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How has the volunteer civic association group, Friends of Berczy Park, influenced the redesign of Berczy Park?

Introduction and Context

I vividly remember discovering Berczy Park while getting accustomed to my new neighbourhood. Hilly berms border a central plaza featuring a whimsical dog-themed fountain, with 27 dog sculptures yearning for the golden bone on top. Though the park is small, the design is most thoughtful, and people and animals gather in this intimate yet vibrant space. The park quickly grew on me, and I found myself taking a detour to King Station just to walk past this urban oasis. I took the opportunity to conduct qualitative research about this site. Who had a stake in designing this wonderful park?

Berczy Park is situated in the St. Lawrence Market neighbourhood. According to archives, the site sat vacant and served as a parking lot in the 1800s, then the public park opened in 1980 (City of Toronto [CoT], 2017). While green space was present, the park was dull and uninviting, as brick walls surrounded walkways and the central fountain (CoT Archives, 1985). From 2010–2011, the City of Toronto started working with the local community, particularly with a community group, *Friends of Berczy Park* (FOBP), to plan its revitalization. Construction began in 2015, and the park officially re-opened in 2017.

Methods

Complementing my daily observations, archives, participant observation, visual analysis, and alternative cartography served as exploratory and descriptive knowledge to shape my understanding of Berczy Park as a family-oriented environment and a safe gathering space, where human-animal interactions are fostered.

Through mapping park activities, I noticed different ‘zones’ accommodate diverse uses. The fountain is an attraction itself—visitors would take photos and be prompted to play with the gushing water—an activity popular among all ages. The walkways serve as hotspots for dog walkers to strike up a conversation, the garden as a haven for those who seek quieter refuge. Copious long benches enable individuals to find their own space yet never feel isolated and alone. I found Berczy Park to be a welcoming public space that brings positive daily experiences to the neighbourhood, exemplifying a ‘third space’ that evokes a sense of belonging, familiarity, and attachment that exists outside of the first place of home and second place of work (Burnage, 2020). According to committee member, Shaun Pearen (2023), “Pre-renovation, I really don’t believe that many residents chose berczy as their meeting place of choice and they likely felt little loyalty or emotion to it. Now, they do.” (Appendix 1)

An interview was conducted to explain and substantiate my understanding of observational knowledge. I interviewed a member of the FOBP committee, Mary McDonald. I introduced myself as a fellow resident of the neighbourhood, and we felt an instant connection when we realized we both live within a 1-block radius of Berczy Park. This helped build mutual trust during the interview process. I learnt about the vital role that FOBP played in the revitalization process. From advocacy to shaping urban design, FOBP strived to “enhance the public space to meet the diverse needs of all park users and encourage inclusive, community-based stewardship” (FOBP, 2017). This landed me on my research question: *How has the volunteer civic association group, Friends of Berczy Park (FOBP), influenced the redesign of Berczy Park?*

Argument

As much as Mary boasted FOBP's influence on the park, my positionality as an Urban Studies student influenced my criticality towards the group. I took away that not everyone's interests were accounted for in the redesign, wary of the duality between their mission and their actions to be inclusive of all users. Whether or not FOBP could be labelled as a “grassroots group” as Mary claims, remains in question. At the same time, I felt conflicted by their inherent role in the community—are they supposed to be inclusive and holistically represent the interests of different park users?

I argue that FOBP embodies an old-fashioned, classic volunteer association that operates on a “purely voluntary, private, and unregulated” basis, whereby members leveraged their social capital to obtain the power to advocate on behalf of the community for a bettered park (Eliasoph, 2009, p.296). Comprised of a group of 7 residents with relatively privileged backgrounds, the exclusive nature of the committee is reflected in their mission to represent only the interests of those they find importance in defending—families, children, elderlies, and dog owners. While they were undoubtedly effective in amplifying the voices of these groups, others such as the unhoused, the mentally ill, and skateboarders were excluded and alienated at the expense of protecting dominant user groups. Their lack of hesitation to exert power over decision-making showcases that the 'civicness' they strive to fulfill extends only to those who uphold public order and adhere to behavioural norms. I will use the concept of the right to the city to showcase how Berczy Park unravels the politics and contestations of public spaces.

The Nature of FOBP: An old-fashioned, volunteer community group

The FOBP was formed based on personal, neighbourly connections. Mary recounts meeting some members through their resistance against a condominium development, and others through a parent network. As active citizens, they saw a lack of green space in the neighbourhood and took the initiative to better Berczy Park. FOBP reflect a classic volunteer association as they self-organised and devoted

themselves to a vision—to reshape Berczy Park on behalf of the broader community (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2002).

Although community groups like these are “alternatives to conventional, top-down forms of...space production and management”, FOBP cannot necessarily be labelled ‘grassroots’ either (Erixon-Aalto & Ernstson, 2017, p.310). They fit the basic definition of grassroots organisations as they are comprised of residents advocating to spur change from the bottom-up at the local level. However, under the contemporary context, “grassroots” is often associated with ideologies such as “social injustice, environmental issues,...and economic inequality” alongside political movements (Ricee, 2020). In fact, the FOBP had a very specific and material cause that did not extend beyond the boundaries of the neighbourhood. Therefore, they were not committed to tackling broader social issues as contemporary grassroots organisations do.

I classify the FOBP as a volunteer association, and what they call themselves—a “Friends group”. They are generally formed by “a group of citizens with common interests in the stewardship of a local park...to support (its) development or conservation” (National Recreation and Park Association, 2009, p.1). Similarly, FOBP strives to drive park improvements, balance the diverse needs of all park users, and encourage inclusive, community-based stewardship of Berczy Park (FOBP, 2011).

Engaging with the City: the power of social capital

The FOBP committee mobilized their social capital to form a network that was conducive to their advocacy. Robert Putnam (2000) refers to social capital as connections among individuals, in which networks and the norms of reciprocity build trustworthiness. FOBP’s interpersonal relationships translated into participation at the community and municipal level; they were embedded in a large and dense network that increased opportunities for encounters (Dekker et. al., 2010). From the formation of FOBP, to the direct approach they took in engaging residents, to the inside connections between political actors, social networks anchored the revitalization process. Berczy Park itself becomes a site where social ties are fostered. Dense connections among members create a trusting and cooperative environment that maximizes the potential of collective action; Mary took pride in how the FOBP “had a single vision, and we worked tirelessly towards it”.

Gaining traction: from incremental changes to effective lobbying

“Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” in that all politics is local (C. Wright Mills, 1959, p.ii). Political actors and institutions dictate the set of relations between civil society and the state, creating the interrelationship between communities and the wider society. From emails to meetings, the FOBP persistently reached out to the city and was politically savvy in asserting their interests.

Mary first pushed for small-scale changes regarding existing park facilities by emailing a community planner, who connected her with Berczy Park's supervisor regarding damaged seating and exposed tree roots. Simultaneously, FOBP attended city halls, requesting that brick walls surrounding the fountain be removed for better sightlines to enhance park safety.

Having established a presence, the FOBP proceeded to advocate large-scale changes. The affable nature of FOBP was evident in their approach to gathering a solid membership base, "just keep talking to people", said Mary. They set up social events with signature bright green chairs and balloons at Berczy Park, tirelessly approaching passersby. More than 2,000 members were added to FOBP's mailing list, and members were encouraged to sign petitions and surveys to have a stake in reimagining the park, specifically regarding dog amenities. Alongside physical efforts, an article was published in *The Bulletin*—a popular community newspaper platform at the time—to reach out to the broader community to sign surveys (Appendix 2). The article was circulated 7,400 times, according to Mary.

Mary further pitched their cause and lobbied the local councillor, Pam McConnell, via email (Appendix 3). Mary's archive of correspondence emails all highlighted a clear and actionable cause—that Berczy Park had to rise to the demands of the rapidly densifying neighbourhood and accommodate rising numbers of families and pet owners to maximise the potential of the limited park space (Appendix 4)(Hume, 2011). Mary pitched for a kid's playground and an off-leash dog run, and data was used to express the importance of taking action. Berczy Park soon had to serve approximately 4,000 condominium units within a 2-3 block radius (Appendix 5).

Lastly, the FOBP attended city halls and the city's Parks Plan consultations. They called on the community to participate in these meetings. In an email archive, Dennis Glasgow, urban planner and member of the committee wrote, "We can get a large group of people speaking about the lack of park space. If we don't do this, no one will". It was his profession as a planner, along with the multidisciplinary abilities of other committee members—a writer, architect, accountant, recruiter...that leveraged their expertise to advocate effectively. Dekker et. al. (2010) argued that "organisations with more professionals are better able to have a voice in local decision-making", since social capital and networks possess valuable resources for an organisation to exert power and influence at the local level, boosting political will for change.

Whose voices were represented in the redesign process?

Perks of having a legitimised voice: connecting with the landscape designer

During the interview, Mary repeatedly emphasised that "Pam gave us a voice at city hall". Despite the FOBP being a fledgling community group at the time, McConnell gave FOBP a seat at the table. She also introduced FOBP to the lead landscape designer of Berczy Park's revitalization, Claude Cormier. They were on a

first-name basis with Cormier, hence the ability to have a direct stake in decision-making. After presenting him with the petition that showed overwhelming support for dog facilities, Cormier had an epiphany, “I was trying to come up with a whimsical theme for the fountain. And because of your work, Friends of Berczy Park, let it be dogs!”

Priority Stakeholders represented by the FOBP and the influence on urban design

Urban design is “a practice of organizing our intentions in a series of explicit decisions concerning those qualities of the world we choose to *recognize as significant*” (Bain, 2006, p.21). Undeniably, the FOBP had considerable success in articulating the needs of certain stakeholders. This lends us to the question, whose interests get to be manifested in the urban form, and for whom does the public space serve?

Families, children, elderlies, and pet owners were stakeholders consistently mentioned throughout the interview. The FOBP had the best interests of these groups, who were underrepresented pre-revitalization (880 Cities, 2012). Among these groups, conflicts of interest were mitigated by urban design (Peters, 2013). Three zones were created intentionally—hilly berms for play, a small garden for dogs, and a plaza for gathering—Berczy Park becomes universally appealing across demographics. Shaun Pearen, a committee member of FOBP, mentioned that “different types of park users can comfortably ‘find their space’ in... distinct ‘quadrants’...whether they want to be part of the crowd, or seek a quieter private area to enjoy the park as they wish” (Appendix 1).

FOBP utilised their newfound power to negotiate with the city for more variable seating. From conventional table sets to backless-benches, Mary ensured the park functioned as a gathering space, where caregivers could vigilantly supervise their children, and elderlies had comfortable seating. Now, an array of seating options are present in Berczy Park.

Berczy Park as a site of contestation regarding the Right to the City: who has the agency and power to shape and use the public space?

Lefebvre (1968) described the right to the city as a cry and a demand—a cry from the alienated, and an involuntary demand from the materially deprived. Lefebvre confers two types of rights: the right to *participate* in decision-making and the right to *appropriate* spatial use (Purcell, 2002). In terms of participation, skateboarders and marginalized groups were never given the opportunity to exercise their interests towards Berczy Park. In terms of appropriation, their rights to occupy Berczy Park are fragile in that any disruptive behaviour will be subject to interference with authority.

Eliasoph (2009) argues that classic volunteer associations are not responsible for ensuring inclusivity as they tend to be exclusive and socially homogenous. They need not document nor justify themselves to be civic to “any public beyond itself”; as

such, it was not FOBP's priority to advocate on behalf of non-members. It was a reciprocal relationship between the core committee and its members—the community trusted FOBP with decision-making because their stakes had been accounted for. Hence, if nobody had represented external interests, then parents, children, and elderlies become the sole stakeholders being considered.

Conditional empathy and acceptance

Using emergent coding, safety and security was a prominent theme that anchored our interview. I argue that FOBP holds conditional empathy and acceptance towards the marginalized. They may tolerate the *presence* of marginalized individuals but condemn any disruptive *behaviour* that threatens the virtue of civility in Berczy Park. The November 2019 issue from FOBP's archive, "Facing Homelessness in Berczy Park", exemplifies this phenomenon.

The blog post carefully notes that everyone has the right to uphold their views towards the issue of homelessness, and "we cannot label or paint all homeless persons with the same brush" (FOBP, 2019). They stand to distinguish between passive and harmless persons from those who exhibit aggressive and disruptive behaviour. Their principle is that "Berczy Park is a public space and everyone is welcome, *as long as* they respect other park users and cause no harm to the park or others"; this translates into their expectation with homeless persons as well (FOBP, 2019). When this principle gets breached, however, any 'at-risk' behaviour that threatens dominant user groups will either be reported to the police or the city's 311 line for non-emergency assistance (City of Toronto, n.d.).

The power to regulate behaviour

Mary's answer to the way FOBP mitigates or balances different concerns is simple and direct, "Well, it's the city now or 311." The fact that she showed no hesitation towards involving authorities demonstrates her empathy does not extend to those who threaten civility.

Mary righteously defends excluding anyone (specifically skateboarders and the mentally ill) who poses a safety threat to innocent passersby—she sees it as the cost of protecting groups like women, children, and elderlies. "...You have mentally ill people who are violent and they're screaming at people and scaring women out of the park in broad daylight...you want to help, but not them." Thus, Mary's prejudice is rooted in disruptive *actions* that threaten civic order, and 311 symbolizes the securitization of space for dominant users to exert guardianship and hold power to exclude certain users in the name of upholding civic behaviour (Matthews et. al., 2023).

Regarding skateboarders' recklessness, Mary furiously recalled them "playing human bowling" crashing into seniors, and witnessing a crash that broke a dog sculpture. She called designer Cormier immediately, and skate-stoppers were soon installed to deter skateboarders from Berczy Park. It was inside connections like

these that framed the direction of revitalization, but even the exclusive nature of FOBP did not hamper the level of inclusivity in the ultimate redesign. It just so happened that designer Claude decided *not* to include anti-homeless infrastructure to discourage the unhoused from using the park. However, the fact that members of FOBP could conveniently exercise their power over design features post-revitalization reflects broader systemic processes whereby powerful interest groups dictate the plight of those already in situations of marginality. Individuals who challenge ‘acceptable behavioural norms’ are easily stripped of the right to exist in public spaces.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although no deliberate engagement was conducted with disadvantaged groups, it is worth acknowledging that the City delegated some degree of power to a citizen group like the FOBP. Equity-based public participation was not full-fledged at the time, and the level of engagement ranged between ‘consultation’ and ‘delegated power’ in Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of citizen participation. In ideal, progressive, participatory planning, participation is considered as an ‘end’, where community groups are given sufficient authority to meaningfully influence decision-making and redistribute power to those who are excluded from political processes (Arnstein, 1969; Nelson & Wright, 1995).

As a politically savvy volunteer association, FOBP successfully conveyed the voices of dominant groups. The right to use Berczy Park lies in the requirement that one must abide by behavioural norms and cause no disruption to public order. Those who threaten the integrity of safety and security of the park will be righteously excluded to protect women, children, and elderlies. Just delegating power to a classic volunteer association is not enough to address inequity—after all, the FOBP should not be assumed the responsibility of a planner to guarantee inclusivity.

Planners should adopt an intersectional lens, creating justice-focused urban design. Planning for the most marginalized should not be thought of as a zero-sum game—universally beneficial outcomes often stem from the bottom-up, rather than the expense of one group or another (Fusca, 2023). A deliberative planning process can subvert entrenched power structures and construct “a sense of collective responsibility across even deep social and political divisions”, unifying the voices of diverse groups (Bain, 2006, p.23). The right to the city manifests in the opportunity for disadvantaged groups to gain agency over the right to participate in decision-making and the right to appropriate public spaces.

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