

Contestations of Public Space: A Case Study of Queen's Park, Toronto

In 2024, the Toronto Mayor's office received numerous complaints about tenants occupying community parks in Toronto. According to Global News, the contents of one letter mentioned that the increasing presence of the camp in public places caused residents anxiety, stress, and fear (Maharaj, 2024). Encampments have always been controversial in Toronto as advocates continue to fight against the city's efforts to remove them (Rady & Sotomayor, 2024). In September 2024, Toronto's asylum system rejected 223 asylum applications per night, forcing many asylum seekers to set up tent camps in public space (Manucdoc & Draaisma, 2024). Queen's Park is one of many campgrounds for the homeless in downtown Toronto. It is located at 111 Wellesley Street and is divided into two distinct North and South sides. The north side is mainly a leisure area, with benches, jogging track and grass for residents to do activities and rest. This area also hosts Queen's Park homeless encampments. On the other hand, the south side is a heavily political space, as it houses the Ontario Legislative Assembly (OLA) and often hosts many social and political events. This area is relatively quiet – there are no homeless camps, and dedicated security personnel maintain a sense of order. This well-defined divide and variety of observed activities undertaken in Queen's Park brought us to question how this public space is negotiated among its users.

This study seeks to answer the following questions: How are the social, spatial and experiential dynamics between homeless individuals and other users of Queen's Park expressed through interactions and perceptions? How do these dynamics underscore the ongoing contestation of public space in Queen's Park? To this end, we analyse interactions and perceptions between three key stakeholders – homeless individuals, the city, and other park goers. First, we analysed social dynamics by examining the perceptions that these stakeholder groups have of one another. Second, we highlighted spatial dynamics by examining the distribution of homeless tents, especially as it relates to the functional and aesthetic differences between the park's northern and southern sections. Finally, we investigated experiential dynamics by documenting interactions between park users and homeless individuals through interviews and observational analyses. These dynamics not only paint a narrative portrait of Queen's Park as a multifunctional public space serving various stakeholder groups but also highlight the ongoing contestation of space among these groups.

Literature Review

Urban Space as a Social Construct

Understanding the social production of space is a prerequisite to analysing the contestation of public space. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre (1991) outlines his theoretical foundation of multidimensional space as a social construction, highlighting the complex interactions between people, institutions, and power. This triad conception of space is an attempt to bridge the disconnect between the dichotomous physical and mental understanding of space as studied in other disciplines, which often neglect the social aspect of space (Butler, 2012). In his book, Butler (2012) summarizes the Lefebvrian conception of space. *Spatial practices* are the material and functional use of space reflected in everyday practices, routines, and networks that represent the undertakings of the individual and collective in inhabited spaces. *Representations of space* are formal and institutionalized designations of space, often expressed or enforced from positions of power that leverage socially recognized 'expertise'. This dimension reflects positivist and technocratic perceptions of space that Lefebvre criticizes to often omit lived realities and other perceptions, undermining organic and grassroots productions of space. *Representational spaces* are those which are part of the social imaginary of the inhabitants and users of the space, representing the transformative, counter-hegemonic productions of space through creative practice and symbolism. Tensions between representations of space and representational spaces underpin the contestation of space, as both represent its creative and transformative dimensions. In public spaces such as parks, these tensions are commonly manifested in the enforcement of spatio-legal tools and subsequent grassroots organization against institutional powers.

Governance and the illegalization of Homelessness

The struggle for public parks in Toronto has been a long-fought battle. Toronto is facing a housing affordability crisis, worsened by a state-led, market-oriented financialization of housing and cutbacks in provision of social housing (Zhang, 2020). Despite the city's shortcomings and a failing shelter system exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic that has left many vulnerable populations with no choice, the city continues to move against encampments through various modes of illegalization (Evans, 2022). Rady and Sotomayor (2024) argue that the use of spatio-legal tools in Toronto, such as the issuance of suspension notices, is arbitrary and tactical, selectively applied to homeless populations to serve as a justification for state violence. Indeed, evictions (and associated protests) have been violent, involving arrests, the use of pepper spray, criminal charges, as well as injuries such as broken bones and concussions (Rady & Sotomayor, 2024; CBC, 2021; Casaletto, 2021). Spatio-legal tools and their enforcement perpetuate the cycle of permanent precarity and displaceability for vulnerable populations, as homelessness becomes increasingly illegalized.

Homeless Claims to Space and the Right to Appropriation

Any group engaging in contestation must have a theoretical, ideological, or empirical reasoning to back their claim. Homeless individuals and their advocates navigate spatial politics through the 'right to appropriation', a concept derived from Lefebvre's right to the city (Butler, 2012; Lefebvre et al., 1996). Appropriated space challenges hegemonic, capitalist perceptions of space that emphasize exchange value over use value, and is achieved through social struggle. In Toronto, these struggles include protests, rallies, and letters to the city, as advocates continue to protect homeless public park encampments from evictions (CBC, 2021; Casaletto, 2021; Draaisma, 2022). As the city continues to act exclusively in the interests of property owners, these encampments represent a form of 'guerilla urbanism', a mode of insurgent urban transformation that seek to prioritize use value in underutilised spaces (Rady & Sotomayor, 2024; Canelas & Baptista, 2021; Hou, 2010). These initiatives are low-cost, grassroots, and resistive practices that challenge the increasingly regulated and diminished forms of public space to appropriate them. They are often undertaken by marginalized groups that cannot satisfy their needs through institutional provision (Canelas & Baptista, 2021; Hou, 2010).

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods qualitative approach to explore the social, spatial, and experiential dynamics of Queen's Park, focusing on the interactions and perceptions between homeless individuals and other park users. The research combined observational studies, alternative cartography, and semi-structured interviews to provide a nuanced understanding of the park as contested space. Ethical considerations were central to the study, ensuring participant anonymity, informed verbal consent, and careful phrasing of questions to minimize bias or discomfort. Data were analyzed thematically, synthesizing findings from observations, maps, and interviews into a coherent narrative of the park's complex dynamics.

Observational Studies and Alternative Cartography

Observational studies formed the foundation of the research, with multiple site visits systematically documenting park activities, spatial arrangements, and user interactions. Distinctions between the northern and southern areas of the park were a key focus: the northern side, with its quieter, tree-shaded sections, hosted homeless encampments, while the southern side, dominated by the Ontario Legislative Building and historical monuments, remained clear of such activities. Observations, documented in photographs, revealed that a visual contrast between tents and associated signage and the park's formal, landscaped design. Complementing these observations, alternative cartography mapped the locations of statues, monuments, and homeless encampments. This mapping exercise visually highlighted the coexistence of planned and spontaneous uses of the park. The

juxtaposition of the central Queen Victoria statue and informal tents underscored the park's dual identity as a site of civic formality and social tension. Maps and photographs were key in capturing these spatial dynamics, offering a visual framework for understanding how public space is contested.

Semi-structured interviews and Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights into the experiences and perceptions of key stakeholder groups, especially park goers (a TTC worker and a dog walker). These interviews were conducted on-site, leveraging the park's context to enrich the dialogue and draw attention to visible dynamics such as homeless encampments and formal civic spaces. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share detailed personal experiences and nuanced opinions. Interview data were thematically coded to identify patterns such as safety concerns, empathy, governance perceptions, and public space contestation. Integrating these findings with the visual and observational data enabled a multi-dimensional analysis of Queen's Park. This triangulation of methods allowed the study to capture the interplay between formal civic design and the organic, often marginalized realities within this public space, providing a robust narrative of the park's contested dynamics.

Addressing Limitations and Researchers' Positionalities

Our study faced significant limitations due to ethical considerations and a lack of sample diversity. We were unable to interview homeless individuals because we did not have the ethics clearance and, owing to their unpredictable nature, doing so could have posed a danger to us. Furthermore, we were unable to gather insights from officials or park supervisors, which could have enhanced our understanding of the city's perspectives and policies. As a result, we could rely only on news articles, site visits, and spatial analysis to infer the dynamics between the homeless and the city.

Our positionality as international students presented both strengths and challenges. As neutral 'outsiders', respondents such as the TTC worker and the dog walker felt freer to share more critical views, especially those of dissatisfaction with government policies. However, our limited familiarity with local historical and cultural contexts may have hindered our ability to fully engage with the experiences of the interviewees. For example, lacking significant interactions with homeless individuals limited our capacity to empathize deeply with the dog walker's reported feelings of unease when approached by the homeless. This could have limited deeper discussions that expound on the experiential dynamics between park goers and the homeless.

Results

Social Dynamics

The interviews revealed a spectrum of perspectives on homelessness in Queen's Park. The TTC worker expressed frustration, citing personal experiences of vandalism and a traumatic assault. Their comments highlighted feelings of disillusionment with city policies, emphasizing perceived powerlessness in addressing homelessness:

"You're not gonna have a chance with these people. They just vandalize everything inside, outside the park."

This perspective contrasted with the dog walker's mix of empathy and criticism, reflecting on systemic failures:

"I don't think anyone chooses to be homeless... The city has, especially during COVID, really failed kind of everyone."

The dog-walking park goer lamented the decline of the park's family-friendly atmosphere, attributing it partly to the rise in encampments.

We also approached security personnel from the OLA, but were politely refused an interview. They cited their duty to remain neutral on political topics due to the nature of the people they work with (city officials). This interaction reflected what the dog walker expressed as an "ivory tower" dynamic of ignorance and neglect, a recurring theme in our interviews and spatial analysis.

Spatial Dynamics

Our alternative map (see Figure 1) highlights a clear division between the park's northern and southern areas. Encampments were concentrated in the northern sections, while the southern area, dominated by the Ontario Legislative Building and its surrounding statues, was conspicuously devoid of homeless activity. The proximity of tents to formal monuments like Queen Victoria's statue accentuated the stark contrast between civic authority and grassroots occupation. Furthermore, homeless and recreational activities are also segregated within the northern section. The homeless encampments tend to be located in the lawns, away from the paved paths and the park's centre upon which an imposing statue of King Edward VII is placed.

Figure 1

Spatial Patterns of Homeless Tents and Statues in Queen's Park

Note. Tents and statue locations depicted on a hand-drawn map of Queen's Park, accompanied by images illustrating a tent, sculpture, and the Ontario Legislative building.

Experiential Dynamics

Interactions between park goers and homeless individuals were characterized by both tension and coexistence. The dog walker described a mix of friendly encounters and unsettling experiences, highlighting safety concerns, particularly for women:

"There's nothing a woman can do or carry to feel more secure."

Meanwhile, the TTC worker detailed a more serious and concerning anecdote, underscoring the unpredictable and sometimes dangerous interactions between park goers and the homeless.

*"I was assaulted once ... he just started beating me for no reason.
He attacked me for seven minutes."*

Observations, documented in photographs (see Figures 2-4), also revealed that despite the presence of tents, other users continued to use Queen's Park to engage in recreational activities, challenging the notion that encampments inherently

deter public use. The dog walker also recalls friendly interactions that emphasize the humanity of the homeless:

"Sometimes they're quite friendly. The dog likes to say hi, and I'm happy to stop for whoever."

This duality reflects broader societal struggles with empathy and fear in shared public spaces.

Figure 2

A Painting Club in Queen's Park with A Homeless Tent in the Background.



Figure 3

Cycle Toronto Gathers for Weekly 5km Ride, Queen's Park.



Figure 4

A Homeless Person Sleeps in the Shade in Queen's Park.



Analysis and discussion

Our methods, through exploration of the social, spatial, and experiential dynamics between three stakeholder groups, reveal Queen's Park as a site of contestation fraught with tensions. Most significantly, both park goers and the homeless are at odds with the city, for different reasons and expressed through different ways. Park goers are disappointed and frustrated at the city for failing to ensure adequate living conditions, forcing the homeless to camp in public parks. The city is effectively pushing aside the homelessness problem onto park goers, framing vulnerable homeless individuals as a societal burden and exposing them to heightened contempt and scorn from park users. The consequences of this is apparent in the negative interactions between homeless individuals and park users – for example, the TTC worker being assaulted by a homeless person.

The spatial organization of Queen's Park further reflects this “pushing aside” of the homeless issue. Kaplan et al. (2019) theorizes a spatial pattern language of spaces that homeless individuals are more likely to occupy, the characteristics of which are: Safe enclosure and high visibility to look out for threats; accessibility to the space; proximity to resources for survival; (un)attractiveness. (Un)attractiveness here can be defined as a location's likelihood of being neglected, otherwise understood as a lack of security aesthetics (Ghertner et al., 2020). The clear division between the North and South sides of the park, as well as the segregation of activities within the North side, highlights the city's use of security aesthetics and presence of security personnel to divert homeless encampments from the South side that houses the OLA to the North side that is dedicated for use by park goers. This issue is

exacerbated by the perception—or reality—of unbalanced power relationships, the “ivory tower” dynamic described by the dog walker and TTC worker. Against the looming backdrop of the Ontario Legislative building, the park goers say they feel powerless and unheard in this situation as the city’s officials look down (physically and metaphorically) from their places of authority.

It is notable that the contestation of public space is not undertaken through suspension notices or violent enforcements as in other places and previous years. This can be due to the smaller number of camps, but might also be due to the work of the homeless advocates and prior backlash against the city’s measures, underscoring the importance of organization and social struggle in the appropriation of space (Rady & Sotomayor, 2024; Butler, 2012).

This study paints a narrative picture of Queen’s Park and homelessness in urban public space, as well as contextualises it within broader literature concerning the contestation of public space between the homeless and the city. Most importantly, we introduce, albeit only with limited preliminary data, an oft-unheard side here categorised as park goers. The transformative nature of representational space and the exercise of the right to appropriation may come at the expense of the spatial practices of everyday people (park goers), who are either overlooked or characterized as “property owners” in whose favour the city acts (Rady & Sotomayor, 2024). This worsened by strategically exclusive representations of space that seek to bolster the interests of the city (maintenance of aesthetic and ‘order’) instead of ameliorating the homeless issue. The tri-faceted story of the homeless in Queen’s Park is a reflection of ongoing battles for the reclamation of space against capitalist conceptions of space that do not prioritise use value or social good, either those engaging in spatial practices or appropriation for survival.

Conclusion

The case study of Queen’s Park illustrates the complex interplay of different stakeholders—homeless individuals, the city, and park goers—negotiating and contesting public space. Through a Lefebvrian lens, the park is conceptualized not simply as a physical location, but as a battleground upon which competing visions and uses are executed. As Toronto continues to grapple with failing shelter systems, an unaffordable and financialised housing market, and consequent rises in homelessness, the ongoing story of Queen’s Park serves as a profound reminder that space is constantly transformed by routine practices, power relationships, and lived experiences expressed through social, spatial, and experiential dynamics. Future research on the subject should better incorporate the voices of the homeless and city officials, ultimately working to bridge disconnects between stakeholders and foster more equitable urban governance.

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