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## Richmond Hill Transit Center: Qualitative Research Methods

### Introduction

The Richmond Hill Center Terminal is a transit terminal situated along the connector road between Yonge Street and Highway 7. It is within close proximity to the Silver City Cineplex Theatre and connects via a pedestrian bridge to Langstaff GO. It is also easily accessible by Highway 407. It services users of GO Transit, York Region Transit (YRT) and Viva. It is located north of Toronto in Richmond Hill. It is not directly connected to the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC). However, it has connections through the Viva and YRT transit systems, with plans to bridge this connection via an extension of the Yonge Line 1.

Our team studied the Richmond Hill Center Terminal through qualitative means over the course of this semester. We chose this site due to familiarity, being users of the site over the last few years, and having common interests in how transit usage and the design of the space fosters or supports certain behaviours. Our research question for the site was to what extent is Richmond Hill Center Terminal able to effectively balance its primary role as a transit hub, ensuring users' safety and comfort, with fostering a more inclusive and multi-functional space for the surrounding community? We argue that the Richmond Hill Center is able to moderately balance its ability to provide comfort and convenience with certain inadvertent uses unintentionally, but works against certain communities to prioritize safety. This report will discuss the qualitative methods that have evolved and supported our research and understanding of the site. We report our findings and decision-making process throughout the semester to create an argument not only of the ways in which the Richmond Hill Center balances various priorities but also of what research we found best done this.

### Literature Review

Urban design scholars Jan Gehl and William H. Whyte have significantly contributed to understanding the intricate relationship between urban design and social behaviour. Gehl's emphasis on human-scale urban design centred on prioritizing pedestrian experiences and fostering social interaction in public spaces, underscores the significance of designing spaces that encourage community engagement (Gehl, 2006). Whyte's seminal work on the social life of small urban spaces offers valuable insights into how design elements within transit terminals influence user behaviour and the potential for community engagement (Whyte, 1980).

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg's concept of "third places," introduced in his work on the vanishing nature of these informal gathering spaces, provides a pertinent

framework for understanding the dynamics of public spaces like transit terminals (Oldenburg, 1997). Third places, distinct from the home (first place) and workplace (second place), are crucial for fostering social interaction, community bonding, and inclusivity. This theory offers a lens through which to analyze the Richmond Hill Transit Terminal's potential role as a third place for the surrounding community.

Additionally, Chauhan, Gupta, and Parida's research on the service quality of Multimodal Transportation Hubs (MMTH) identifies crucial factors influencing service quality, such as transfer environment, safety, accessibility, comfort, and staff management (Chauhan et al., 2021). The study underscores the significant impact of elements like transfers, environment and safety/security on overall service quality, aligning with observed challenges at the Richmond Hill Center Terminal. Integrating these scholarly perspectives into a literature review of the Richmond Hill Center Terminal accentuates the pivotal role of design elements, safety, and community engagement within transit hubs. These insights reinforce the importance of considering safety, comfort, and functionality in fostering a more inclusive and community-centric space within transit terminals like Richmond Hill Center, aligning with the overarching goal of optimizing these spaces to meet diverse user needs.

## Methodology

Through a qualitative exploration encompassing observational work, visual analysis, mapping, ex-situ research, literature reviews, and interviews, we uncover the social and physical phenomena full of nuanced interactions, structured flow, and inadvertent usage.

First, we engaged in a participatory observation, where we submersed ourselves in the atmosphere separately on two occasions for a minimum of 30 minutes each, taking note of the sights, sounds, smells, sensations, design and behaviours that could be documented on our phones. We also used this time to compile information to structure our initial research questions. We took pictures to analyze for our next assignment on visual analysis of photography, where we then started to connect our findings from the secondary scans of the images to the research questions we had formulated. Observation served as an immersive tool, capturing nuances of the transit terminal's environment, enabling connections between design elements and Newman's concept of defensive spaces. It facilitated a comprehensive understanding of how design influences behaviours and perceptions within the terminal.

After scoping out the space, we created three maps. We used the first two to outline the flows of vehicle and pedestrian traffic, as well as designated spaces for waiting, including bus shelters and seating zones. We used the third map to depict ex-situ research we conducted, being Instagram posts we searched via geotag and marked where they were taken to understand alternative usage of the space. Unfortunately, for the following assignment, the formal ex-situ

research done by our New York partners did not uncover much more than we previously used, especially relating to alternative usage and the impacts of the built design on the behaviour of users.

Finally, we conducted a semi-structured interview with a professional associated with the transit field. After reaching out to York Region Transit for over a month via email and phone calls, we finally landed a meeting with a service planner over Microsoft Teams. We asked the interviewee questions regarding their approach to accessibility, comfort, convenience, and for whom. We also inquired about their safety priorities and common issues on site; how they balance inclusivity and safety on site, as well as their opinion on supporting alternative uses of the site and some possible changes, they would like to implement.

### Reflection on Methods

The two of us are users of the space and live in spaces that resemble the neighbourhood where the site is situated. This influences how we perceive the space and what aspects we study. This position arguably makes us experts on the site, knowing what to look for and where. It may also lead us to overlook certain aspects of the terminal or take certain observations for granted. For example, we were very focused on the senses of the space: what we heard, what we smelled, where people flowed and how they acted. However, we might not have noted what people looked like or the demographics of those in the space and how this intersected with other pieces of information.

Qualitative methodologies like interviews and observation played a pivotal role in comprehending the multifaceted phenomena occurring in spaces like the site. Interviews illuminate diverse perspectives, while observation adds depth, enriching insights and uncovering nuanced aspects crucial for a comprehensive understanding of user experiences and community dynamics within transit spaces. Integrating these methods amplified research depth and validation (Jamshed 2014).

The ex-situ portion of the project highlighted our many privileges, having access to background knowledge of the space and the site itself. Unfortunately, our site was very difficult for our partners in New York to research, especially for information relevant to answering our research question. They were not able to find anything that would be useful to our final analysis. However, we did do some archival research to create the third map using social media posts. An anthropological study by Patrizia Toscano (2017) offers insights into the transformative power of social media in the shaping of public perception of urban spaces. Through this, we understand how the Richmond Hill Transit Terminal's scenic appeal, architectural elements and daily life within the space were portrayed and perceived online. It also emphasizes how social media, as a tool for visual representation and sharing, contributes to reshaping the narrative and significance of public spaces. In parallel, our qualitative research

methods, including visual analysis and social media exploration, echoed the idea that traditional spaces, like transit terminals, transform into virtual canvases through social media, influencing the perception and cultural significance of these spaces.

When moving toward the interview portion, we struggled to gain an interview with an on-site customer service worker for the site, an individual we believed would have had more experience with the site and its people than us. We could only get an interview with one of YRT's service planners, although they did not have personal experiences with the site. When conversing with the interviewee, we believe that our positionality as students allowed the service planner to let his guard down and be of the most help to us.

Overall, our research questions and focus were constantly changing, leading us to change what we focused on studying during each deliverable. Ultimately, if we had a consistent vision throughout the process, we may have collected our information accordingly to maximize our findings. We were also constrained by timing to gather more opinions and observe during various conditions and timings.

## Results & Data

Our research unearthed many insights on the site, mostly focused on the interplay between design, functionality and societal dynamics within the transit hub. We observed a wide demographic of age groups and backgrounds, although primarily ethnic, with many being students or someone in a specific profession. Younger generations tended to take transit in pairs or groups, as observed in our photography (Figure 2). Many transit users were conversing with one another, such as two older women in Figure 6. For our social media map, we found photo posts from Instagram, linked in the appendix. Many of these photos were of sunsets with captions about the scenery or short philosophical thoughts. This information helps us understand how the space is used, whether it can be directly tied to its intended function, as we defined from the later interview with the service planner, or if it arose from the design or nature of transit systems and spaces themselves.



Figure C

Continuing our observations, at least two transit workers were on site to help guide and increase information accessibility, ensure public safety, and create a more communal and personable environment (Figures 4 and 14). All available seating was heavily used indoors and outdoors as the weather around the time of our observations was warm. However, we observed hostile architectural designs in seating, such as in Figures 4 and 6, where the shelter seating is slanted and outdoor benches include armrests between supposed seating spaces to prevent sleeping. In addition, we observed a man sleeping on the floor of one of the shelters that the on-site workers kept close to for monitoring purposes. Our observations resonate with findings from Loukaitou-Sideris et al.'s (2021) report on homelessness in transit settings. The report highlights transit's role as a makeshift shelter for many unhoused individuals, especially those facing chronic homelessness and structural disadvantages. The presence of individuals experiencing homelessness and the challenges faced in addressing this issue align with the findings observed locally, such as the occasional disturbance and the presence of personal belongings in shopping carts. This broader context emphasizes the complexity of homelessness within transit spaces, mirroring observations at the Richmond Hill Transit Terminal. The concept of defensible space, introduced by architect Oscar Newman, explores how design elements within spaces impact perceptions of safety and security. In the context of our site, the functionality-driven approach inadvertently aligns with aspects of defensible space theory, reinforcing a sense of control and safety for transit users and inadvertently creating a perceived boundary that deters activities or uses not directly associated with transit and limits broader public engagement.



Figure 2



Figure 4



Figure 6



Figure 14

This leads to the findings of our interview with a service planner at York Region Transit, William Choi. He discussed on-site priorities, design provisions, and intentions, claiming commitment to AODA standards and accommodation via his quote, "Our service has to be accessible for everybody." Although he agreed on the potential for the site's amenities to be used as a general public space due to its "unique location" in proximity to many amenities, he also emphasized the aspect of enforcing safety and prioritizing transit usage, stating: "It's not like the green space surrounding it. It's

restricted just for the transit user or other users in the neighborhood. It's already being publicly being used." He referred to this issue as "loitering," being the most prominent in the zone. The interviewee also listed important facilities included in the design of the space to make it more comfortable and convenient, including waiting areas, washrooms, wifi, and USB ports.

## Analysis

Reflecting on our findings, the space supports transit use and additional amenities to make the space more convenient and comfortable but does not support users of the space beyond transit. The social media map highlighted the existence of appreciation or connection with a discovered aesthetic of the terminal, tying back to Toscano's study, but this was not done

intentionally. This was made evident when the service planner in our interview seemingly dismissed interest in the existence of these posts and the need to support this in its design, as it "wouldn't be our top priorities." Instead, priority was given to transit efficiency, safety, and accessibility over diverse community engagement, aligning with Oscar Newman's defensible space theory. This raises questions about the terminal's ability to balance its role as a transit hub and an inclusive community space. We believe that it does balance this well, considering that not all unhoused people are immediately removed on site, but it is made evident that the site, although public, has a specific use that is to be adhered to for the comfort and safety of the majority it is designed for.

## Conclusion

The research question explored the extent to which the Richmond Hill Centre Transit Terminal effectively balances its primary role as a transit hub, ensuring safety and comfort for users and fostering a more inclusive and multi-functional space for the surrounding community.

Our investigation revealed that while the terminal excels in prioritizing transit functionality, safety, and accessibility, tensions arise in achieving broader inclusivity and community engagement. The functionality-driven approach and safety priority inadvertently shape the terminal predominantly as a transit-oriented space, inadvertently limiting its potential for diverse community uses. This nuanced balance between ensuring safety and promoting inclusivity presents a challenge for the terminal's aspiration to be a truly multi-functional and inclusive space for the surrounding community.

## References

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## ArcGIS StoryMaps

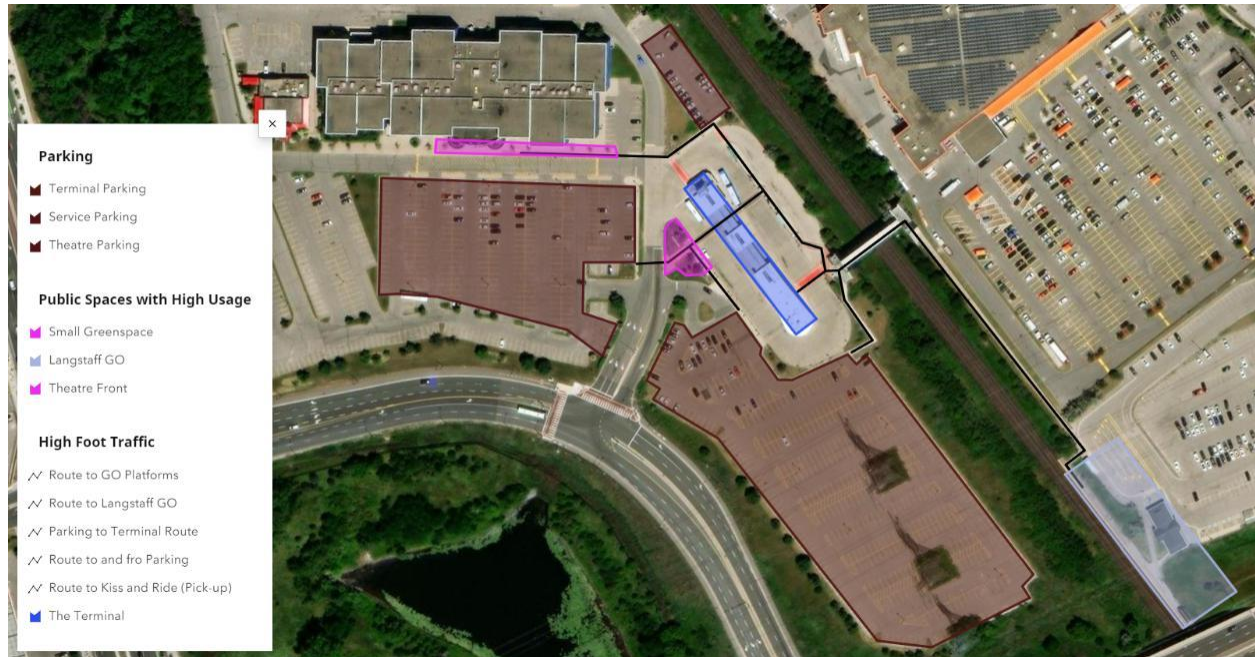
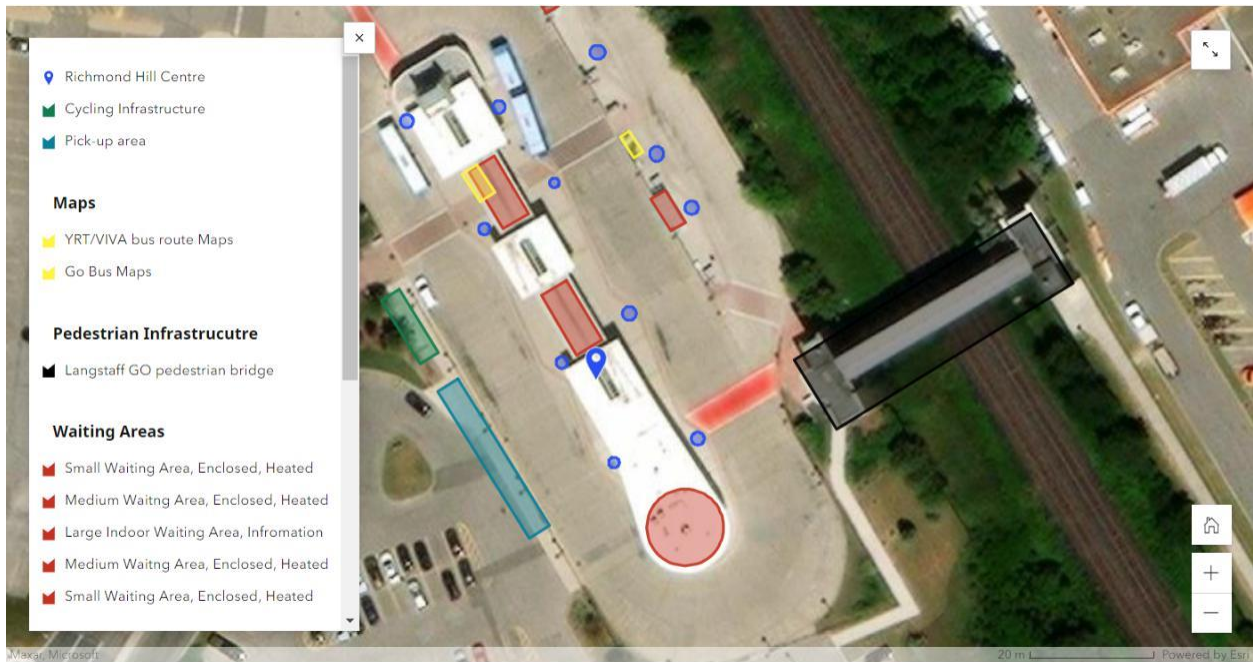


Figure A





Pedestrian hotspots within the Terminal

Figure B



Figure C

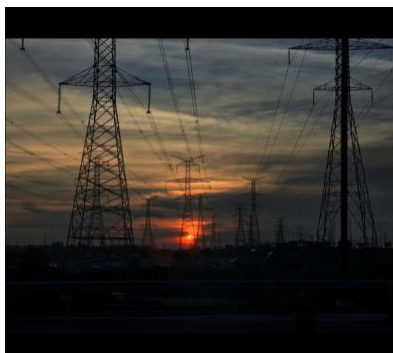


Figure C.1



Figure C.2

Figure C.3



Figure C.4

Figure C.5