

Displaced and Disadvantaged: Capitalism and the Homeless in Trinity Square Park

Introduction

Trinity Square Park is a city-owned park located in the heart of downtown Toronto, bounded by Dundas Street West to the north, the Eaton Centre to the east, Albert Street to the south, and Bay Street to the west. Over the years, this park has been transformed from a place where people could gather and engage in recreational activities to a space that has become increasingly unwelcoming to marginalized communities, particularly the homeless. This transformation can be attributed to the marginalization of homeless people and the prioritization of commercial development in the city. In a capitalist society, where profit is the driving force, the needs and concerns of marginalized communities are often overlooked. The power imbalance between the homeless people at Trinity Square Park and the various actors in the nearby buildings, such as shoppers, developers, and the employees of Eaton Centre, Marriott Hotel, and Bell Trinity Square Building, is a clear manifestation of the marginalization of vulnerable populations in a capitalist society, where economic interests and profit often take precedence over the well-being of marginalized communities. This being the case, the research question we pose in this study is: How does the marginalization of homeless people manifest in the transformation of Trinity Square Park?

Trinity Square Park has become increasingly hostile and inaccessible to homeless people. Through preliminary observations, mapping and cartography, images and soundscapes, interviews and codes, and drawing on the insights of scholars, this study aims to explore how the marginalization of homeless people manifests in the transformation of Trinity Square Park, revealing the power imbalances and economic interests that prioritize commercial development over the needs of the local community, while also examining the social implications of these transformations.

Background/Literature Review

The foundation of our study will be rooted in *The Sociological Imagination* of C. Wright Mills (1959), which emphasizes the connection between personal experiences and broader social structures. Using this framework, we aim to examine how the marginalization of homeless people in Trinity Square Park is not just an individual issue, but a result of larger social and economic structures. Mills (1959) distinguishes between troubles, which are individual matters, and issues, which are widespread within a society. He gives the example of a single unemployed man in a city as a trouble and millions of unemployed men in a nation as an issue. In the years leading up to the COVID-

19 pandemic, communities across Canada and the United States had been struggling with increasing rates of homelessness and a lack of proper services for addictions and mental illness (Frankling, 2022). This continent-wide lens paints homelessness as an issue.

Boya started engaging in volunteer work with the homeless community, including at Trinity Square Park, before the start of this study (see Appendix). This volunteer work allows us to build trust and rapport with the community, which is essential for conducting ethical research. The work is informed by the ethical considerations raised in Mario Small's "De-Exoticizing Ghetto Poverty" (2015), which emphasized the importance of treating research participants with respect and avoiding the use of sympathy, which can create distance between the researcher and the community being studied. Instead, Small (2015) advocates for empathy, which involves a deeper level of understanding and connection with the participants. Boya has on several instances over the years come very close to experiencing street homelessness herself and empathizes with this population. Our interviewee Mario Greco, who volunteers for the homeless, has always been securely housed, and his current involvement in homelessness activism began in October 2022. For him, building from a sympathetic connection into an empathetic connection is always a work in progress. For example, while handing out clothing on a freezing night in December 2022, Mario and Boya encountered a homeless woman who was wearing leggings and asked for pants. There were no pants in the trolley used to carry clothing, and Boya was wearing two pairs of pants to keep warm, so she took one pair off and gave it to the woman. Mario suggested to Boya that she did not have to do that. Boya, who has been forced to consider sleeping outdoors during the coldest nights of winter and has experienced frostbite related to a near-homelessness situation, understood the dangers of being under clothed and how people have lost their lives trying to obtain clothing. From 2015 to January 2019, at least 8 people died in clothing donation bins in Canada, a result of homeless people "turn[ing] to the bins for clothing items or shelter without being aware of how dangerous they can be" (McQuigge, 2019).

Before the city conducted mass encampment clear-outs, Trinity Square Park was one of the few places where unhoused people were not regularly patrolled (Frankling, 2022). Pre-pandemic, 40 people a day used the drop in service at the Church of the Holy Trinity, located in the square (Cook & Crowe, 2022). When the pandemic hit in March 2020, drop-in centres, respite services, and shelters across Toronto ceased their operations (Frankling, 2022). That month, the church set up a hot meal service called Unity Kitchen, which at its peak served over 300 people a day (Cook & Crowe, 2022). By the end of 2020, Trinity Square had become the site of a sizable tent encampment (Frankling, 2022). The church encouraged people living there to stay until they could find other accommodations, to the opposition of nearby business owners and the City of

Toronto (Frankling, 2022). The church also provides clothes, hygiene supplies, and naloxone kits. As the pandemic subsided, by December 2022 the encampment had dwindled down to a single tent, and the volume of people being fed had decreased to around 150 per day (Frankling, 2022).

Methodology

We began our study by conducting initial observations and assessments of Trinity Square Park to gather preliminary data. This involved spending time to observe and document participants, the physical layout, signage, and overall atmosphere of the park. We applied a relativist epistemological orientation, as defined by Yin (2018), which acknowledges multiple realities and findings that are observer dependent. Boya visited the park around 5pm on Saturday, January 28, 2023. Based on what each participant looked like and what belongings they had, she could obviously classify them as either shoppers or homeless. Aneesa visited the park at around 12:30pm on Tuesday, January 31, 2023 and noticed similar observations, although as a new visitor to the park it was not obvious to her who was homeless or not.

A few weeks later, we created a map of Trinity Square Park to gain a better understanding of the spatial dynamics and attitudes towards homeless individuals in the park. We identified and categorized the signage in the park into different categories: welcoming signs (coloured) and unwelcoming signs (black and white), to analyze the visual cues in the park. This is an example of critical cartography, defined by Kim (2015) as a form of mapmaking that brings up issues of power. Historically, maps “served the interests of the powerful” (Kim, 2015), and our map subverts this convention by centering on a theme of hostility versus welcomeness toward homeless people.

Next, we conducted a visual and soundscape analysis of Trinity Square Park. This involved documenting the presence of substance use litter and material objects in the park that contributed to noise and visual aesthetics. In a photo essay that paints a picture of the users of an urban space, Vergara (2018) photographs East 125th Street at Lexington Avenue in New York City. This intersection has a history related to drug use: Lou Reed sang about buying heroin there in 1967, people catch a bus there to go to a drug treatment centre, and there is a methadone clinic nearby (Vergara, 2018). Trinity Square Park is also intricately linked to drug use, as there is a supervised consumption service nearby, and photos with a clear relation to substance use were chosen as there were various types of harm reduction gear either disposed of or dropped on the ground. Poon (2015) describes the sounds coming from a commercial hub on a street in Ghana. This is similar to our site in that some of the sounds we recorded come from another commercial hub, the Eaton Centre. The similarities, however, end there. Instead of an open-air market in a warm climate where conversations between sellers and customers can be heard, we have a temperature controlled indoor space in the dead of winter,

where a heater at the entrance of the mall is a source of noise that drowns out most conversations.

Lastly, we conducted interviews with key stakeholders, including the designer of the park, Michael Presutti, and a volunteer who distributes supplies to the homeless, Mario Greco. Presutti's interview provided insights into the history, design intent, and perceptions of the park, and helped us understand how the park has evolved over time. Mario's interview provided insights on the descriptions of homeless people, food and clothing items that he and other volunteers give out, the homelessness issue at Trinity Square Park and in other locations in the city, encampments and the city's efforts to ban them, opinions from and regarding political candidates and figures, potential solutions to homelessness, the prevalence of substance use disorders in the homeless population, and services provided by religious organizations to help the homeless. We coded the interview data to analyze it. Presutti's interview was coded for materials used to build areas surrounding the site, designing public spaces while addressing safety concerns, and the role of community input in new development. Mario's interview was coded for food and clothing items he gave out and other charities that engage in supply distribution.

Reflection on Methods

Boya's positionality as a cisgender woman made her instinctively know the significance of a menstrual product wrapper on the ground. It was evidence that some unhoused people frequenting the park are young women (or other people who menstruate) and have less access to washroom facilities to dispose of their hygiene products. As a survivor of hidden homelessness and a renter who has lost her housing on short notice it is through pure luck and the kindness of friends that she has managed to avoid street homelessness herself. Her positionality as someone who has been close to people with substance use disorder made her recognize evidence of drug use in the park.

Aneeza's positionality as someone who has lived with her parents all her life and as a resident of Scarborough who is not regularly exposed to homelessness presents some limitations in this study. These factors have influenced her perception and understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by homeless individuals in downtown Toronto. Living with her parents all her life has provided Aneeza with a sense of security and stability, which makes it difficult for her to fully comprehend the challenges faced by those who are homeless. As a resident of Scarborough, she does not have frequent exposure to the homeless population in downtown Toronto, which also limits her knowledge of their experiences and struggles.

The limitation of this project, as we could not interview vulnerable groups, was that we were not able to gather first-hand information from someone who has

experienced homelessness. Both of our interview subjects were educated degree holders and of higher socioeconomic status. As university students, we also faced some limitations in terms of time and resources. Balancing our coursework and research was challenging, and we had limited access to research materials, funding, or other resources that would have allowed us to conduct a more comprehensive study.

Results/Data

The data from our map shows that Trinity Square Park has different types of signs and items that directly or indirectly affect the homeless population present there. It is evident that some of these signs create a welcoming environment for homeless people while a good amount is restrictive toward them. Social service signage and activism art (shown as coloured below) demonstrate positive attitudes toward homeless people, while capitalist and social control signage (shown as black and white below) demonstrates negative attitudes toward them. An example of a social service sign on the map is one that displays crisis help phone numbers, while an example of a social control sign is a "no camping" sign.

Our visual and soundscape analysis both present items that provide some form of comfort to the two main user groups of the park: homeless people and shoppers. Homeless people are left out in the elements and have to bear however cold the weather gets, often using drugs to numb their sensations, and there is evidence of this in the litter on the ground. Meanwhile, the mall invests in temperature control equipment to draw in shoppers and keep them comfortable whatever the weather is like outside, which generates aural evidence in the form of noise from a heating fan and ventilation systems.

During our interview with volunteer Mario Greco, we found that facilities in and around the park provide products that are considered essential to people who are homeless and/or have a substance use disorder. Religious organizations and individuals provide food and clothing. This is evident when Greco says, "Sometimes at that church, they offer food and clothing from the actual church. Homeless people can go there to pick up clothing to keep warm in the winter and some food offered for free. They even have trucks that offer food as well. There was a Jewish religious cart [Ve'ahavta] that offers food for people, so they tend to deliver them [to Trinity Square]."

During our interview with Michael Presutti, the designer of Trinity Square Park, it was revealed that the history of how the park was designed suggests that it was friendly towards the homeless population. Presutti explained that after the park was designed in 2004, they received positive feedback from the homeless people who utilized the park as a place to rest, socialize, and engage in other activities. Presutti emphasized that the park's design, namely the labyrinth maze, incorporated elements that made it welcoming and safe for everyone, including the homeless population. This is evident when Presutti

says, "I think it was well received with some of the homeless individuals that frequented the space. They [...] liked it, because all of a sudden, it kind of gives the space a little bit of purpose."

It is important to mention that while searching for someone to interview, we encountered challenges when attempting to interview the property manager at the Eaton Centre. Instead of being directly connected to the property manager, we were transferred to multiple departments, such as security and guest services, and ultimately directed to email the marketing team for further inquiry where we got no response.

Analysis

The presence of homeless individuals in Trinity Square Park has led to a clear opposition between different actors in the community. This has been a decades-long battle, with architect Michael Presutti being aware of homelessness issues around the park since before he designed the park in 2004. While religious organizations and private individuals such as Mario have shown compassion towards the homeless by providing them with donated clothes and food, the City of Toronto and nearby business owners have taken a different approach by opposing the presence of the homeless encampment that developed in the park in 2020. The city has since spent thousands of dollars to put up "no camping" signs in various public spaces, including Trinity Square Park. The fact that homelessness is so widespread in the city that hundreds of signs were posted to tell them they are not welcome in public spaces points to homelessness being a societal issue, not an individual trouble, as defined by Miller (1959). This conflict between different actors in the community highlights a stark dichotomy in attitudes towards homeless individuals, with charity organizations and private citizens displaying more compassionate care while the city and business owners take a more adversarial approach. This raises questions about the role of governments and businesses in supporting vulnerable populations, and whether their actions are driven by compassion or profit.

Drawing from our map, the spatial distribution of the signs and items demonstrate how the marginalization of homeless people in Trinity Square Park may be linked to the capitalist interests and values of actors in nearby buildings such as Eaton Centre, Marriott Hotel, and Bell Trinity Square Building. The presence of capitalist signage and items in nearby buildings creates a hostile environment for homeless people, as these signs prioritize commercial interests over the well-being of marginalized communities. For example, signs that prohibit loitering, panhandling, or sleeping in the park reflect a capitalist mentality that values profit and commerce over the basic needs of homeless individuals for shelter and rest. On the other hand, social service signage and activism art in the park and the church show a more positive attitude towards homeless

individuals, indicating that the provision of basic social services and activism can help counteract the negative effects of capitalism.

Our visual and soundscape analysis further reinforces the idea that nearby businesses, such as the mall, prioritize attracting and catering to shoppers over providing resources for the homeless population. The investment in temperature control equipment and other amenities for shoppers generates noise pollution in the form of heating fans, which can further marginalize homeless people who may find it difficult to rest or sleep in the park. This underscores how capitalist values and interests can create unequal access to resources and comfort in public spaces, ultimately affecting the well-being and quality of life of different user groups.

Lastly, our unsuccessful attempt to interview the property manager at Eaton Centre can be seen as a reflection of the effects of capitalism on how institutions and businesses handle social issues. In a capitalist system, profit and commercial interests often take precedence over social issues, such as homelessness. The Eaton Centre, as a commercial entity, prioritizes its marketing and public relations efforts to protect its brand image and maintain positive relationships with its customers and stakeholders. This can result in a lack of direct access to decision-makers and a redirection of inquiries to different departments, creating barriers to obtaining information and insights on the homelessness issue.

Conclusion

Based on our research, we have found that the marginalization of homeless people has resulted in the transformation of Trinity Square Park into a space that is increasingly unwelcoming to marginalized communities. This transformation can be attributed to the prioritization of commercial development and profit over the needs and well-being of the local community. The power imbalance between homeless individuals and nearby actors, such as shoppers and developers, is a clear manifestation of the marginalization of vulnerable populations in a capitalist society.

It is important to recognize that this opposition and conflict can have real-world consequences for the homeless individuals living in Trinity Square Park. The sociological imagination allows us to see that individual experiences and behaviours are shaped by larger societal forces, and that solutions to societal issues such as homelessness require a holistic understanding of the larger social and historical context. By understanding the different attitudes and approaches towards homeless individuals in the park, we can begin to explore ways to address these issues and promote a more compassionate and equitable society. We try to understand the conditions of homeless people as we would our own, an example of empathy as demonstrated by Small (2015).



Mario making sandwiches to hand out to homeless people.



Boya with several housing advocates (Isabella Gamk, Phillip D'Cruze, Pierre Therrien, Kevin Clarke, Adam Golding, and Miguel Avila-Velarde) at the Toronto Homeless Memorial in Trinity Square.



Mario and Boya outside Seaton House, a homeless shelter on George Street, a short walk from Trinity Square.

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