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Introduction

In Toronto, the underground is a place of movement. Pipes carry water from the depths of the lake and push them to the top of our skyscrapers. Billions of signals run along fiber optic and telephone cables. Crammed-together commuters move between home and work on the subway. Yet, defining the underground PATH system as a purely liminal space would be inaccurate. What makes the network of tunnels and retail stores important is not the thousands of businesspeople who walk through and out of it to escape the cold, but the people for whom it is a permanent home. Yes, there is motion under the sidewalks of downtown Toronto. But for the unhoused population for whom the PATH offers the barest level of relief, there is static. In a place of constant commerce and activity, what is it like to stay still? How does the physical and social environment of the PATH affect unhoused people living in it?

We found that many characteristics of the PATH, including bright lights, pervasive security presence, and unaffordable retail stores and restaurants adversely affect unhoused people's ability to live in the space. However, we also concluded that the PATH's social environment provides an opportunity for unhoused residents to receive unique support.

Literature review

In Toronto, and indeed, Ontario, the PATH is peerless. Nowhere else in the city or the province do tunnels link such a great area. Consequently, we sought to understand the PATH's effect on unhoused people through researching the relationship between unhoused people and similar spaces internationally. We identified two relevant themes: physical exclusion and social exclusion.

Physical Exclusion

Spaces like the PATH are categorized as "privately owned public open spaces" (POPOS) – owned by corporations instead of governments, but nominally accessible to the general public without payment. There are several physical factors that facilitate the exclusion of unhoused people from POPOS. Schindler (2018) identifies how hostile architecture (i.e., spikes, lack of seating) and the presence of security guards make POPOS disinviting to low-income users and hamper their enjoyment of the spaces. Doherty et al. (2002) describe how POPOS – or, as they refer to them, quasi-public spaces – restrict access to, specifically, unhoused people. Echoing Schindler, Doherty et al. relate how European train stations, which, like the PATH, are liminal spaces, use the presence of security guards and CCTV cameras to deter unhoused people from

staying in them. Birch (2006) attributes the creation of physical barriers to conflicting interests between business owners and unhoused people – that one cannot use the space without impeding the other’s enjoyment of it.

Social Exclusion

We also identified several mechanisms through which unhoused people were excluded from the social fabric of POPOS. Schindler (2018) notes that, if not physically restrictive, the design of many spaces creates the impression that users must engage in commercial activity to use them – for example, seating located near a food court. Doherty et al. (2022) show how the social activities of unhoused people were actively curtailed at the POPOS they studied – they explain how a railway company discouraged a not-for-profit from providing meals to unhoused people at their stations to disincentivize them from sleeping there. Mabhala et al. (2017) sheds light on the particular danger social exclusion poses to the unhoused, identifying “the final stage” of becoming unhoused as the destruction of meaningful relationships.

Methodology

We conducted both visual observations and semi-structured interviews to collect data on the PATH.

In her introduction to *Infinite City*, Rebecca Solnit (2011) writes that “every place is if not infinite practically inexhaustible... any single map can depict only an arbitrary selection of the facts on its two-dimensional surface”. The PATH is significantly more physically constrained than perhaps any other space in Toronto; it can functionally only be traversed linearly, with few diverging sections, and hyper-branded stores fill much of its area. Rather than focusing on diverse geography, as Solnit does in many of her maps, we emphasized certain “geographical” features – namely, cameras, security guards, and places to sit and sleep. We collected data through visual observation by walking the length of the PATH from Dundas Station to Union Station several times between January and February 2023. We conducted most of these walkthroughs in the late evening, around 10:00pm to 11:00pm, to observe the space absent the presence of corporate employees and see how unhoused people interacted with it as much as possible. During these walks, we mapped where unhoused people were sleeping, the locations of optimal sleeping locations (i.e., benches and sofas), and the features that contributed to their physical exclusion of the unhoused population on Google Maps.

We collected data through semi-structured interviews on March 14, 2023, between 2:45pm and 4:40pm. Because research ethics protocols prohibited us from speaking to unhoused people themselves, we instead interviewed nine retail workers who had interacted with the unhoused population during their shifts in the PATH. Initially, our interview protocol focused on physical design elements of the PATH and how they affected work experience – for example, what it was like to spend eight

hours in a space without windows. However, upon realizing that natural light was not important to any of the employees we spoke to, we followed Jacob & Furgerson's (2015) advice to "make "on the spot" revisions to [our] interview protocol", pivoting to ask about a subject employee *did* care a lot about – the social connections they formed with their customers. We recorded the interviews, created transcripts of the answers that most closely addressed our research question, and coded the data under the themes of "Fear of unhoused people", "Community with customers," "Desire to help," and "Perceived deterrents to the unhoused population."

Reflection on Methods

Being unable to speak to the unhoused community was a major drawback, but it was for the best. In "Ethics, Reflexivity and Research: Encounters with Homeless People," Cloke et al. (2010) describe having guilty emotional responses to conducting research on unhoused people. These feelings stemmed from the fact that only they as researchers stood to gain from their interviews – in spite of their labour answering questions, their interviewees would not benefit from the study's success. In our case, this is all the truer – unlike Cloke et al.'s research, our paper, being undergraduate coursework, stands an incredibly limited chance of affecting actual policy. Still, our perception and analysis of the experiences of unhoused people was undermined by the fact that no one involved in our data collection, whether ourselves as researchers or retail workers as interviewees, had lived experience of homelessness.

Sometimes, however, our positionality also proved an asset during interviews. The fact that we are both university students, and Cameron is of Indian descent, allowed us to form instant connections with retail workers who were university students themselves and often hailed from India. Often, bonding over the shared culture or shared academic struggles was the "Moment of Connection" Isabel Wilkerson described in "Accelerated Intimacy" (2017).

Results

The physical elements literature identified as deterring unhoused people from staying in POPOS internationally had the same effect in the PATH. Through reviewing our map, we found that an overwhelming proportion of unhoused people frequented sections of the PATH with little or no security presence. Areas with a heavier security presence, including those with many suitable places to sleep – for example, the Scotia Plaza lobby – were completely free of unhoused people. The deterrent effect of security guards was confirmed by our interviews. One employee we talked to worked in a shop positioned directly across from a bench unhoused people often slept or sat on. She told us how a security guard would often lean on the pole adjacent to the bench, causing unhoused people using it to leave.

Similarly, many of the social barriers typically present in POPOS were prevalent in the PATH. Especially pervasive was the indirect exclusion of unhoused people through unaffordability. The sections of the PATH with the largest unhoused populations on our map were the sections with the lower-end stores and cheaper restaurants. While this can partially be attributed to the fact landlords whose tenants are less wealthy have less to spend on security, even dingier spaces with security guards had more unhoused people sleeping in them than better maintained sections with the same number of guards. A retail worker at a quick-service restaurant in a more expensive section of the PATH pinned the lack of unhoused people near her storefront to affordability. “[unhoused people] usually don’t come into the store... the salads here are like \$15 to \$18 dollars in range.”

However, we found that there existed social bonds between retail employees in the PATH and unhoused residents. In our interviews, one worker described being curious about an unhoused person’s background and starting a conversation with them on his way to work. Another worker described how her colleagues would box up food their restaurant did not serve and give it to unhoused people on their way home from work.

Analysis

The physical environment of the PATH is hostile toward unhoused people. The presence of security guards and highly visible security cameras correlated to an absence of unhoused people that was apparent to both us as researchers and retail workers as users of the space. Even while the PATH lacks more obvious features of hostile architecture (i.e., spikes, armrests on benches), its design functionally serves the same purpose – to keep unhoused people out. If anything, the subtlety of the PATH’s anti-homeless measures made them even more pernicious: whereas obvious hostile architecture is easily spotted and criticized, measures like extensive security presence and highly visible cameras are only apparent to people who use and think about the space regularly.

The PATH’s prioritization of the wealthy to the detriment of the unhoused can also be seen in the highly commercialized nature of the space. Because of businesses’ staggering prices, both accessing a significant physical portion of the PATH and the resources necessary to live fully within it (i.e., food, clothing) is cost-prohibitive to low-income people. Consequently, not only is subsisting in the PATH more difficult, but people who cannot afford to do so are given the impression they do not belong, itself a deterrent to use.

The PATH’s physical design and social environment both serve their purpose. They deter unhoused people from sleeping in all but the least commercial and well-maintained sections of the PATH and make living elsewhere within it challenging.

However, there is a beacon of hope. Retail employees are clearly interested in getting to know the people they regularly interact with. While they may hold some biases against unhoused people (i.e. a shopkeeper who described them as smelling too badly to be approached), examples like the employee who boxed up unsold meals demonstrate that there is a potential for social connections between retail employees and unhoused people to deepen – perhaps a reflection of the fact that employees' economic circumstances are much more similar to unhoused people than the corporate workers they serve. Forming meaningful, stable relationships is both good for quality of life in general and a potential path out of homelessness for the people who experience it. (Mabhala et al. 2017)

Conclusion

In penthouses and rooftop bars, Toronto's wealthy live at the top of the city. The PATH provides shelter for their brief forays underground – before they ascend back up lustrous elevators to work meetings and office jobs, they are shielded from the cold by the light of retail signs and designer brands. There – even while they exist at the same physical altitude – they and the unhoused people whose need for the PATH's warmth exist kilometers apart. The wealthy can afford to buy \$16 salads at the quick-service restaurants; the unhoused cannot get through the door. The wealthy have vast, cushioned sofas to sleep or take meetings on; the presence of the unhoused on them sends a security guard scuttling after them. We wrote in our Mapping & Alternative Cartography essay that if one wants to see inequality in the city, they should go underground. We have witnessed massive inequality. Yet the PATH is not just a story of oppression – of an unfair dystopia hidden beneath sidewalk concrete. Look even deeper than the tiled floors and the dazzling lights. As office workers in fancy suits pass by, talking on AirPods or sipping Trentas, retail workers chat with unhoused people on the way to work. Chefs box up meals to feed people sleeping on the subway. Looking down from their office windows, the wealthy may not see what the PATH can truly be. But between the people who clean up after investors and managers have a home, and the people who have no home to go to, a community is beginning to form. Perhaps, ergo, the underground might become a place of movement – from the depths below downtown to up the economic ladder.

Map

Our map can be viewed at <https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1-IRjCNA-6Xcwk5QrDdFz51acrWWKZTU&usp=sharing>.

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