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The Spadina Road Library sits just north of the intersection of Spadina Avenue and Bloor Street West in the Annex neighborhood. From a purely quantitative perspective, the Annex appears to be a wealthy neighborhood. According to their 2016 neighborhood census profile, 28% of families belong in the top income decile compared to the city's average of 13%. The median annual income for full-time workers in the Annex is significantly greater than the Toronto average, with residents earning \$66,359 compared to \$55,246. Moreover, the census indicates that residents are more employed and more educated than the rest of the city. The Annex has a 66% employment rate relative to the city's 59%, while 70% of the neighborhood has completed tertiary education compared to just 44% in Toronto (City of Toronto, 2016).

What sort of image does this data paint of the neighborhood? For someone who has never visited the Annex, they might assume that residents occupy "high-skilled" jobs that compensate well. Below average rates of unemployment and low levels of unsuitable housing (City of Toronto, 2016) might mean that residents do not experience food insecurity or housing precarity. Perhaps there is minimal poverty in the neighborhood, and the built environment is well maintained with pretty gardens and plentiful green space.

We explored a couple of blocks' radii around the library to help us understand and contextualize this data. We observed objects and spaces confirming its high-income demographic, such as expensive cars, large, single-family homes, private schools, multiple forms of public transit. We saw the different restaurants, parks, religious centers and TTC (Toronto Transit Commission) buildings shown on maps, including Tim Hortons, the Walmer Road Baptist Church, Paul Martel Park, and three Spadina station entrances.

As we walked through the area, we quickly realized the limitations of our initial research. While census profiles and geographical maps document who or what comprise the neighborhood, they often fail to capture the complex socio-spatial relationships that develop within them. We noticed that the neighborhood is not exclusively populated by census "residents," and that seemingly mono-functional objects and spaces carry multiple meanings depending on who engages them. More broadly, we recognized that a person's social location influences how they navigate the built form, especially for people who are homeless, visibly poor, or precariously housed. In the Annex, private and public spaces develop into "havens" or "hazards," sometimes functioning as a place for temporary refuge or a space of hostile exclusion. Paradoxically, these spaces can be both havens and hazards; welcoming some while simultaneously constraining others.

We developed these typologies to demonstrate how the built environment communicates attitudes towards homelessness or vulnerability. Attitudes can be subtle and overt and be expressed by individuals and institutions. Havens are spaces that are free of charge to enter, are temperature controlled, provide free Wi-Fi, public restrooms, free food, and places to temporarily rest or sleep. Hazards are more exclusive spaces, ones that require entry fees or are restricted to public access. They might be locked, fenced in, or guarded by police and security. They have “no loitering” and “no trespassing” signs, surveillance cameras, and a built form that prohibits or discourages resting or sleeping in place.

We identified two spaces in the area that serve as havens for precariously housed or homeless individuals. For example, the Walmer Road Baptist Church has a community fridge and food bank garden, providing free food for individuals experiencing food insecurity. In a neighborhood that is predominately high-income, the church recognizes that low-income and vulnerable people pass through, and that they should have access to nourishment regardless of whether they live in the neighborhood. Similarly, the Spadina Road Library branch has services that can provide haven to those experiencing homelessness. This includes free entry, free Wi-Fi, public bathrooms, and access to computers.

However, many spaces in the neighborhood mix havens with hazards, with some being very hostile. This is true of both outdoors and indoors, public, and privately owned. In terms of the outdoor landscape, most benches on city sidewalks have armrests in their middle. On the surface, arm rests are innocuous and helpful; they appear to make sitting more ergonomic. However, they are impossible to lie down on. This is not unintentional but a product of “defensive design” also known as hostile architecture (Pelley, 2019). These benches are intended to discourage people, usually homeless, from sleeping on them. Thus, benches can be either a haven or a hazard, depending on their built form. In Paul Martel Park, none of the benches have middle armrests, but they are the exception.

In Spadina Station, hostile benches are one of several hazards faced by the precariously housed. There is a “No Loitering” sign, which warns of prosecution, as well as many security cameras—watchful employee eyes were on the immobile, while commuters were not given a second glance. At one point, we saw constables questioning a man beside a tent in front of the station. While we could not determine the context of the conversation, they later came with a large pick-up truck, suggesting they were going to remove them from the premises.

However, the station also functions as a haven: there is free Wi-Fi, and for a small fee people can access a temperature-controlled environment which connects stations with other amenities—such as public bathrooms. Moreover, we noticed that the station was serving two contradictory functions: a place for mobility and a place of

settlement. Nestled between flocks of commuters, entrances featured make-shift encampments and people huddled by the doors to stay warm.

The Annex is a complex neighborhood, reflected strongly in the small area we explored around the Spadina Road Library. Public spaces are not universally accessible or welcoming, and private spaces are patrolled and guarded to remain so. Neighborhood hostility can be explicit, like a “No Loitering” or “No Trespassing” sign, or implicit, like the seemingly infinite number of uncomfortable benches scattered across sidewalks, parks, and TTC buildings. More deeply, we realized the way the neighborhood excludes vulnerable people mirrors how it controls wildlife and pests. Above the many restrictive sidewalk benches are roofs covered in spikes—plastic and metal—all to discourage pigeons from hanging around. Garbage bins are locked to keep out scavengers and animals, while private balconies are covered in mesh preventing birds and squatters from settling on their patios. When we consider these social and spatial dynamics, the importance of the Spadina Library becomes clearer: It is a place of knowledge and a haven for safety—one that respects individuals as humans, with a human right to dignity.

References

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