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**Community-Based Public Art and Gentrification in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Traditional art forms and artists have been increasingly enrolled in urban revitalization projects in global cities, contributing to a desirable “creative city” vibe that can lead to the displacement of existing residents. However, community-based public art has been seen as a form of grassroots expression and visual dissent in public spaces. This paper interrogates the role of community-based public art and artists in processes of gentrification impacting the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood of Vancouver, known as Canada’s poorest postal code, through interviews with artists and surveys of people passing by community-based public art projects. We found that while community-based public art is an important site for critiquing urban change and social marginalization in this neighbourhood, artists are constrained in their resistance to gentrification by limited funding sources for community-based public art and the growing appeal of gritty artistic urban spaces.

**Keywords:** *community-based public art, public art, gentrification, Vancouver*

## **TEXT**

### **Introduction**

Public art is often described as material culture appearing in an “open arena” where a diverse group of people can gather and interact (Massey and Rose 2003, 6). Art becomes public when it is tangibly present in an accessible space, or through engagement with discursive and imaginary spheres of publicness invoked by pieces of art (such as the imagined notions of nation and national identity that may be embodied in monuments). Art may also be considered public when it emerges from processes of community involvement, democratic participation, and public engagement (Hall 2007). Art cannot be considered truly public if it fails to invite negotiation among diverse social understandings (Massey and Rose 2003). An audience member is not a passive observer, but an interpreter, contributing to the continuous making of the public installation (Tolia-Kelly 2011). Thus, art is not only public in its physical presence, but also in its discursive and imaginary engagement within a broader social and political sphere.

Top-down public art (TDPA) is generally the product of an exclusive decision-making process and is usually created by an established professional artist who has been commissioned for the work. Traditionally, these pieces, such as war memorials, celebrate dominant histories of oppression, colonization, and hegemony. They seek to create and control a collective cultural identity in a way that distracts from ongoing urban injustices (Sholette 1997; Hall 2007). TDPA slips quietly into public space, avoids any critical disruption, artistic risk, or sociopolitical challenge (Phillips 2000). “Minimum risk art” is the end-product of bureaucratic machinery, comprised of a busy network of risk-averse decision makers (Phillips 2000, 100; Hall and Robertson 2001). Although TDPA is often framed as politically neutral, it is notorious for frequently concealing a political agenda.

In contrast to TDPA, community-based public art (CBPA) is created through a process of community-engagement, which is most often facilitated by an artist or artists' group (Bressi et al. 2008). The CBPA movement is generally connected to social justice mobilization and activism and grounded in principles of democracy (Lacy 1994). A high level of inclusion through democratic decision-making processes creates a sense of community ownership of these pieces (Sharp et al. 2005). CBPA enables self-representation and provides a venue to express lived experiences. It can also challenge oppressive social structures that create inequalities (Hall 2007). Public community art uses thought-provoking imagery that creates and gives meaning to place, narrates history, and discloses imagined futures (Tuan 1990). Marginalized residents are often involved in the co-creation of CBPA pieces, as discussed in the case studies below.

The creative democratic processes of community art can invite crowd-sourced ideas and inspire people toward a more socially-just future (Camponeschi 2010). Fundamental to this inclusive democratic practice is the recognition of different voices and interests. CBPA efforts seek to render hidden histories visible by presenting them to a wider audience (Sharp et al. 2005). CBPA is deployed as a method to politicize space; it draws in media attention, raises awareness about local issues, gathers communities of support, and encourages further public discourse (Culhane 2003). Furthermore, when CBPA successfully provokes public discourse, it demands that decision makers consider alternative solutions, and eventually creates shifts in policy (Bower 2011).

This study investigates the cultural geographies of community-based public art (CBPA) in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood. Known as Canada's poorest postal code (Eby and Misura 2006), this neighbourhood is located on prime real estate steps away from the city's business centre. Once considered to be a 'skid-row' (Sommers 1998), the DTES is

increasingly recognized as a socially-accepting, multi-cultural, and art-rich neighbourhood. This shift in reputation is also indicative of a staunch resident-led effort to reframe the DTES as a valuable community with strong social support networks (Boyd 2009). However, encroaching gentrification continues to juxtapose new housing developments, exclusive boutiques, and high-end cafés with the DTES' existing social fabric. Social and physical displacements in the DTES pose a serious threat to the well-being of its many marginalized low-income residents (including drug-users, sex workers, new immigrants, those suffering from mental trauma or abuse, etc.). Artists, often regarded as harbingers of gentrification, may also be dedicated community organizers who contribute their creativity and organizational capacity to the DTES' fight for social justice. Community arts play an important role in the social geographies of the DTES in terms of establishing a community identity, claiming urban space for its residents, and creating political arenas.

In this paper, we draw upon the contributions of critical urban studies to interrogate the role of art and artists in either reproducing or challenging social inequalities in the urban sphere, as well as the potential enrollment of public art projects in capitalist creative-destructive processes in urban spaces. As described by Brenner et al. (2012):

...critical approaches to urban studies are concerned: (a) to analyze the systemic, yet historically specific, interactions between capitalism and urbanization processes; (b) to examine the changing balance of social forces, power relations, sociospatial inequalities and political-institutional arrangements that shape, and are in turn shaped by the evolution of capitalist urbanization; (c) to expose the marginalizations, exclusions, and injustices (whether of class, ethnicity, "race,"

gender, sexuality, nationality, or otherwise) that are inscribed and naturalized within existing urban configurations; (d) to decipher the contradictions, crisis tendencies, and lines of potential or actual conflict within contemporary cities; and on this basis, (e) to demarcate and politicize the strategically essential possibilities for more progressive, socially just, emancipatory, and sustainable formations of urban life (5).

This paper begins with a literature review of critical urban scholarship that connects public art to gentrification, which is defined by Hackworth as the “production of urban space for progressively more affluent users” (2002, 815). We then present an overview of the social and economic dynamics of the DTES neighbourhood, situating this part of Vancouver as both a site of marginalization and historical social exclusion, as well as a rich site of resistance to social stigma and urban redevelopment. We introduce the methods of the study, which include interviews and Circle conversations with artists and other key informants, case studies of community-based public art pieces, and surveys of passersby at the art pieces. We then discuss the case studies, including the provenance of the community-based art, its reception by the public, and artist commentary on the sites. We then present a discussion of urban change as one of the main emergent themes from the research. While community-based public art may serve as a means of expressing resistance to gentrification, the role of artists in urban change is less clear: they may alternately be considered as facilitators, interrupters, or victims of gentrification. Capital flows through art projects in Vancouver also demonstrate the instability of interests that are represented by urban public art. Our central argument is that while community-based public-art can be an empowering public site of resistance to urban change and social exclusion, this

form of public expression also has the potential to be coopted and enrolled into capitalist processes of urban redevelopment and displacement, thus highlighting a central contradiction in the role of “progressive” art and artists in public spaces.

### **Public art and gentrification**

Artists are often seen as a colonizing arm of neighbourhood revitalization (Ley 1996) or as pioneers of gentrification (Sholette 1997). Artists may be incorporated into urban revitalization strategies because their lifestyle and work alter space (in both symbolic and physical ways), contributing to the ‘discovery’ of new areas that appeal to the middle-classes (Matthews 2010; Quastel 2009). Public art can be used to privatize space when projects are used to fabricate “auras of distinction and exclusivity appropriate to their corporate contexts” (Hall and Robertson 2001, 20). Public art may be installed alongside urban redevelopment to impose “cultural upgrade” to the social landscape (Lossau 2006, 52). The artistic redevelopment of a landscape is regarded as a method to manipulate the histories and identities of inner-city communities like the DTES (Demos 2012; Hall 2007; Sholette 1997) and transform cultural capital into economic capital (Lossau 2006). A commonly cited document from the Policy Studies Institute provides a list of the social and economic benefits attributed to public art that speak to urban revitalization interests, which can lead to the dispossession and disenfranchisement of marginal urbanites. Among this list of benefits are: enhancing local distinctiveness, attracting investment interest, creating sites for cultural tourism, increasing property values, activating public space, reducing buildings maintenance, and discouraging vandalism (Selwood 1994). Often, such art forms are “top down” rather than community-based.

In his influential work, Florida (2003) considers artists to be drivers of economic growth and urban expansion because their creative contributions add economic value to an area. Although a number of researchers dispute Florida's thesis (see for example Markusen, 2006; Catungal et. al, 2009; Ley, 2003; Matthews, 2010), his work has been accepted by mainstream society and quickly adopted into North American municipal policy (a phenomenon labelled "discourse-turned-policy" by Catungal et al. 2009, 1095). The widespread adoption of Florida's creative city policy recommendations in urban revitalization projects has implicated artists in contemporary gentrification processes. However, Ley (2003, 2541) maintains that it is a "misplaced charge" to lay the blame of gentrification upon artists. Rather, the broader political trajectories that inadvertently convert cultural capital into economic capital should be held accountable. By converting artists' creative "sweat equity" into economic capital (Matthews 2010; Lees 2011; Ley 1996), the commodification cycle and its proponents are the likely drivers of gentrification (Markusen 2006).

It is valuable to draw attention to some of the key tensions and contradictions at play with regard to CBPA's role in a changing inner-city community. As much as CBPA can empower a community and contribute to neighbourhood-led revitalization, it may also contribute to the "authenticity" of an area, which may in turn predispose the neighbourhood to gentrification and displacement. In this paper, we posit that CBPA can contest gentrification through its explicit pro-community messages and its inclusive processes, but that its ability to fundamentally challenge gentrification is often constrained by the precarious existence of CBPArtists, who may themselves face displacement and funding challenges when working in low-income politically-charged neighbourhoods like the DTES of Vancouver.



## **Vancouver's Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood**

In 2011, an estimated 18,477 residents lived in the DTES (City of Vancouver 2014b). This neighbourhood has a diverse cultural heritage (Local Area Plan 2015). A comparatively high percentage of residents identify as Aboriginal (10 percent in the DTES versus 2 percent in Vancouver at large) (City of Vancouver 2013). There is also a high concentration of artists in the area: approximately 10 percent of Vancouver's culture workers live here (Hill 2010). DTES artists' median earnings (\$14,300) were nearly 20 percent less than that earned by artists living in the city overall (City of Vancouver 2014a).

Nearly 70 percent of DTES residents live below the poverty line (CCAP 2009) and an estimated 846 people were homeless in the DTES in 2013 (City of Vancouver 2013). Many people in the community experience everyday violence and social stigma, compounding intergenerational trauma and harms associated with drug use. Local social networks and services are key sites of refuge and resistance. People who are living in poverty and systematically excluded from the labor market often engage in high-risk subsistence income generation strategies such as sex work, drug dealing, and the resale of goods found in waste streams (Culhane 2003; Fast et al. 2010). The neighbourhood is also stigmatized in the media for its open drug use, homelessness, unemployment, crime, and historic disinvestment (Fast et al. 2010; Smith 2003; Masuda and Crabtree 2010; Masuda et al. 2012; Burk 2003; Dale and Newman 2008).

Media sources create a deficit-focused public narrative of the DTES (Masuda and Crabtree 2010; Varty 2008). Residents are often represented as members of an impure subculture inhabiting urban areas with economic potential. Media reports and research findings that present the DTES as faceless and dysfunctional serve to justify redevelopment (Liu and Blomley 2013).

However, there is a strong sense of community pride in the DTES, largely because individuals, community groups, and organizations are dedicated to supporting and developing neighbourhood assets and providing means for self-representation. The Carnegie Community Action Project (CCAP) conducted a community mapping project with DTES residents, which uncovered many neighbourhood assets:

Health and social services are close, available, needed, and appreciated; [...] Social housing provides a stable base for thousands of residents; [...] [R]ich cultural and community heritage; Green spaces help residents make a connection to nature and have become spiritually important; Many residents have empathy for homeless people and people with health and/or addiction issues; Residents feel accepted and at home in the DTES; [...] Because the DTES is a poor community and people experience many human rights violations, many residents work for social justice (CCAP 2009, 2).

In addition, persistent kinship networks, a distinguishing characteristic of urban Indigenous life, are an important social asset in the community (Culhane 2003). CCAP advocates for the safekeeping and improvement of these assets as they are necessary in fostering a safe and healthy social environment (CCAP 2009).

As one of the oldest districts of Vancouver, the Downtown Eastside has a long history of conflict and rebellion (Newnham 2005; Ley 1994; Mason 2007). The residents of the DTES have been deeply impacted by multiple waves of displacement and racialized discrimination, including the colonial settlement of the unceded traditional lands of Coast Salish Peoples (City of Vancouver 2014b), anti-Asian riots in 1907 (Masuda et al. 2012; Masuda and Crabtree 2010),

the displacement of the Vancouver's last Indigenous hamlet to the northern periphery of the new city in 1923 (Culhane 2003), the forcible relocation of the Japanese population on Powell Street to internment camps in 1942 (Aoki 2011), the demolition of Hogan's Alley in the 1960s – an ethnically diverse and predominantly black area in the DTES – in order to construct the Georgia Viaduct (City of Vancouver 2014b), and the banishment of sex workers from the nearby West End neighborhood in the 1980s (Ross 2010). Blomley (2002) argues that urban transformations in Vancouver have been motivated by the city's self-perception as a disciplined white space. For nearly a century, the residents of the DTES have resisted these injustices (Ley 1994; Ley and Dobson 2008).

### **Gentrification in the DTES**

The City of Vancouver has undergone a series of urban transformations since the 1970s that have led to the redevelopment of parts of the DTES, resulting in resident polarization, disinvestment in lower-income housing stock, and tensions between different socio-economic groups (Dale and Newman 2009; Ley 1994; Masuda and Crabtree 2010; Smith 2003). In contemporary gentrifying neighbourhoods, developers, municipal governments, and private business owners may employ strategic marketing tactics that valorize the pre-existing attributes of an area in an effort to attract investment and consumption. Authenticity is cultivated by hiring artists to publicize the “discovery” of new areas (Quastel 2009). Ethnic, low-income areas are marketed as “authentic” (Zukin 2010) and sold to the adventurous gentrifiers who are drawn to the unique urban experience (Florida 2002). Aoki (2011) identifies that the City of Vancouver's enthusiasm for image-building and place-branding is inspired by its agenda to obtain international recognition, attract foreign investment, and develop tourism-related capital. Existing attributes of the DTES,

such as grittiness, visible poverty, and high social tolerance, are being romanticized in effort to make the area more appealing to outsiders (Burnett 2014; Masuda and Crabtree 2010).

The capitalistic reconfiguration of place-based attributes plays an important role in gentrification by generating “spaces of consumption” (Zukin 1998). These capitalistic transformations contribute to the privatization of space, impose top-down aestheticized fear (Demos 2012), and decrease the availability of public street space in the DTES (Masuda and Crabtree 2010; Parizeau 2017). This is done through aggressive authoritarian measures such as policing, private security, continuous surveillance, criminalization of homelessness, and disciplinary designs, which effectively control the movement of street life (Masuda and Crabtree 2010; Aoki 2011). For example, the City urges the immediate removal of graffiti (arguably an unsanctioned form of public art) because it associates graffiti with crime, diminished property values, increased citizen fear, and decline in business (City of Vancouver 2012). Government-funded graffiti removal efforts were accelerated to clean public spaces of unsightly behaviour before the 2010 Olympics.

Although fraught with criticism, the City of Vancouver’s planning policies have mostly abided by a “revitalization without displacement” doctrine (City of Vancouver 2014b) – that is, until the advent of the Local Area Plan (LAP), which has been dubbed by opponents a “dispersal plan” (Wallstam et al. 2014). The LAP widens the “revitalization without displacement” commitment to a city-wide context (City of Vancouver 2014b; Wallstam et al. 2014). In doing so, it commits to providing rent subsidies and social housing for former DTES residents outside of the DTES, resulting in the scattering of a projected 36 percent of DTES residents across the city. Furthermore, the 30-year revitalization plan aims to accommodate 8850 new condominium

dwellers in the DTES (Wallstam et al. 2014). The DTES is therefore undergoing further processes of gentrification, and its artscape has become a contested site of urban change.

## **Methods**

A mixed-methods research approach was employed in this study. These methods consisted of community engagement, semi-structured interviews, two successive discussion Circles, and street-level surveys, led by Szőke during the summer of 2014. For 6 weeks at the beginning of this study, Szőke worked on a research project with the Community Arts Council of Vancouver (CACV) to assess the potential for organizational adaptation. Szőke also volunteered at Gallery Gachet over the duration of the research project. This is a collectively-run art space in the DTES that uses art as a means to “demystify and challenge issues related to mental health and social marginalization in order to educate the public and promote social and economic justice” (Gallery Gachet 2012).

Key informant interviews were conducted with 5 individuals who acted (sometimes in multiple capacities) as representatives of arts-based organizations in the DTES, community-based researchers, a city councillor, and two Indigenous elders. Szőke also interviewed 13 artists who were directly involved with organizing CBPA projects in the DTES. Interview questions were designed to uncover artists’ motivations, their involvement in the community, their perceptions of neighbourhood change, and their understandings of their role in the community. Interviewees were then invited to participate in two discussion Circles to discuss the relationship between the DTES, artists, and public art.

At the end of the first Circle discussion with seven community artists, participants were asked to collectively choose three pieces of public art that they felt were particularly contentious

or meaningful to the DTES as sites for surveying the passing public. Artists identified multiple sites of public art (performances, memorials, alleyway graffiti, community gardens, etc.), and quickly built consensus around three chosen pieces of CBPA: the Oppenheimer Park Memorial Pole (which is not further discussed in this paper)<sup>1</sup>, a stencil from the Lowdown project, and the Bud Osborn Memorial Wall. Participants then reviewed the proposed questions for these public art surveys.

Survey questionnaires were conducted with passersby at the three chosen CBPA sites to encourage people to think about how they encountered, experienced, and engaged with public art in the neighbourhood. Szőke was joined by a research assistant during each survey period. In order to capture a wider variety of voices and establish reliable data, surveys were administered at various times and on both weekends and weekdays. Participants were left to fill out the short survey and asked to place it in small drop box to ensure confidentiality. In total, pedestrians completed 301 public surveys around the three chosen sites of CBPA, 256 of which were conducted at the two sites discussed in this paper. Most of the respondents (63 percent) identified themselves as residents of the DTES.

The second discussion Circle took place after the public surveys were conducted. Artists were presented with the results of the surveys and were given the opportunity to openly discuss any common themes they noted in the raw survey data. Szőke then systematically coded the survey responses according to these themes. Three of the seven original participants from the

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<sup>1</sup> The Oppenheimer Park Memorial Pole was raised by carver Dick Baker and a group of local carvers in 1997. This pole is an important site of memory and resistance for Indigenous communities in the DTES. It faces the direction of the commercial and political centres of the city in “condemnation of past silences and a lack of dialogue when it was most needed” (Aoki, 2011. p. 46). However, the vast majority of passersby surveyed at this site were local residents, and the park is a relatively stable site for socializing and other aspects of social reproduction for local residents. For these reasons, most of the commentary in the surveys focused on this site as a site of memory and healing and an important touchstone for Indigenous communities in the area, rather than a discussion on the dynamics of urban change in the neighbourhood. For these reasons, we do not elaborate on the Oppenheimer Park Memorial Pole in the analysis that follows.

first discussion Circle participants were able to return for this second session, and were joined by two additional community artists (who were not able to attend the first Circle due to scheduling constraints).

Interviews and surveys were coded thematically using NVivo software. Codes were based on key concepts and phenomena described in the literature, as well as the inclusion of emergent themes that arose from the interviews or were identified in the Circle discussions.

## **CBPA and urban change in the DTES**

### ***The Lowdown Stencil***

*Untitled – by Anne Hopkinson*

*walk fast*

*walk past*

*look at me*

*outcast*

Figure 1: The Lowdown Stencil (F.O.U.N.D. Spaces Collective 2014)

These confrontational words written by community poet Anne Hopkinson were spray-painted in bright orange across four sidewalk panels where West Hastings Street becomes East Hastings, an area undergoing obvious social and physical transition (see Figure 1). The stencil lies next to a strip of newly renovated cafés and bistros that are directly across the street from the Hastings Community Garden and a local pub with boarded windows. Steps away from the stencil stands the contentious Woodward’s development project, an infamous harbinger of urban change (Lees 2011; Ball 2015). This fragment of space can be interpreted as a sphere of liminality: a

“threshold” or ambiguous transition that unravels or advances previous ways of structuring identity, time, and community (Jones and Garde-Hansen 2012).

This stenciled poem was part of a larger public art project called the Lowdown. The idea was designed and carried out by the two founding members of the F.O.U.N.D. Spaces Collective and 14 local writers, many of whom participated in writing groups based in the DTES. Artists Linnea Strom and Lindsey Adams connected with a number of local writing groups, and invited them to submit their writing to the project. The quotes, colours, and various locations along Hastings Corridor were all selected in consultation with the poets.

Community Artist Andrea noted that participants hold a strong sense of agency and ownership over their space in their neighbourhood. She reflected on the role that this project and others like it play in the lives of DTES residents:

So these are little markers and little traces of where they own space [...] and it makes it theirs for them, over and over and over again and that’s how you reinforce it. Maybe there’s a condo there but their words and their feeling and their heart is also here, right?”  
(Andrea Creamer, Artist, Project Coordinator, SFU Woodward's Cultural Unit).

Projects like this strengthen personal connections to space in a community that is threatened by urban change and displacement.

The Lowdown art project was funded by the Hastings Crossing Business Improvement Association (HxBIA). The allotted funding was sufficient to cover the costs of supplies and acknowledge poets for their contributions. According to their website, HxBIA “is no regular BIA” (HxBIA 2014). They see themselves as socially innovative, and motivated by strong



socially- and environmentally-conscious values, and dedicated to the “authentic urban culture” of Vancouver’s DTES. They also claim to “take a leadership role in managing change and shaping a more resilient, inclusive and sustainable local economy here in the Downtown Eastside” (HxBIA 2014), while explicitly advocating for the rights of those who hold a business membership. However, the HxBIA is ultimately responsive to its business members, whose priorities may differ from those of residents. For example, mentioned first among their list of member services is graffiti removal. Like other BIAs, the City has granted the HxBIA power over the use of public space. Since they have legal rights to physically alter public space within their BIA zone, they were able to grant permission to the F.O.U.N.D. Spaces Collective to spray paint on city sidewalks.

To some, however, these community art installations were regarded as graffiti. One of the poets from the Lowdown stencil project found that his poetry had been pressure-washed from the sidewalk. The adjacent building had a For Sale sign posted in the window and the poet believed the property owner had pressure-washed the sidewalk clean of rogue social and cultural expression in an effort to increase the saleability of the property. This was an ironic scenario given that the HxBIA, an association dedicated to enhancing the economic desirability of the area, had funded the project.

During the first discussion circle, artists of the F.O.U.N.D Spaces Collective shared a story of a tense encounter with the police while installing their stencil. They reflected on the officer’s violent energy, masked by a kind demeanour. The officer made the artists feel uncomfortable by snapping photographs of the artists as they spray-painted the quote along the sidewalk. Installing street art in a heavily policed neighbourhood can raise suspicions with the law and invoke anxiety for those involved, even if permission had been granted.

The poem brings to mind the social dynamics that are prevalent in both the DTES and Vancouver at large. The stencil clearly acknowledges the ongoing social marginalization in the neighbourhood. To those survey respondents who experienced being “outcast,” these words invoked a personal response:

It made me think of how alone I feel out here because my baby mamma kicked me out and I’m on the streets. Every time I pass it I think or feel more grounded (Surveyed passerby, Resident of Vancouver, Works in the DTES).

Makes me feel like I’m at home. I’m outcast. I can relate to it. I walk past it every day (Surveyed passerby, DTES Resident).

These respondents felt that the stenciled words publicly acknowledged their marginalized presence in the neighbourhood, and granted them a sense of solidarity and belonging. This recognition, although comforting to some, was seen by others as an undesired reminder of hardship and exclusion:

Makes me feel more homeless and hopeless (first thought). Depressing (Surveyed passerby, Resident of Vancouver)

A number of hopeful passersby reported that this stencil provoked urban awareness and ideally inspired people to change the way they behave towards each other. They focused on the possible influence that the stencil had on pedestrian consciousness:

I thought it would make judgmental people aware of their attitude as it expresses this so bluntly and well (Surveyed passerby, DTES Resident)

That everyone should be noticed. Actually makes me feel opposite to the words...slow down and take notice (Surveyed passerby, Resident of Vancouver)

It makes people think about their attitude towards others and thus might create empathy and compassion (Surveyed passerby, DTES Resident)

A couple of individuals found the sardonic tone of the poem to be ineffective at relaying its message:

[T]his particular stencil might come across as sort of privileged and probably irritating to people who have to see it every day. It's presumably delivered in an ironic tone, but irony is highly problematic in these sorts of didactic art pieces, well-intentioned though they may be. I don't know if this piece fully succeeds in what it is meant to accomplish. (Surveyed passerby, DTES Resident).

This respondent also wrote at length about feelings and thoughts provoked by the poem, and how important it is to draw attention to the poor quality of life in the DTES.

This installation was not only recognized for its discursive connotations but also for its specific location in the urban landscape. The poem was spread out over four sidewalk panels and therefore could be experienced in motion (a survey respondent described this as a "kinetic")

experience). Given the direction in which the words were stencilled, the poem could only be read in motion by someone walking from the west (the City's business centre) towards the east (entering the DTES).

Some of the survey responses demonstrated a perceptive recognition of the stencil's placement at the frontiers of gentrification:

Makes me aware of the discomfort most people (sometimes me...) feel around poverty.

The location of the piece is at the edge of gentrification (Surveyed passerby, DTES Resident).

It invigorates the space and diffuses the social separation of gentrification (Surveyed passerby, Non-resident, Works in the DTES).

These quotes exemplify an acute awareness of the art's spatial significance among public audience members. The piece was chosen by the community-based art group to reflect the social dynamics of a rapidly changing area, and the message of the Lowdown Stencil resonated with passersby as a commentary on social exclusion, poverty and inequality, and the advancing threat of gentrification in the DTES.

### ***The Bud Osborn Memorial Wall***

Figure 2: The Bud Osborn Memorial Wall

The DTES neighbourhood is animated by a tight social network, but certain individuals stand out as particularly influential or supportive in this community. Bud Osborn was one such person: he was a poet, activist and leader in the DTES for decades. When he passed away in 2014, residents gathered in memory of his life and in celebration of his accomplishments. Throughout the afternoon, attendees expressed their love and their loss with art, poetry and music. They painted a tribute wall, pictured in Figure 2, spanning over half a block along Hastings Street covered in messages, pictures, and poetry. The wall was directly across the street from Insite, the DTES' renowned safe injection site, which Bud had staunchly advocated for. Behind the plywood hoarding that served as the canvas laid the remains of the demolished Pantages Theatre. By late summer, around the time the surveys were conducted, the construction of the newest DTES condominium had begun on the site of the Pantages demolition. The ongoing redevelopment project noticeably influenced the survey responses of the passersby.

The surveying took place two months after the Bud Memorial Wall had been painted, which was far longer than artists had expected the tribute to last. In this time, the wall had taken on a life of its own, slowly being altered by the public. Although it started off as a wall covered in kind words that addressed the late Bud Osborn, it became mixed with messages of resistance, such as: "Stop Gentrification", "Love, No Condos" and "We Resist Block By Block". This may have influenced the survey responses since many passersby interpreted the wall as a platform for resistance. They saw it as taking a stand against displacement and against the diminishing availability of safe, affordable housing for low-income residents.

The boarded-up construction site stood as a symbolic border between street life and the ongoing redevelopment. More than at any other site, passersby commented on the looming

impacts of gentrification upon DTES residents. Many respondents chose to focus their attention on the relationship between the Memorial Wall and the development project:

Doesn't affect the actuality of building or construction that's going behind the wall  
(Surveyed passerby, DTES Resident).

It makes me feel like it's holding onto the block and once it's torn down and the  
development begins the block will change (Surveyed passerby, Resident of Vancouver,  
Works in the DTES)

These respondents felt that the painted hoarding had no ability to impact the construction proceeding behind it. Some went on to express that gentrification is inevitable:

I like to think it [the Wall] does [influence change], but it hasn't resulted in much. Seems  
like he [Bud] did a lot of work for nothing because it doesn't stop construction (Surveyed  
passerby, DTES Resident)

Frustration. Represents frontiers of shift. You can't stop progress but I love it here. Lose  
status quo (Surveyed passerby, Place of residency not specified)

Although many respondents recognized that gentrification was occurring, they held  
varying opinions about urban change. While respondents generally expressed discontent towards

the new condominium, it is worth noting that not all respondents stood in opposition to structural and social change:

[The Memorial Wall does not change the space, but] the condo going up is. But I'm for the condo. I live here and income mix high/low is a good thing (Surveyed passerby, DTES Resident)

Notably, the above survey respondent did not express concern about potentially being displaced in the process of urban change.

The aesthetic impact of the painted hoarding was discussed by many of the respondents. A few stated that they felt that the painted wall visually enhanced the space. Other respondents reported having a negative response to the painted hoarding. The scramble of words and images appeared to have frustrated and overwhelmed a number of passersby who felt the piece induced an unfavourable impact on the urban landscape:

Anarchy of colour and words that never catch my eye other than distracting  
(Surveyed passerby, DTES Resident)

It gives it a dingy environment feeling (Surveyed passerby, DTES Resident)

These responses to CBPA illustrate the diversity of impacts of such art on the public sphere. Some find the art heartening or reflective of their own experiences, others are challenged by it, and some find it distasteful or disturbing. Regardless of their perception of the phenomenon,

most passersby did recognize the DTES as a liminal space in the process of gentrification. In interpreting the survey results, the Circle of artists also identified the Bud Osborn Memorial Wall as a site of reclaiming space and place-making in the DTES, further demonstrating the complexity of resistance to urban change in this neighbourhood.

## **Reflecting on Urban Change and CBPA**

### *CBPA as a means of resisting urban change*

With a well-established tradition of community activism, the DTES has proven that creative resistance can lessen the impact and rate of gentrification (Burk 2003; Ley and Dobson 2008; Blomley 2008). Ley and Dobson argue that devoted neighbourhood mobilization has contributed to the unique place-based moral culture that extends and secures the right to the city for low-income and/or disenfranchised residents (2008). DTES residents and community-based artists are active in their efforts to challenge the upscaling of their neighbourhood. All of the interviewed artists expressed a strong dedication to political and/or community involvement (a trend also identified by Buser et al. 2013; Bower 2011; Burnham 2011; Scholette 1997; Hall 2007; Forkert 2011), and many were among those fighting to establish “zones of social justice” in the DTES neighbourhood (CCAP 2013). Community artists were often recognized as “staunch defenders” of progressive and accessible social services and programs (Markusen 2006). Ley and Dobson (2008) also state that locals’ disruptive activities can interfere with the ability of new residents to create a comfortable life when moving into the DTES neighbourhood. Therefore, aggressively expressive public art has the potential to hinder the social desirability of the area even after development has occurred. However, this expressive art might have a similarly



disturbing impact on existing residents, as indicated by those who expressed that the Bud Osborn Memorial Wall made them uncomfortable and gave the area a “dingy” feel.

Based on observations of CBPA sites in the DTES, the key artistic messages of resistance to urban redevelopment addressed the lack of safe social housing, diminished affordability of local services, commodification and erasure of local culture, ongoing racial injustice, diminished access to public space, social discrimination, and culturally inappropriate healthcare and services. The Circles of artists involved in choosing the surveyed CBPA sites and interpreting the results noted the centrality of respondents’ commentary on diverse experiences of gentrification in the survey results, and all of the community-based artists were concerned about the role of art in facilitating urban change. However, it is not always clear that community-based artists and their work can effectively disrupt gentrification processes.

*Artists as facilitators, interrupters, or victims of urban change?*

It was evident in the interviews that artists were cognizant and critical of the complicated role that they and their peers play with respect to urban change. Artist and academic Gregory Sholette writes that even those artists who expressively criticize class displacement “[understand] that they were themselves central to the displacement process” (1997, 6). This is because artists’ work enhances neighbourhoods, increasing the appeal for middle- and upper-income investment. For example, the HxBIA refers to the creativity in the neighbourhood as the local currency (Burnett 2014) and the presence of artists is pitched as a marketable asset (HxBIA 2014). On the front page of the HxBIA website, beneath a photograph of a colourful street mural, reads “Hastings Crossing BIA enjoys one of the highest concentrations of artists in Canada”

(HxBIA 2014). Some of the artists acknowledged in the interviews that their art, along with the expressive, place-based identities of the DTES, are shamelessly glorified to attract newcomers.

In her interview, Sharon spoke about how artists can be implicated in processes of gentrification:

... when the artists move in, that means you're hooped because the area's gentrified... I have mixed feelings about it, because they also lose their houses, and they also lose their studios and their apartments, and they shouldn't necessarily be naïve about the process that they are moving into a neighbourhood with cheap rent. That's who it's being marketed towards now, it's artists. [...] Anybody who's actually buying an artist loft [...] probably isn't an artist. And if they're an artist, then they're an artist that makes a lot of money, which I don't know too many of [...] It's part of how they've been branding the neighbourhood - this sort of this edgy urban chic. (Sharon Kravitz, Artist, Documentary Filmmaker, Community organizer)

Like Sharon, many of the interviewed artists recognized that the relationship between artists and gentrification is mediated and perpetuated by neoliberal urban policies and place-branding efforts, including revitalization plans and creative city branding that might lead to zoning of upscale live-work spaces for artists.

Ley and Dobson (2008) report that, in the past, when the welfare state was more willing to interfere in the urban housing market, rent control strategies were far more predominant in

Vancouver. Some interviewed artists recommended that the City should implement policies that control rent prices to support, rather than exploit, creative social capital:

The answer is creating low-rise industrial spaces, that are super cool that artists can live in - rent controlled, that don't go through the roof, and then you keep up this level of culture happening that you apparently want instead of shoving it away. And you're also creating housing that is also sustainable. (Linnea Strom, Artist, Co-founder of F.O.U.N.D Spaces Collective).

Linnea alludes to the fact that if culture is valued in the DTES, then it should be preserved, rather than used as a marketing tool. This echoes Mathews' contention that if the arts are to remain within the urban fabric, then "it is necessary to value their role beyond economic fodder" (2010, 672),

Paradoxically, artists are also threatened by the urban change that they are presumably cultivating. Although the majority of artists interviewed (60 percent) lived outside the city-sanctioned borders of the DTES, they were deeply involved in the community. Artists expressed being drawn to the DTES for a host of reasons, such as access social and health services, being among a creative community, attending Simon Fraser University's School of Contemporary Arts, and lending their creative capacities to local organizations as volunteers and staff. Whether they lived in the DTES or not, the majority of interviewed artists felt a strong sense of belonging in the DTES community. However, urban change also threatens to dissolve what Markusen and Johnson (2005) refer to as "artistcentric" programs, organizations and centres in the DTES. Thus,

some artists expressed trepidation that ongoing urban change will unravel their “social constellations” (in the words of Andrea Creamer).

Many of the artists expressed concern about how their presence and their creative work impacted the well-being of those around them. Some community artists reported that being associated with gentrification instills in them a sense of wrongdoing. One noted that it inflicts artists with guilt that may ultimately interfere with their efficacy in fighting for social justice and equality:

If you’re going to argue against gentrification and someone’s trying to lump artists into like an agitational force towards gentrification—I think that it’s the wrong angle to take, or it’s not a helpful angle to take. And often times, it really disempowers artists instead of using our skill sets and solidarity for, like, radical means. You know, like if you’re always feeling guilty about being the first step of gentrification then you’re not going speak against it because you’re going to be like, yea, I’m like this. There’s shame there. (Heidi Nagtegaal, Artist, Founder of Hammock Residency)

Therefore, perceiving artists solely as pioneers of gentrification can obscure their potential role as creative advocates fighting against displacement. It is important to acknowledge that there is diversity among artists, however; just as top-down public art can recreate dominant and hegemonic narratives, professional artists who are not embedded in community politics may not be interested in using art as a means of expressing resistance to gentrification and social exclusion. Examining the flows of capital through diverse art projects can provide insight to the

types of art that gain prominence in the urban sphere, and the politicization of access to artscaapes in the city.

*Funding public art: Artists as mediators of capital flows into the DTES*

The artist interviews reveal that much of the tension around public art revolves around the issue of funding. Public art has been associated with urban development, largely through the “percent for art” policy that has been popular in urban North America and Europe since the 1980s. In Vancouver, the Private Sector Development Program (PSDP), a “percent for the art” type policy, requires that developers invest in public art projects. The program stipulates that “[p]rivate sector rezonings greater than 100,000 square feet are required to contribute \$1.98 per buildable square foot to a public art process approved by us” (City of Vancouver 2018).

Established professional artists are usually hired to design pieces that are installed in areas where there is a high development density. This program does not support CBPA or low-income artists, and it does not necessarily yield a piece of art that authentically reflects the social or physical attributes of its location. These concerns were discussed and criticized by many of the interviewees. Some artists stated that public arts funding was generally available to professional artists, that it favoured “apolitical” art, and served the well-to-do.

Funding for CBPA is often provided by individual developers, Business Improvement Associations, and city enhancement funds. Many of the artists explained that these external funding sources can be fairly controversial. When a CBPA project has been supported by a contentious source, artists and community members have been reluctant to participate in the project. Artists in the F.O.U.N.D. Spaces Collective reported that some poets chose not to participate in their Lowdown project specifically because they were uneasy about the affiliation

it had with the Hastings Crossing Business Improvement Association (HxBIA). This is understandable, given that BIAs usually work to redefine the symbolic meanings of their areas by commodifying local culture - a motivation that is at odds with marginalized residents and anti-gentrification activists (Burnett 2014).

Similarly, artists and art-based organizations were hesitant to accept funding that was affiliated with the 2010 Olympics. The neoliberal roll-back in arts funding situated artists and artists' groups in an especially vulnerable position after the provincial arts budget was cut by 50 percent and the 2010 Sports and Arts Legacy Fund was established with a \$10 million dollar investment (Forkert 2011). The Legacy Fund made money accessible to artists, but this was met with skepticism, and some artists and organizations were adamantly unwilling to accept this offer. A news article published by the Vancouver Media Coop identified some of the reasons why artists chose to turn down this offer: they were ethically opposed to the Olympics and its role in forced displacement and gentrification in Vancouver, they were concerned it would dilute their critical politics, and they rejected capitalist-propelled creativity (Paley 2010). However, the massive budget cuts that closely coincided with this offer obligated some artists and organizations to accept financial support with the Cultural Olympiad logo, even if it clashed with their political and ethical standpoints.

Funding organizations were sometimes inclined to change CBPA projects' narratives to ensure they fit with their corporate image. Some artists suggested in their interviews that they were required to make compromises in order to comply with the conflicting interests of their funding source(s). When the redevelopment of the Woodward's building was underway, the City of Vancouver and Westbank Corp., the real estate development company behind the project, funded a community-based mural project. A group of 36 participants, including patrons of the

DTES Women's Centre, residents of transient housing, and those living on the streets, set out to paint the hoarding around the construction site (CACV 2007). Sharon Kravitz organized the mural project and served as a mediator between the funders and project participants. The funders appealed to Sharon when they realized that the mural contained messages that illustrated the community's disapproval of the ongoing development. However, Sharon was unwilling to censor the words of the community to please the interest of the developers:

[W]e bent on this, we bent on that but we're not going to bend on this. (Sharon Kravitz, Artist, Documentary Filmmaker, Community organizer).

The completed mural contained a large, but hidden message: Homes for All (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Woodward's Mural Project (CACV 2007)

Funding parameters may also influence the process of a CBPA project. Some artists reported that the City refused to endorse a CBPA project if it involved artists who were previously convicted of performing illegal graffiti. Thus, artists reported that civic and corporate funding sources may impair a CBPA project from being politically and socially influential. Some of the interviewees expressed the need for accessible grants for "outsider artists" (Fine 2004). The Community Arts Fund, offered by the Community Arts Council of Vancouver, supports low-income artists and organizations by providing them with both financial support and opportunity for skill development. Some of the interviewees noted that there should be more

funding sources that mirror this model to provide low-barrier support explicitly geared toward low-income artists and communities.

## **Conclusions**

The results of this study resonate with contemporary gentrification literature, describing a tendency toward the commodification of culture, privatization of space, and depoliticization of art in global cities. Urban injustice, racial discrimination, and socioeconomic inequalities perpetuated by uneven patterns of urban change have prompted communities to politicize public art. Community artists work in solidarity with the marginalized residents of the DTES who are being displaced by the progression of urban change. Within the context of Vancouver's DTES, artists and residents alike employ public art in response to political neglect and the delegitimization of existing residents and community.

However, the effectiveness of using art to raise a community's voice is not assured. In some instances, supporters financing CBPA work have imposed their own agenda on projects. Furthermore, not all artists resist gentrification or reject the commodification of artwork. As discussed by several interviewees, artists may choose to work in the DTES because it provides an appealing and "gritty" sociopolitical backdrop. Such projects often perpetuate rather than alleviate the stigmatization of poverty and drug-use. CBPA can act as a form of resistance to the potentially commodifying and privatizing impacts of top-down public art, but it does not always do so.

In various ways, public art in the DTES is conflated with the discourse on gentrification. Artists can be both willingly and involuntarily involved in the commodification cycle (Ley 2003). Even seemingly undesirable place-based attributes are susceptible to commodification, as



when social and physical characteristics of poverty are used to lure consumers and investors into the DTES (Burnett 2014). Furthermore, because of its economically vulnerable position, CBPA is required to accept funding from contentious sources, implicating CBPA more deeply in processes of place-based commodification and urban change.

CBPA can thus be seen as a form of constrained resistance to gentrification and displacement. Such constraints emerge from uneven funding for public art, the inadvertent commodification of place through art, and from stipulations made on CBPA projects by funders. In its ability to communicate shared place-based histories, identities, needs, and aspirations, CBPA is an apt catalyst and conduit for the “generation and communication of public discourse” (Hall and Robertson 2001, 12). Even though creative outputs may become enrolled in gentrification processes, the discursive arena that builds around the co-creative process of imagining, installing and encountering public art pieces in the DTES demonstrates that CBPA projects can also contribute to the democratization of space and the emergence of community-based resistance.

From a critical urban studies perspective, this case study of CBPA in the DTES demonstrates how place-based histories of economic displacement and social marginalization continue to have momentum in contemporary capitalist urbanization processes. While CBPA is an important outlet for democratic expressions of resistance to urban change and social exclusion, its creation is often reliant on funding from mainstream or elite sources, and its continued existence relies on tacit and explicit permissions from urban authorities (including municipal actors, business improvement associations, and police). The need to fund and authorize art that challenges dominant interests can lead to conflicts and compromises of artistic expression, and therein lies the central contradiction of community-based public art. Our finding

that CBPA resonates with its audience gives hope for the emancipatory potential of this art form, which can provoke thoughtfulness about the dynamics of urban change and alternative visions for the public sphere among those who encounter it in their urban sojourns.

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