2006; see Parizeau and Lepawsky, 2015 for a fuller accounting of this era). While subsequent municipal governments have worked to be more inclusive of informal recyclers, restrictions on their activities continue. For example, the British Columbia provincial courts recently upheld an anti-street vending by-law, which prevents informal recyclers (and others) from selling items they recover from the waste stream on sidewalks and in public spaces, under penalty of a \$250 fine (Griffin,

2014). The policing of street vending and informal recycling activities is closely connected to urban change in the city, and the influx of more affluent residents to the neighbourhoods where the survival activities associated with “disorder” have long taken place. The Project Civil Society documentation makes explicit the problem with informal recycling: “this type of activity is creating a certain level of social tension within the City of Vancouver” (City of Vancouver Office of the Mayor, 2006: p.24). It is thus the appearance of “public disorder” and the discomfort it causes for new arrivals to areas like the DTES that are at issue. Similar regimes of urban hygiene have targeted informal recyclers in other parts of the world (Banerjee-Guha, 2009; Mitchell, 2008; Parizeau, 2015), displacing them from high profile public areas that are frequented by urban elites, and are often marked for redevelopment or revitalization. The bodies of informal recyclers thus become a symbolic marker of disorder and poverty in low-income areas of the city, legitimizing the need for redevelopment.

The connection between stigmatized bodies and the production of gentrified urban spaces is articulated by Kern (2015):

“...the mutual constitution of forms of embodiment and processes of urban change... happens not only through the removal of symbolically ‘dirty’ bodies and practices and their replacement with symbolically ‘clean’ bodies and practices, but also by constituting those ‘dirty’ bodies and practices as such by the symbolic and substantive displacement of environmental and industrial pollution onto those bodies, allowing the neighbourhood to redefine itself as clean (whether it is environmentally clean or not) once those bodies are displaced, contained, or made invisible” (68).

If informal recyclers are “dirty” and “disordered,” then their physical removal and rhetorical erasure from city spaces can be considered a success for revitalization movements. The symbolic import of informal recycling, combined with the public presence

of informal recyclers on city streets, places these workers at the nexus of urban change in neighbourhoods like the DTES.

## **Methods**

This research is part of a multi-year study of urban change in the DTES of Vancouver, including multiple field visits to Vancouver between 2011-2015 and key informant interviews with planners, service providers, and others who were connected to the lives and work of informal recyclers in Vancouver. The data for this article were collected in 2012 in a series of interviews with 17 informal recyclers and workers at the United We Can recycling depot, which was located in the DTES at the time (it has since moved to a larger site just outside of the neighbourhood). Of the 17 respondents, 7 identified as both workers at the depot and informal recyclers, 9 were recyclers only, and 1 was a depot worker only. United We Can strives to provide part-time employment for community members who otherwise face labour exclusions, which is why many of their workers also reported engaging informal recycling activities. Respondents were asked questions about their recycling activities, their spaces of work, their experiences of public space, and perceptions of what had changed / stayed the same in the DTES neighbourhood (and other spaces of work and residence) over time. Few demographic or personal questions were asked of respondents, in part because the DTES is a heavily-researched area where people are often asked about their poverty, drug use, and other stigmatized behaviours. Additionally, the focus of this research was on the perspectives of those

connected to informal recycling in Vancouver, and I strove to interact with respondents as expert informants rather than as research subjects.

## **Results and discussion**

### *The place of informal recycling / recyclers in the gentrifying city*

Respondents reported collecting recyclables at multiple sites throughout the city, including at public events (such as festivals and concerts held in parks), from dumpsters, from recycling bins, from people who work in residential buildings (including cleaning and front-door staff), from restaurants and offices and hotels, and from friends and family. Respondents also discussed the importance of informal recycling as an environmental service, particularly in the context of imperfect recycling sorting by others:

“Like most people think recycling is a huge thing, but you’ll be quite surprised about how many people still, like I’d say like more than half the population still throws their recycling in the garbage.” (Respondent #2, male)

They commented on the increasing prevalence of informal recycling in the city, suggesting that competition for materials was becoming more intense. All respondents observed that the number of people doing this work had increased over time, and many connected this trend to financial strain:

“People need the money. They got to keep digging for cans wherever they can get it.” (Respondent #17, male)

Although informal recycling is a poverty-mediation strategy that can improve recycling rates in the city, it is still waste work, and respondents were aware of the stigma that is attached to those who engage in it:

“They’re going up hills, they’re cutting their hands, they’re dirty, they have to put with the looks people giving them. They...you know. It’s hard work, just to get up twenty bucks.” (Respondent #4: male)

“These people [informal recyclers]: ‘druggies’ or uh, ‘diseased,’ or uh, ‘dirty,’ or ‘bugs.’ There was a bed bugs thing a while back... You know, you see somebody bent over to pick something up off the ground, you think, ew! (Respondent #11, male)

The dirtiness and disorder associated with waste is thus symbolically attached to the bodies of informal recyclers, and respondents reported that this association sometimes resulted in poor treatment from others while working.

### *The production of gentrified space in the DTES*

When asked about their perceptions of changes in Vancouver, respondents spoke to high rates of turnover in commercial sites that had long been established in the DTES (including affordable retail and restaurants, along with poverty-affiliated sites) and the loss of affordable housing:

“Just a lot of the, uh, the pawn shops, a lot of them are closed down. A lot of the old bars are closed down ...the old housing, uh, turned into new condos. A lot of new condos coming up.” (Respondent #5, male)

Respondents observed that these sites were being replaced with high-end retail, services, and housing, along with an influx of affluent residents and shoppers:

“There's a lot of, um, yuppie type people as I call them moving into the area, and a lot more um, upscale businesses moving into the area.” (Respondent #6, female)

The entry of high-priced retail and services in the area not only brings new people and new lifestyles into the area, but also serves to curtail the ability of lower-income residents and workers to meet their day-to-day needs in the neighbourhood:

“Where I live... there’s a lot of places that popped up, and there’s a hair dressing place beside me. \$45 for a haircut... none of us can afford that.” (Respondent #7, female)

A number of respondents referred to the direct replacement of former neighbourhood sites with higher-end versions, such as SRO housing replaced with condos, and affordable coffee and foods being replaced with much more expensive gourmet versions. These upgrades can be read as a trend of replacement-as-displacement in the production of gentrified space in the DTES. A key example of this phenomenon is “renoviction,” a locally-used term that describes the process of closing down SROs for renovations and then renting the spaces at much higher prices that the original inhabitants cannot afford. Respondents commonly cited the example of the Burns Block building: a high-profile example of a notoriously poor quality SRO that was converted to upscale micro-lofts in 2011, purportedly in an attempt to create “affordable housing” (Vancouver Sun staff, 2014). However, the building is now an iconic example of gentrification via renoviction:

“It used to be SROs. It used to be like 375 a month. And uh, they redid it. They kicked everybody out and redid it. Said we’re gonna give it back to you, we’re just gonna redo it. But then we opened up a bunch of university campuses down here. And so I guess, they went, ok we’re not gonna cater to the Downtown Eastside, we’re gonna cater to the university students who can afford 800 bucks a month.” (Respondent #14, male)

While the micro-loft rental units were originally intended to be priced at \$850 per month, the high demand for these units led to the quick skyrocketing of rental prices to \$1,100 (almost three times the price of the \$375 month shelter allowance provided to those on social assistance referenced in the quote above), as well as a waiting list to live in the building (Lupick, 2014).

When discussing experiences of residential displacement within the neighbourhood, some respondents described being displaced from one SRO to another, as well as transitions from housing to temporary shelters or homelessness. Alluding to the difficulties of finding new accommodations when displaced, one respondent noted:

“Ah, screw it, I'll live in the bush for a while... I don't know how many times I've done that, but it just gets harder on the back, harder on the body.”  
(Respondent #5, male)

Respondents also spoke of residential displacement from the DTES to surrounding communities in the region (including Surrey and Richmond, although these were second-hand accounts; when informal recyclers move out of the city, it is unlikely that they would commute into the DTES to work and use the bottle depot there (see also Newman and Wyly, 2006 for discussion of this methodological limitation).

Respondents commented on the increasing concentration of poverty in a small area of the DTES (also observed by Dale and Newman, 2009; Kennelly and Watt, 2011):

“Interviewer: You were talking about certain people sort of being pushed out?”

Interviewee: ...Not being pushed out - being pushed in... There was a certain area where - like, this street, all this along here.” (Respondent #8, male)

The respondent is referencing the blocks of Hastings Street that surrounded the then-location of the United We Can depot, where the interview took place. This section of the DTES has been the epicenter of visible poverty in the city, largely due to the prevalence of street vending, the line-ups of informal recyclers with their carts at the depot, the line-ups of people waiting for food at soup kitchens and other food service providers, and common open drug use in this area (all of this despite the close proximity of a police station). As one



respondent noted, the transition from this area of concentrated poverty to both the newly gentrified areas as well as the established residential areas of the DTES is stark: “And you’d be surprised at the difference, just walking a block off of Hastings” (Respondent #14, male). Some expressed concern that the corralling of low-income urbanites and poverty-stigmatized behaviours into this small area is a precursor to, and possibly a justification for, major redevelopment and mass displacement.

Another theme in the production of gentrified space in the DTES observed by respondents was the enclosure of public spaces (see also Blomley 2008):

“Especially if you were homeless, that’s your home there, so you’re just on the street you know, whatever. You always have - you always find the good spots. Right? Like you know the coves there, or like stairways, or a bench park. You know, you just find a spot where you could hang out, sleep, or do drugs, or you know, stay out of public view. Right? What happened, last few years now, all those spots, someone...complained. They see... drug addicts or homeless people are hanging out there. So what the city is gonna do now is they all put up fences or barbed wire and they’ve been closing off all these areas.” (Respondent #2, male)

One mechanism for enclosing public space is increased securitization. A number of respondents referred to increased formal and informal securitization of space in the DTES neighbourhood, including more private security staff, as well as an increase in verbal warnings of trespassing from residents and proprietors:

“Lot of new buildings and lot of people telling me I’m not allowed here or there or, private property. Anywhere I walk, under my two feet is private property.” (Respondent #11, male)

Increased securitization in the DTES can lead to reduced access to previously public spaces (see also Kennelly and Watt 2011).

In addition to the loss of access to public spaces, respondents also referred to the loss of formal and informal community spaces, including private spaces that may function

as de facto public spaces (see Parlette and Cowen, 2010 for further discussion of such spaces):

“Well, they need some cheap restaurants, some places to, where people just go hangout. Right? There’s... no community centers, or what do you call ‘em, rec things right?... Oh, it’s worse, way worse. You use to be able to do stuff down here.” (Respondent #16, male)

Public space (whether formal or informal) is a particularly important resource for low-income residents of the DTES, as they often have little access to private spaces that can allow for socializing, access to outdoor spaces, or even eating and food preparation spaces (e.g. for those who live in SROs). Blomley (2004, 2008) argues that claims of legitimate access to both public and private spaces in the DTES are both practically and symbolically important to low-income community members in this neighbourhood, allowing them to articulate an ethics of an “urban commons,” and legitimize their inhabitation of such spaces.

The enclosure of previously accessible spaces also has implications for the income-earning ability of informal recyclers. Some reported an increase in dumpsters being locked in the back alleys of commercial areas, an initiative that was spearheaded in 2007 under Project Civil Society to discourage informal recycling in the DTES. Respondents reported that the trend of formal and informal securitization has also been extended to other spaces that contain recyclables (such as garbage rooms in multi-unit buildings):

“When I’m in their recycling room... Some people have the time and I say, ‘Thank you. Thank you for recycling...’ But, some people tell me I’m trespassing. Trespass by assault. I got like 380 charges like that. But, well, they tell me is ‘walk out,’ because somebody’s upset that I’m getting a bottle or two. So, 5 or 10 cents, hunh.” (Respondent #11, male)

This account raises the perception of informal recyclers as a threatening presence and as bodies out of place, particularly in upscale residential private spaces. Combined with the

reported increase in competition for materials due to the rise in numbers of informal recyclers (see also Tremblay 2007), reduced access to waste streams thus threatens an important source of livelihood for low-income community members in the DTES.

*Social relations in the gentrifying DTES: the incivility of social mix*

The Local Area Plan for the DTES espouses a philosophy of social mixing: “Best practice to ensure the sustainability and feasibility of social housing shows that mixed income tenants in a social housing project enables optimum results over the long term” (City of Vancouver, 2015a: 96). This approach has been commonly adopted in redevelopment and revitalization initiatives in Europe and North America (Lees, 2008), and is often assumed to be beneficial for all parties involved. However, the literature suggests that the types of urban change that bring such diverse socio-economic groups of residents into close proximity may actually cause social tensions, and may lead to the eventual displacement of lower-income residents (e.g. August, 2014; Larsen and Hansen, 2008; Slater, 2004; Walks and Maaranen, 2008; Wyly and Hammel, 2004). Respondents similarly described how proximity with more affluent users of the DTES neighbourhood could lead to incivility and conflict:

“Because it’s kind of a war almost. You got these two classes, right? And they’re knocking heads... Just people are, ya, they don’t want nothing to do with you.” (Respondent #5, male)

“You know, seriously, what’s up with that? You’re in our neighbourhood. Do not talk to people like that. Do not talk to the women like that. There’s a lot of working girls who go into the bars. Yes, they have a big addiction, or they’re an alcoholic, or they have both. But you know what? When you’re talking to a lady... or anybody, we’re human beings.” (Respondent #1, male)

“They’re making us feel less than you.” (Respondent #7, female)

Even for those who did not perceive conflict with more affluent entrants to the neighbourhood, they did not report “socially mixing” with them either:

“So far I don’t think there’s been any problems. It seems like the two different communities kind of blend together. We’re ok.... Maybe not so much mixing but, you know, conflict or confrontation - they just kind of stay separate to themselves.” (Respondent #6, female)

Whether by remaining separate or by behaving aggressively and uncivilly, these reported behaviours of “yuppie” newcomers to the DTES challenge the social mixing hypothesis. As summarized by Lees: “despite the new middle classes’ desire for diversity and difference they tend to self-segregate and, far from being tolerant, gentrification is part of an aggressive, revanchist ideology designed to retake the inner city for the middle classes” (2008: 2449). It would appear that this divide between classes is being actively built into the gentrifying city: even those spaces that are seemingly designed to promote social mix do not provide planned spaces for interaction. For example, the Vancouver Sun newspaper reports that it is becoming a trend for new mixed housing developments in the city to include separate entrances and elevators for those who live in the social housing portion of the buildings (Lee, 2015).

A respondent articulated the injustice of the revanchist impulse of gentrifiers in the DTES:

“So what happened was all these people bought in there because it was really cheap, and then they got on the city’s case: ‘Now we’re homeowners: get ‘em out of here.’ Right? [laughs]... That’s like me moving into your neighbourhood and saying, ‘You got to move out of your house now.’” (Respondent #14, male)

In contrast, respondents often reported a strong sense of community among DTES residents:

“But the people in this neighbourhood that are here every single day, they got respect for each other, empathy... The other parts of downtown, I don’t see people talking with each other. Down here it’s like, almost everyone.” (Respondent #4, male)

These quotations reflect recyclers’ perception that new high-income entrants to the neighbourhood are likely to self-isolate and separate themselves from the existing community, rather than “socially mix” with them.

Another potential source of incivility reported by some respondents was changes in policing in the neighbourhood:

“They’re hiring more policeman, but some of them are being too gung-ho, too rogue.” (Respondent #17, male)

“Some of the police I’ve seen down here are just brutal. Right? On the wrong people though, right? On the weak.” (Respondent #1, male)

Notably, some respondents also described positive interactions with the police. The Vancouver Police Department is seen as a leader in community policing efforts in some quarters (McKenna, 2014), and has been an active supporter of harm-reduction initiatives like the safe injection site in the DTES. However, the police occupy a complicated space in the DTES, and debate continues over their proper role in the neighbourhood (e.g. Mahichi, 2015). The ambivalence of informal recyclers toward police in the DTES highlights both the benefits and complexity of “tiered policing” models that work to incorporate enforcement with community services (McKenna, 2014), particularly in low-income neighbourhoods. While some may perceive the ability of officers to exercise flexibility and discretion in their enforcement decisions as a positive step in building community

relationships, this approach also creates an uneven landscape of policing in the DTES where certain people and behaviours are criminalized one day, but may not be the next. In effect, the differential enforcement of criminal and anti-social behaviours can contribute to feelings of insecurity in this transitioning neighbourhood (Proudfoot and McCann, 2008, Parizeau and Lepawsky, 2015).

#### *Other perspectives on urban change in the DTES*

Not all respondents reported observations of urban change: two reported that nothing seemed to be changing in the neighbourhood. It could be that these respondents had not felt the impacts of urban change in their neighbourhood (and particularly in the area of concentrated poverty where the interviews took place), that they were isolated from the social dynamics of the neighbourhood (e.g. due to addiction issues), or that the functions of the neighbourhood that were most important to them had not been impacted by neighbourhood change. Another possible interpretation is that life has always been challenging in the DTES: “It’s always been the same” (Respondent #10, male). From this perspective, the trends of increasing development in the neighbourhood could be seen as a continuation of the exclusion and marginalization that residents of the DTES have experienced for decades.

Other respondents commented on the potential benefits of urban change and revitalization in the DTES:

“Fixing it up is great because there’s a lot of problems with bugs and stuff.” (Respondent #13, male)

“Just even across the street there, that Only Seafood restaurant has been empty for, you know, it’s been empty for years, and, you know, it looks

like a really old heritage building, and it looks beautiful. If you fixed that up it would look nice. I don't think there's anything wrong with fixing up buildings." (Respondent #4, male)

These same respondents had also commented on the negative impacts of gentrification and displacement in the DTES, revealing a complex understanding of urban change, and a legitimate demand for neighbourhood improvement after years of disinvestment (see also Mazer and Rankin, 2011).

Finally, it is important to note that respondents questioned the inevitability of the production of gentrified space in the DTES. They discussed some of the "poverty culture" factors that Ley and Dobson (2008) identified as barriers to urban change (including drugs and crime in the neighbourhood), and also alluded to community organizing and activism as means of slowing urban change. In particular, respondents highlighted the advocacy and community-building work of the Carnegie Community Centre and its anti-poverty programs, Pivot Legal Society (an organization working to protect the legal interests of low-income and socially-excluded groups), VANDU (the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users), and United We Can. The acknowledgement of potential barriers to gentrification reveals informal recyclers' sense of agency within the DTES community, and a sense of possibility for interrupting processes of gentrification and displacement in the DTES.

## **Conclusions**

Those who work in the informal recycling sector in Vancouver are well-positioned to observe urban change and its impacts on the social and physical spaces of the DTES. Respondents described the following trends in the production of gentrified space in this

neighbourhood: forced displacement (e.g. evictions, increased securitization), displacement-by-replacement (whereby higher-cost versions of housing, services, and retail outlets replace lower-cost options, and out-price lower-income users), the concentration of poverty into an ever smaller area, the enclosure of public space, the loss of formal/informal community spaces, and poor treatment in public spaces by new entrants to the neighbourhood, and sometimes by police. There is therefore a diversity of gentrifying processes at play in the DTES, including restricting access to certain spaces for low-income urbanites; the social exclusion of bodies read as poor, dirty, or otherwise undesirable; and the symbolic construction of the DTES as a place of poverty that is in need of intervention. On-the-ground qualitative accounts of neighbourhood change can thus reveal the social impacts of these changes of low-income urbanites, and add nuance to academic understandings of the production of gentrified spaces.

The above accounts reveal the importance of attending to the bodily scale of gentrification's impacts in transitioning neighbourhoods. Respondents emphasized how their poor treatment in the DTES was connected to the stigma of their association with waste, as well as other signifiers of poverty. They also described decreasing abilities to meet their bodily needs (e.g. shelter, food, personal care) within the neighbourhood due to price increases. Informal recyclers detailed decreased access to recyclable or re-sellable materials in the DTES, and increased competition for recyclables. These changes, along with discretionary policing and the continuation of anti-vending by-laws, place pressure on informal recyclers' livelihood practices in the neighbourhood. As described by Kern, the displacement, containment, and policing of "contaminated" abject bodies in gentrifying



neighbourhoods serves to “facilitate strategies of capital accumulation by opening spaces for new development and new uses” (2015: 73).

Revitalization and neighbourhood improvement need not necessarily be conflated with gentrification and displacement, even though these efforts tend to be pursued in tandem in contemporary cities. The question becomes, why is redevelopment pursued as the main viable form of neighbourhood re-investment to the detriment of low-income community members (August, 2014; Newman and Wyly 2006)? The Local Area Plan for the DTES provides hints: “The City needs to work together with and leverage other levels of government as well as private, non-profit and community stakeholders to assist in developing an affordable housing supply that will meet local need” (City of Vancouver, 2015a: 92). There is little government funding available for affordable housing, and so private and non-profit actors become key partners in the provision of housing and the redevelopment of communities. Without government support, such redevelopments must be profitable in order to proceed. The restoration of federal and provincial funding for the construction and repair of affordable housing would enable reinvestment in neighbourhoods like the DTES without displacing low-income residents. Municipal governments also have a role to play in protecting existing low-income housing and commercial uses, and also in governing the accessibility of public spaces and ensuring equitable enforcement of low-income urbanites’ inhabitation of public spaces. The perception of informal recyclers as “bodies out of place” must be challenged in order to recognize these workers as community members who provide a useful environmental service within constrained circumstances. Organizations in the DTES work to challenge such stigma through community-building and advocacy work, and so are important resources for low-income Vancouverites.

There is a strong history of interventions to prevent wholesale displacement in the DTES, including community mobilization and public policy to protect of non-market housing units. It is yet to be seen whether the implementation of the Local Area Plan will continue to protect low-income housing in the DTES (as proponents of the plan avow), or whether this plan and its redefinition of “social housing” will lead to widespread displacement of low-income community members (as feared by community organizers). What is clear is that researchers and policy-makers must continue to seek out and pay heed to the perspectives of low-income urbanites in gentrifying neighbourhoods – not only because they are likely to be apt observers of the dynamics of urban change, but because they have the most to lose as their neighbourhoods change.

## References

Ashenmiller B (2009) Cash recycling, waste disposal costs, and the incomes of the working poor: Evidence from California. *Land Economics* 85(3): 539-551.

August M (2014) Challenging the rhetoric of stigmatization: The benefits of concentrated poverty in Toronto's Regent Park. *Environment and Planning A* 46: 1317-1333.

Banerjee-Guha S (2009) Neoliberalising the 'Urban': New Geographies of Power and Injustice in Indian Cities. *Economic and Political Weekly* 44(22): 95-107.

Barnes T, Hutton T, Ley D, and Moos M (2011) Vancouver: Restructuring Narratives in the Transnational Metropolis. In: Bourne LS, Hutton T, Shearmur RG, and Simmons J (eds) *Canadian Urban Regions: Trajectories of Growth and Change*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, pp. 291-327.

Blokland T (2009) Celebrating Local Histories and Defining Neighbourhood Communities: Place-making in a Gentrified Neighbourhood. *Urban Studies* 46: 1593-1610.

Blomley N (2004) *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property*. New York: Routledge.

Blomley N (2008) Enclosure, Common Right and the Property of the Poor. *Social & Legal Studies* 17: 311-331.

Boykoff, J (2011) The Anti-Olympics. *New Left Review* 67: 41-59.

Burnett K (2014) Commodifying poverty: gentrification and consumption in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. *Urban Geography* 35: 157-176.

Cahill C (2006) 'At Risk'? The Fed Up Honeys Re-Present the Gentrification of the Lower East Side. *Women's Studies Quarterly* 34(1/2): 334-363.

Cahill C (2007) Negotiating Grit and Glamour: Young Women of Color and the Gentrification of the Lower East Side. *City & Society* 19: 202-231.

Carnegie Community Action Project (2014) What the new LAP means for the low-income community. In Carnegie Community Action Project blog. Available at:

<https://ccapvancouver.wordpress.com/2014/03/18/what-the-new-lap-means-for-the-low-income-community/>

City of Vancouver (2005) Housing plan for the Downtown Eastside. Vancouver BC.

City of Vancouver Office of the Mayor (2006) Project Civil Society. Vancouver BC.

City of Vancouver (2014) Downtown Eastside Social Impact Assessment. Vancouver BC.

City of Vancouver (2015a) Downtown Eastside Plan. Vancouver BC.

City of Vancouver (2015b) Greenest City Action Plan. Available at:

<http://vancouver.ca/green-vancouver/greenest-city-action-plan.aspx>

Dale A and Newman L (2006) Sustainable community development, networks and resilience. *Environments Journal* 34(2): 17-27.

Dale A and Newman L (2008) Social capital: a necessary and sufficient condition for sustainable community development? *Community Development Journal* 45: 5-21.

Dale A and Newman, L (2009) Sustainable development for some: green urban development and affordability. *Local Environment* 14(7): 669-681.

DeBeck K, Shannon K, Wood E, Li K, Montaner J and Kerr T (2007) Income generating activities of people who inject drugs. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 91: 50-56.

Griffin K (2014) Judge dismisses challenge of Vancouver's street vending bylaw.

*Vancouver Sun*, September 23. Available at:

<http://www.vancouversun.com/news/Judge+dismisses+challenge+Vancouver+street+vending+bylaw/10228324/story.html#ixzz3dFsF5Ld9>

Gutberlet J and de Oliveira Jayme B (2010) The Story of My Face: How Environmental Stewards Perceive Stigmatization (Re)produced By Discourse. *Sustainability* 2: 3339-3353.

Gutberlet J, Tremblay C, Taylor E, et al. (2009) Who are our informal recyclers? An inquiry to uncover crisis and potential in Victoria, Canada. *Local Environment* 14: 733-747.

Hackworth J (2002) Post-recession gentrification in New York City. *Urban Affairs Review* 37: 815-43.

Hasson S and Ley D (1994) The Downtown Eastside: One hundred years of struggle. In: Hasson S and Ley D (eds) *Neighbourhood Organizations and the Welfare State*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 172-204.

Hoyle B (2000) Confrontation, consultation, cooperation? Community groups and urban change in Canadian port-city waterfronts. *The Canadian Geographer* 44(3): 228-243.

Hutton TA (2004) Post-industrialism, Post-modernism and the Reproduction of Vancouver's Central Area: Retheorising the 21st-century City. *Urban Studies* 41(10):1953-1982.

Kear M (2007) Spaces of transition spaces of tomorrow: Making a sustainable future in Southeast False Creek, Vancouver. *Cities* 24(4): 324-334.

Kennelly J and Watt P (2011) Sanitizing Public Space in Olympic Host Cities: The Spatial Experiences of Marginalized Youth in 2010 Vancouver and 2012 London. *Sociology* 45: 765-781.

Kern L (2015) From toxic wreck to crunchy chic: environmental gentrification through the body. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33: 67-83.

Larsen HG and Hansen AL (2008) Gentrification—Gentle or Traumatic? Urban Renewal Policies and Socioeconomic Transformations in Copenhagen. *Urban Studies* 45(12): 2429-2448.

Lee J (2015) New Vancouver highrise to have separate door for social housing. *Vancouver Sun*, May 5. Available at:

<http://www.vancouversun.com/Vancouver+highrise+have+separate+door+social+housing/11031424/story.html>

Lees L (2008) Gentrification and Social Mixing: Towards an Inclusive Urban Renaissance? *Urban Studies* 45: 2449-2470.

Lees L and Demeritt D (1998) Envisioning the Livable City: The Interplay of “Sin City” and “Sim City” in Vancouver's Planning Discourse. *Urban Geography* 19: 332-359.

Ley D and Dobson C (2008) Are There Limits to Gentrification? The Contexts of Impeded Gentrification in Vancouver. *Urban Studies* 45(12): 2471-2498.

Ley D and Lynch N (2012) Divisions and disparities in Lotus-Land: Socio-spatial income polarization in Greater Vancouver, 1970-2005. Cities Centre Research Paper 223, Toronto ON.

Lupick T (2014) Downtown Eastside SRO units become pricey microlofts. *The Georgia Straight*, May 7. Available at: <http://www.straight.com/news/639506/downtown-eastside-sro-units-become-pricey-microlofts>

Mahichi B (2015) What should policing in the Downtown Eastside look like? In: VanCity Buzz. Available at: <http://www.vancitybuzz.com/2015/06/policing-downtown-eastside-look-like/>

Mason M (2007) Collaborative partnerships for urban development: a study of the Vancouver Agreement. *Environment and Planning A* 39(10): 2366-2382.

Mazer K and Rankin K (2011) The social space of gentrification: The politics of neighbourhood accessibility in Toronto's Downtown West. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29:822-839.



McKenna PF (2014) Tiered Policing: An Alternative Model of Police Service Delivery. Canadian Police College Discussion Paper Series.

Mitchell C (2008) Altered landscapes, altered livelihoods: The shifting experience of informal waste collecting during Hanoi's urban transition. *Geoforum* 39: 2019-2029.

Mitchell K (2004) *Crossing the Neoliberal Line: Pacific Rim Migration and the Metropolis*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Moos M and Skaburskis A (2010) The Globalization of Urban Housing Markets: Immigration and Changing Housing Demand in Vancouver. *Urban Geography* 31(6): 724-749.

Newman K and Wyly EK (2006) The Right to Stay Put, Revisited: Gentrification and Resistance to Displacement in New York City. *Urban Studies* 43(1):23-57.

Parlette V and Cowen D (2010) Dead malls: Suburban activism, local spaces, global logistics. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35(4): 794-811.

Parizeau K (2015) Re-representing the city: waste and public space in Buenos Aires, Argentina in the late 2000s. *Environment and Planning A* 47: 284-299.

Parizeau K and Lepawsky J (2015) Legal orderings of waste in built spaces. *International Journal of Law in the Built Environment* 7(1): 21-38.

Porter L (2009) Planning Displacement: The Real Legacy of Major Sporting Events. *Planning Theory & Practice* 10(3): 395-418.

Proudfoot J and E McCann (2008) At street-level: Bureaucratic practice in the management of urban neighbourhood change. *Urban Geography* 29(4): 348-370.

Quastel N (2009) Political Ecologies of Gentrification. *Urban Geography* 30(7): 694-725.

Quastel N, Moos M and Lynch N (2013) Sustainability-As-Density and the Return of the Social: The Case of Vancouver, British Columbia. *Urban Geography* 33: 1055-1084.

Rankin KN and McLean H (2015) Governing the Commercial Streets of the City: New Terrains of Disinvestment and Gentrification in Toronto's Inner Suburbs. *Antipode* 47: 216-239.

Ray BK, Halseth G and Johnson B (1997) The Changing 'Face' of the Suburbs: Issues of Ethnicity and Residential Change in Suburban Vancouver. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 21(1): 75-99.

RBC Economics Research (2015) Housing Trends and Affordability report. Available at:

[http://www.rbc.com/newsroom/\\_assets-custom/pdf/20150622-HA.pdf](http://www.rbc.com/newsroom/_assets-custom/pdf/20150622-HA.pdf)

Reynolds C (2013) Downtown Eastside protesters hassle new restaurant's patrons in fight against perceived gentrification. *Vancouver Sun*, February 18.

Slater T (2006) The Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification Research.

*International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30: 737-757.

Slater T (2004) Municipally managed gentrification in South Parkdale, Toronto. *The*

*Canadian Geographer* 48(3): 303-325.

Smith H (2003) Planning, policy and polarisation in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

*Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 94(4): 496-509.

Tremblay C (2007) *Binnens in Vancouver: A socio-economic study on Binnens and their*

*Traplines in Downtown Eastside*. Masters Thesis, University of Victoria, Canada.

Tremblay C, Gutberlet J and Peredo AM (2010) United We Can: Resource recovery, place

and social enterprise. *Resources, Conservation and Recycling* 54: 422-428.

Vancouver Agreement (2004) Economic revitalization plan. Vancouver BC.

Vancouver Sun staff (2014) Photos: Inside a 291-sq-ft micro loft in Vancouver. *Vancouver Sun*, April 10. Available at: [www.vancouversun.com/business/real-estate/Photos+Inside+micro+loft+Vancouver/9729073/story.html](http://www.vancouversun.com/business/real-estate/Photos+Inside+micro+loft+Vancouver/9729073/story.html)

Wacquant L (2008) Relocating Gentrification: The Working Class, Science and the State in Recent Urban Research. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32: 198-205.

Walks RA and Maaranen R (2008) Gentrification, social mix, and social polarization: Testing the linkages in large Canadian cities. *Urban Geography* 29(4): 293-326.

Wallstam M, Markle T and Crompton N (2014) Downtown Eastside dispersal plan approved by Vancouver city council. IN: *The Mainlander*. Available at: <http://themainlander.com/2014/03/17/downtown-eastside-dispersal-plan-approved-by-vancouver-city-council/>

Wittmer J (2014) *Environmental governance, urban change, and health: An investigation of informal recyclers' perspectives on well-being in Vancouver, BC*. Masters Thesis, University of Guelph, Canada.

Wyly EK and Hammel DJ (2004) Gentrification, segregation, and discrimination in the American urban system. *Environment and Planning A* 36(7): 1215-1241.