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Art and Neighbourhood Change Beyond the City Centre

Theresa E. Enright
Department of Political Science
University of Toronto

Christina McIntyre
Independent Researcher

Abstract

In critical urban research, artists are typically seen as drivers of central city gentrification and public arts as depoliticized tools of the creative city agenda. This paper takes Toronto's Main Square as a case study, first, to delineate the multiple ways that community arts can influence social change beyond gentrification, and second, to identify suburban space as an important site of cultural and creative policy articulation. We claim that the unique non-central location of Main Square appears as a significant factor shaping the trajectory of transformation and delimiting the political potential of arts in engendering public values and in addressing spatial injustice. We claim that rather than following the script of neoliberal creative city policies, community based public art can work within and against a market-driven logic of cultural programming to pose new opportunities for public space and public life.

Keywords: gentrification, public art, urban regeneration, suburbs

Résumé

Dans la recherche urbaine critique, les artistes sont généralement considérés comme moteur de l'embourgeoisement de centre-ville et les arts publics sont perçus comme des outils dépolitisés du programme des villes créatives. Dans cet article, nous analysons les transformations de *Main Square* à Toronto pour illustrer les multiples façons dont l'art communautaire peut influencer des changements sociaux au-delà de l'embourgeoisement. De plus, nous identifions l'espace de banlieue comme un lieu important pour la formulation de politiques culturelles et créatives. Nous affirmons que l'emplacement unique et non-central de *Main Square* apparaît comme un facteur déterminant de la production de l'espace public et qui délimite le potentiel politique des arts pour lutter contre l'injustice spatiale. Nous affirmons que l'art public communautaire n'est pas simplement un outil commercialisé, mais ce dernier peut créer de nouvelles opportunités pour l'espace public et la vie publique.

Mots clés: embourgeoisement, art public, régénération urbaine, banlieue

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Art and Neighbourhood Change Beyond the City Centre

On a typical Saturday afternoon, the public plaza of Main Square in Toronto's East end sits relatively unoccupied. There is no purpose-built seating in the square and while it is bordered on three sides by concrete retaining walls, these are perennially covered in pigeon feces and are unwelcoming options for resting or lingering. The ground of the square is uneven causing passing strollers, mobility devices, and grocery carts to catch on the surface as pedestrians cut diagonally across the site. There is frequent and visible drug use in the alcoves of the abandoned storefronts that have sat empty for nearly a decade. Residents claim that after the property management gutted all the other communal areas in the apartment complex, they simply "left the square to rot." Described by local residents as "dead space," "empty space," and "totally underused," the square appears an unlikely civic gathering place. [Figure 1]



Yet this privately owned public space (POPS) owned by the Talisker Corporation and managed by Realstar is not completely desolate. Residents and passersby do adapt and use the square on a daily basis, despite the apparent bleakness of the environment. In the words of one neighbour, "it probably doesn't look like a really nice space...but on a warm summer's night the place is buzzing...this is their outdoor space, their front yard." (author's interview). The plaza has clear and undeniable potential as an open space, not only to the approximately two thousand residents who live in the surrounding Main Square towers, but to the diversity of residents and commuters from nearby communities. Well beyond Toronto's downtown, at the crossroads of Main Street and Danforth Avenue, the square is located in one of the densest, most walkable, and relatively affordable neighbourhoods in the city.¹ It is conveniently situated next to the Danforth GO and Main Street TTC stations, and is at the centre of a prospective transit Gateway Hub as outlined in regional growth schemes (Metrolinx 2015).

For nine days, from August 26 to September 3, 2017, the square was transformed in a direct effort to actualize future possibilities of the space and to amplify existing forms of vibrant common life. The “*Main Squared*” arts and community festival aimed to animate the space of the Main Square plaza and to revitalize the East Danforth community of which it is part. Festival organizers drew on democratic ideas of historic “public squares” to invite “residents, community members, and the general public to reimagine the square as a space for social engagement, discourse and civic activism” (Main Squared 2017). Through envisioning and enacting new social and spatial configurations, the arts festival sought to assert the public nature of the space, positioning festival-goers as equal co-creators of a revitalized shared world (Iveson 2011; Low and Smith 2006). While turnout at the festival was uneven, those who participated described a vibrant set of activities, workshops, and performances that brought together typically isolated individuals and groups as part of a fun-filled collective experience. Yet amidst the celebrations of the festival, there were lingering fears not only about the obstacles to revitalizing civic life, but also about how if the positive effects of animation were too successful, they may be lost to current residents (author’s interview). Faced with rising development pressures (for example, there are at least four new condominium developments within a one km radius of Main Square, including a thirty-story building proposed directly across the street) improvements to the square and to the quality of life of the neighbourhood, could paradoxically destroy the very conditions of possibility for diverse democratic encounters. Successful local placemaking could also result in transformations to the retail and residential offerings around Main Square that would render Main-Danforth more homogenous, exclusive, and private. There is a conflict, in other words, between creative initiatives such as *Main Squared* that are intended to promote positive neighbourhood development through the arts and the fact that the arts are a contributing factor in gentrification and displacement.

In this paper, we examine the contemporary transformations of Main Square with a focus on how community based art projects change the meaning and function of public space. We ask how these dynamics are situated in cultural political economy of place, and what difference it makes for arts activities to be situated beyond the city center. The article explores the contradictory politics of arts practices within urban regeneration initiatives. Rather than view artists as drivers or victims of gentrification, however, it demonstrates how colloquial creative practices may thrive on the urban edge without becoming ‘edgy’ and therefore commodified. In this analysis, the unique non-central location of Main Square emerges as a significant factor shaping the trajectory of transformation and delimiting the political potential of arts in engendering public values and in addressing spatial injustice. We claim that rather than following the script of neoliberal creative city policies, *Main Squared* works within and against a market-driven logic of cultural programming to pose new opportunities—and also new challenges—to neighbourhood and community development.

This research is based a qualitative examination of the role of arts and arts programming in the public spaces beyond Toronto’s city center. The analysis draws on 1) media reports about Main Square and the East Danforth; 2) planning documents of the City of Toronto and of private developers; 2) ten semiformal and informal interviews conducted in the fall of 2017 with arts workers, community members, and local business owners; 4) participant observation at the *Main Squared* festival, at community arts and planning consultations, and at the Main Square site throughout 2017. We use these various approaches to trace how creative city policies are encoded and enacted by different actors, as well as how the space of Main Square is being used, understood, and transformed. Through discursive and ethnographic lenses, we interpret how the arts are involved in the spatial and social development of public space. This paper takes Main Square as a case study, first, to delineate how community arts can influence social change beyond gentrification, and second, to identify non-central urban space as an important site of cultural and creative policy articulation. While this single study is admittedly limited, a focus on the specific dynamics of Main Square is used to add both empirical breadth and theoretical nuance to existing understandings of arts-led public space- and placemaking.

In what follows, we begin by outlining the literature on arts-led neighbourhood change and contemporary cultural programming. This is followed by a brief sketch of how these processes in Toronto are being suburbanized. Focusing on the *Main Squared* festival, we then analyze the impacts of the project on the locality, landscape, economy, culture of the Main-Danforth community. We conclude with more general reflections on art and neighbourhood change beyond the city centre.

Arts, Gentrification, and Public Space

Given the central place of creativity and culture in contemporary systems of accumulation, artists and cultural producers are frequently at the forefront of debates over urbanization and neighbourhood change. In theories of gentrification in particular, artists are viewed with ambivalence. The arts and artists are key forces of gentrification, instigating successive waves of displacement from central city neighbourhoods (Zukin 1982), yet they are also frequently among the first victims of embourgeoisement (Ley 2003). Indeed, in both cultural and economic strands of gentrification theory, artists play a crucial role. In more agential analyses, artists are drawn to inexpensive and “edgy” working class areas of the city where they can benefit from a countercultural identity and lifestyle and access to relatively inexpensive live-work studio spaces. Once there, they serve as pioneers of transformation, turning alternative spaces into hip up-and-coming neighbourhoods through a “cultural mode of production” (Zukin 1982; 1987). Attracted to the cultural cache and the local amenities created by artist communities, new waves of residents including middle class professionals then move in; and with them, rising rents, new investments, and changes to the retail and commercial landscape to accommodate new tastes and incomes. In more structural accounts, it is disinvested land in the urban core—a rent gap between current and optimal market uses (Smith 1979)—that fundamentally attracts investment. Yet artists here remain important in the processes of gentrification insofar as they provide the initial resources and labour to transform cultural capital into economic capital through the aesthetic valorization of the urban fabric (Ley 2003).

In both these narratives, arts and culture are drivers of accumulation and urban regeneration in advanced service economies. They are key forces, in other words, in the remaking of central city areas for more affluent (often whiter) residents (Slater 2006; Smith 2002). And in both these stories, art tragically suffers by the forced displacement and relocation of artists and through the commodification of art and loss of locational authenticity as developers and market actors increasingly appropriate cultural production (Zukin 1982).

Supporting these general findings, since the 1980s, a sizable literature has emerged that associates the arts and artists with the negative consequences of downtown urban regeneration (Deutsche and Ryan 1984; Ley 1986, 2003; Matthews 2010; Zukin 1982). While some admit that gentrification can have positive impacts on the built form and see artists as valuable contributors to community development, artists are also structurally implicated in the forced displacement of residents and businesses when their work is tied to a system of production that appropriates culture and channels collective surplus into private property in land and real estate (Newman and Wyly 2006; Smith 1979; Zukin 1982, 2009). Notably, these processes are not random, but cultural planning and policy plays a direct role in guiding the distribution of arts and therefore in sparking uneven patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Cameron and Coafee 2005).

Public art commissions and public space renewal are both essential tactics of arts-led placemaking that cater to a typically white middle class. Rosalyn Deutsche (1996), for example, has compellingly argued that public and participatory art is a weapon of revanchist urban planning used to assault low income people of colour.² Not only is gentrification abetted by the artistic process of renewal, but public art frequently uses poverty and homelessness as a trope to be represented for aesthetic pleasure (Deutsche and Ryan 1984). Hence through practices ostensibly aimed at revitalizing civic life and including citizens in the processes of spatial change, democracy suffers as physical and symbolic “evictions” from the public sphere reproduce an exclusive model of political belonging (Deutsche 2006).

Even the forms of public and participatory art justified according to social rationales have been implicated in private urban redevelopments and racialized and class exclusions (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Whereas socially oriented forms of public art aim to create new collective subjects either through disrupting everyday life practices, or involving diverse participants in creative practices (Bishop 2006), these frequently fall short of engendering a democratic society or addressing the systemic features of capitalist urbanization. Patricia Phillips (1998), for example, has argued that although public art seems open and inclusive, it has failed to intervene critically in the processes of urban development or to create truly ‘public’ venues because the machineries of public art production—including their corporate patronage—mitigate against critical intervention. Deutsche (2006) too criticizes the “technocratic” advocacy of public art whereby the prevailing logic of community based art is reformist and envisioned as an inexpensive solution to poverty, crime, unemployment, and violence. Here public art acts to beautify space and assuage restive populations, but does so without fundamentally addressing class structures, production processes, or political practices that generate inequalities in the first place.

Arts-led urban renewal thus diminishes public space in several notable ways. Public art itself frequently reproduces discriminatory and essentialized notions of community and offers only depoliticized distractions from ongoing social and spatial injustices. Moreover, insofar as it is implicated in processes of gentrification, arts activities limit the public nature of ownership, access, and collective encounter. First, by emphasizing the primacy of private property relations, gentrification reduces the potential for the collective property in land and for non-profit land uses. Second, in upscaling the physical environment and pursuing high-yield elite spaces of exchange, gentrification fundamentally alters the character of a neighbourhood, frequently reducing who belongs in the space as well as the acceptable uses therein. Third, by changing the demographic composition of a neighbourhood, gentrification creates marked spatial inequalities and social polarization, and it thus fundamentally reduces the potential for meaningful encounter across differences and engagement among strangers.

Although the relationship between artists, gentrification, and reduced publicity is frequent, these changes are not inevitable. Indeed, a frequent justification for arts investments is the purported benefits of art for social, political, and community development (Hall and Robertson 2001). Many scholars and activists are optimistic that arts can spur positive neighbourhood improvements without gentrification and that creative place-based change can benefit existing residents without forced exclusions (Grodach 2011; Grodach et al, 2014; Markusen and Gadwa 2010). Markusen and Schrock (2006, 1661), for example, argue that through the “artistic dividend” value can be added to local economies and societies without being capitalized upon by external forces (see also Markusen and Gadwa 2010). Stern and Seifert (2010) claim that places with a diversity of arts offerings can foster change without neighbourhood turnover and upscaling, and Cameron and Coaffee (2005) demonstrate that in many places outside downtown cores, arts-led displacement is not extensive. There is also some evidence that different types of arts activities may be less prone to activating negative externalities, with public or community initiatives (as opposed to commercial arts), showing the weakest association with gentrification (Grodach et al. 2014). A number of qualitative studies have supported these claims, arguing that community-led public arts in non-central urban locations can be used to make claims about ownership of space, to assert ethnic identity, and to contest colonial histories (Chakrovarty and Hwee-Haw Chan 2016; McCarthy 2006; Minty 2006). In contrast to the seemingly inevitable script of arts-led displacement and the degradation of the public, this literature suggests a more nuanced account of the promises and limits of art in activating public space and public life.

Notwithstanding the slippery racial and economic logics of creative-led ‘progressive’ developments (Rankin and Mclean 2015), it is this insight that we explore. We ask whether non-central urban areas primarily focused on grassroots community arts can present a more positive story of neighbourhood change. In so doing, it is crucial to account not only for different types of arts activities, but also for what Loretta Lees calls a “geography of gentrification” (2000, 2012) that is attuned to the specificity of locality and urbanization dynamics. The not quite urban, not quite suburban spaces beyond the city center defy stereotypical assessments of city form and instead assemble a plural landscape of residents and uses. In looking at community-engaged public art in non-central spaces such as Main Square, we suggest not only that artistic practices and cultural policies are being decentred from downtown, but that these “hyperdiverse” (see Pitter and Lorinc 2016) spaces might provide a potential for practices that do not inevitably lead to social and political exclusions and to public arts’ tragic end.

This story of public space beyond the city center is somewhat counterintuitive. For while “life on the edge” is “the preferred social location of the artist” (Ley 2003, 2530), rarely do non-central urban areas appear in the literature on arts and gentrification. Indeed, not only are cultural producers disproportionately located in core urban areas but they frequently express a distaste for what they see as the banal lifeless texture of postwar North American suburbia (Bain 2010; Ley 2003).

Today, a small part of Toronto’s downtown remains the locus of arts producers, consumers, facilities, and organizations. The core concentrates venues for cultural activities such as museums, galleries, and performing arts centres, and it serves as an educational and information hub of the greater urban region. Activities taking place outside cores are frequently viewed as insignificant or poor quality (merely “community arts”), and few tourist brochures or media coverage feature non-central locations. This creates a clear hierarchy of artistic spaces and conditions of “cultural dependence” of the periphery on the core (Bain 2010, 70). Yet this landscape is changing.

Despite the fact that the majority of Canadian cultural workers are concentrated in urban locations (Bain 2010; Bunting and Mitchell, 2001; Ley 2003), many nevertheless live in surrounding communities as well (Bain

2013). Endogenous arts activities outside of the core are increasingly receiving critical recognition and suburban areas of Toronto are being included in landmark events (Parris 2017). Moreover, artists once located in the core are increasingly relocating to the suburbs out of necessity as real estate markets in Canada's largest cities spin out of control (Hracs 2010). Shattering the monocentric image of Toronto's artistic landscape, Mayor John Tory even claimed in 2016 that the East End of Toronto, including the Main-Danforth neighbourhood, now boasts the highest concentration of artist in the city.³ And while, Toronto's urban edges in general may lack the iconic 'grit' of neighbourhoods such as Parkdale and Regent Park, the varied neighbourhoods that comprise the non-central locations of the City of Toronto are hardly homogenous, uniform, and bourgeois (see Micallef 2016). As Alison Bain (2010) writes, "[t]he suburbs of Canadian cities are also uniquely textured with their own intensities, elasticities, and complexities" (74) that make them crucibles of creativity. The inner suburbs are "the new vernacular creative edge of city regions" (63). For many who we spoke to, it is in the vibrant areas beyond the city center where "the transformative power of the arts" thrives (East End Arts 2017).⁴

Building the Creative City-Region

Since 2003, the City of Toronto has pursued a conscious and coordinated creative city agenda. The *Culture Plan for the Creative City* (2003) first established a ten-year strategy to position the City as leading global hub of culture. The influential paradigm of the "creative" class and "creative" cities promoted by Richard Florida (2002) solidified the presumed links between culture and economic development and provided the discursive framework as well as the policy repertoires that encouraged the spread of arts-led urbanization. This vision included expanded cultural facilities, façade improvements, heritage preservation, community festivals, and investments in public art. However, it was best exemplified by the early 2000s 'super build' whereby Toronto instigated a broad process of beatification through megaprojects, building or renovating high profile cultural venues such as the Royal Ontario Museum, the Art Gallery of Ontario, The Canadian Opera House, and the Toronto International Film Festival Lightbox theatre. Building on this plan, in 2008, Mayor David Miller identified "Creative Toronto" as one of the four pillars of his agenda for urban prosperity. A 2008 *Creative City Planning Framework* (prepared for the City of Toronto by the urban consultant firm AuthentiCity) makes it clear that:

These are not philanthropic investments. They are investments in wealth creation. In advanced economies, the generation of new ideas and the translation/commercialization of these ideas into new products, services and experiences are the primary source of economic value and wealth creation. Building vibrant, authentic places is critical to attracting the best talent in the world. And investing in creativity and culture plays a major role in this vibrancy and authenticity, defining Toronto's image and identity globally. (Toronto 2008, 3)

Importantly, culture and creativity for the City of Toronto in the first decade of the twenty-first century were framed as economic issues through the simple formula "Culture + Place = Wealth" (Toronto 2008, 22).

The general critiques of creative city agendas—namely that the market-oriented and elite nature of creative city policies entrenches urban problems such as poverty, gentrification, social polarization, political fragmentation, and racialized exclusion (Gibson and Kong 2005; Evans 2009; McCann 2007; Mould 2015; Peck 2005)—have also been leveled at Toronto's early efforts at cultural programming and planning. Many, for example, have noted the failure of creative city initiatives to forge truly open and inclusive creative spaces, and demonstrated that discourses of participation, used to include low income residents in urban regeneration, have actually exacerbated inequality (Catungal and Leslie, 2009; McLean 2014; Mazer and Rankin 2011). Critics also claim that city boosters and business improvement associations use arts initiatives to emphasize depoliticized pleasures over critical discussions about poverty and displacement (McLean 2009; Mazer and Rankin 2011) resulting in a "spectacular commodification of difference" (Goonewardena and Kipfer 2005, 672). Through public art, diversity is curated in a way to appeal to the white middle class while hiding or entrenching racialized exclusions in space (see also McLean 2014). This has been particularly the case in Toronto's suburbs, where arts funding in the 2000s was intertwined with a "Community Safety Plan" to clean up 'dangerous' and 'problem' neighbourhoods (Kamau et al. 2016).

Breaking with earlier iterations of the creative city programme, however, the 2011 report, *Creative Capital Gains*, questioned both the downtown focus of creative investments and the prestige-oriented strategies of arts regeneration. Instead, it highlighted the uneven recognition of arts activities, the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities across the region, as well as the diversity of arts and cultural offerings necessary to promote generalized creativity. The report notes that “Toronto is a city of neighbourhoods and within each of them is a wealth of existing cultural activity that deserves to be highlighted and celebrated” (Creative Capital Advisory Council 2011 34). It continues, “We need to shine a spotlight on the community arts that make each neighbourhood a vibrant place to live; to identify existing networks of creative people, cultural organizations and facilities; to strengthen ties to culture-friendly businesses; to encourage novel partnerships and innovative models for participation in the arts.” *Creative Capital Gains* thus provided cultural programming with a more eccentric and eclectic orientation. More concretely, the report also directly led to the emergence of East End Arts, a Local Arts Service Organizations (LASO) funded by the City with a mandate to serve the unique communities and interests of Toronto’s East End (Wards 29, 30, 31, and 32). The report was also instrumental in initiating the Cultural Hotspot of the Year program which rotates through non-central quadrants of the city to highlight and promote non-central and non-elite arts activities.⁵ The outward movement of arts infrastructure and investments opens the suburbs to new rounds of potential urban development and it offers opportunities for cultural producers, artists, and ‘ordinary’ residents to engage in creative activities.⁶

What happens when arts-led placemaking moves into hyperdiverse non-central urban spaces? While contemporary arts practices in Toronto—including social practice, public, and participatory work—can feed into exclusionary policies, we are interested in how the 2011 policy change may enhance “opportunities for contestation” (McLean 2014, 2157). Artists are undoubtedly complicit in naturalizing colonial gentrification processes at multiple scales, but at the same time, they can also work within existing policy frameworks and funding models to make space for more critical activities and for interventions that challenge the competitive creative city agenda. These might include activities of reappropriation, transgression, or subversion (Mould 2015), but it is our contention that smaller scale community projects might more intentionally enable more public forms of city building to emerge. This may be particularly true as artists and arts policies suburbanize away from the hypercommodified urban core to the multiplex suburbs and the traditional script of revanchist, racist, and elite placemaking becomes harder to follow.

Main Square

Main Square is located at the southeast corner of Main Street and Danforth Avenue. Farther East even than what local newspapers describe as the “other Danforth” (Barmack 2007; Radwanski 2008), Main Square sits in a difficult to define marginal area of Toronto’s East end situated between the newly rebranded “the Danny” and the stigmatized inner suburbs of Scarborough. While the surrounding streetscape mainly consists of walkable strip retail with single apartments above, there are also more typically suburban features such as car dealerships, and just to the East, Canada’s first indoor shopping mall. The neighbourhood is extremely diverse ethnically and racially, and is visibly marked, for example, by Canadian Maritime, Bangladeshi, Middle Eastern, Ethiopian, Jamaican, Trinidadian, and Bengali restaurants and retail.⁷ The Main Square apartments represent high-density living, yet these are surrounded by both pre- and post-war single family bungalows, new townhouse subdivisions, other high-rise rental tower complexes, homeless shelters, and upscale under-construction midrise condos. The area defies easy categorization.

‘Main Square’ refers both in general to the 3.2 hectare property featuring a four-tower apartment complex, and more specifically to the concrete public square that borders the southeast corner of the Main-Danforth intersection. Built by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation in 1972 as a public-private partnership, Main Square was initially designed to be a progressive, diverse, mixed-income development, emblematic of the reform era of national social housing. The Square’s design included over thirty retail spaces, a community center, swimming pool, gymnasium, and daycare center. A 1971 marketing brochure advertised Main Square’s planning as driven by “communitcept,” a neologism for “community concept” design for people-centred and intentionally collective forms of living. The open plaza was the most obvious and prominent concretization of these values.

However, these lofty goals were largely abandoned as the management of Main Square underwent several changes. Most notably the Square was privatized in the late 1990s as part of a CMHC trend of selling off its

affordable housing portfolio and downloading housing to the provinces. When the Talisker Corporation bought the complex in 1998, they agreed to reserve a small number of units for subsidized housing (these are currently used on an ad-hoc basis by Toronto Community Housing Corporation) but otherwise they offer market rate rentals. Not only did the rhetoric of intentional community fall to the wayside in these changes, but the physical landscape is now a shell of its original design. Although management claims to have made many improvements to deteriorating buildings, many of the community spaces, retail offerings, and amenities in Main Square have long since been abandoned. At the site of the demolished community center and outdoor swimming pool is a large concrete hole that residents affectionately call ‘the pit.’ The aspirational design of Main Square as a community space has instead become a degraded and underused realm avoided by many residents. For those trying to transform this space, Talisker has been notoriously difficult to engage and the management company Realstar has been reluctant to participate in any efforts at animation.

In part, this hesitation is explainable by the fact that the plaza area is set to be demolished. As of 2006, Talisker Corporation has approval from the City of Toronto to build two new towers on the site, one of which will take the place of the public square. While the public square was initially understood to be an essential public benefit of the complex, this benefit was not secured for the long term. Unlike in the urban core, streetscapes and public spaces beyond the city center are not meant to endure. Under a Section 37 agreement of Toronto’s Planning Act that trades community benefits for increased density provisions, Talisker’s development proposal promises improved amenity spaces, a new daycare and new equipment to local community centres. Yet the open, accessible, visible, and street-facing town square itself will be destroyed.

Despite, or perhaps because of its liminal status, the plaza at Main Square has attracted the attention of residents, planners, and developers who see extreme potential in the site. While the square had been used, for example, by the local Danforth Village Business Improvement Association (BIA) for various movie nights and activities over the past few years, in 2017 attention to the square became more sharply focused. Officially, the City of Toronto Danforth Avenue Planning Study and the more specific Main-Danforth Planning Study are looking to the site in their efforts to reinvigorate the local streetscape. At the community level, the local *Beach Metro* newspaper featured several stories in 2017 about how the space could be better designed, including improving transit connections and public accessibility. In June, the Danforth Village Fair sponsored by the City and the local BIA hosted Brown + Storey Architects (involved in the infamous redesign of Yonge and Dundas square in downtown Toronto) to take part in a visioning exercise to see the site as a live work, play, study, economic hub. Later in the summer of 2017, as a signature project of the City of Toronto Cultural Hotspots initiative, East End Arts partnered with LabSpace Studios to host a ten-day, multidisciplinary public art festival, *Main Squared*.

While East End Arts had hosted a variety of events throughout East Toronto since its formation in 2014, *Main Squared*—which aimed to explore and animate the plaza—was their biggest and most ambitious initiative to date. The festival’s play on “main squared” represents amplifying the space in hopes of helping developers, planners, property managers, and residents recognize the square’s potential. It follows East End Arts’ (2014) mandate to “unite, inspire, and enhance the communities of east Toronto” and LabSpace’s (2017) emphasis on uncovering “intricate connections between people and places.” By engaging the East Danforth community with interactive art, activities, workshops, installations, performances, and co-created designs, the festival supported resident participation in public art, public space, and community life. In particular, the festival featured a dozen original artworks which addressed the overarching theme of the “public square” that would “[e]xamine, explore or challenge the notion of what a “public square” should or could be,” that would “[p]lay with or challenge the traditional uses/activities of public squares,” and that would “[e]xplore the potential of public squares as spaces for social engagement, discourse, and civic activism” (Main Squared 2017). As such, the creation, deliberation, and reflection on public space was at the heart of the arts festival.

Animating the Square, Transforming the Neighbourhood?

In order to assess the contributions of the festival to public space, both in the immediate transformation of the square and in the more long-term dynamics of change, we turn to the work of Hall and Robertson (2001) on public art and urban regeneration. They identify seven broad justifications claimed by arts advocates of neighbourhood contributions that provides a useful starting point for analyzing the role of the *Main Squared*

Festival in neighbourhood transformation: 1) developing a sense of community, 2) developing a sense of place, 3) developing civic identity, 4) addressing community needs, 5) tackling social exclusion, 6) educational value, and 7) promoting social change. While the authors are critical of these oft-circulated claims, citing “the lack of satisfactory evaluation of the claims of public art and of a rigorous critical apparatus” (Hall and Robertson, 18), our research nevertheless gives some indication of these—both in intention and in result [see Table 1]. Our study is not meant to offer definitive ‘proof’ of benefits to the community, nor does our approach claim to entirely circumvent some of the more intractable methodological difficulties of evaluating social change pointed out by Hall and Robertson. However, in our observation of the *Main Squared* festival and through our conversations with artists and participants, there were perceived impacts that were appreciable and therefore ‘real,’ even if they were not durable or causally verifiable.⁸

Nearly all of those we spoke to felt that the primary impact of the festival was in the ephemeral act of bringing people together across difference and in creating a space of collective encounter, creativity, and care (author’s interviews).⁹ The active and affective dimensions of the event were paramount. Against the fragmenting effects of contemporary urban living, the festival facilitated joyful, playful, happy, aleatory social engagements. Through gathering people in space, encouraging intersubjective encounter, and providing a venue for the collective elaboration of meaning, the festival forged and strengthened common social bonds. These communicative and emotional aspects of community building and public engagement were also evidenced by the emergence of more formal networks in the wake of the festival including the Danforth Village Community Association. [Figure 2]



These encounters were remarkably generative and inclusive. Unlike many other large-scale cultural and arts festivals in Toronto, the *Main Squared* festival was curated by artists who lived and worked in the neighbourhood. Although the call for artist participation was open, many of those chosen also lived nearby and

had prior connections to the Main Square site. Indeed, the curators were especially aware of the potential for colonizing engagements, and they were eager to have residents' aspirations guide the direction of the festival from the outset (author's interview). This was achieved through extensive community consultations, surveys, and workshops throughout the summer and various participatory practices prior to and during the festival. Rather than place restrictions on who the public of *Main Squared* was, this question was determined in practice. Several of the homeless individuals who frequent the square, for example, became friends with the organizers and helped to prepare and set up the various projects of the festival. Participants included long term and short term apartment dwellers, individuals and families from surrounding neighbourhoods, and interested commuters and passersby. There was representation from the area's older working class white population, from established immigrant communities, and from newcomers to the neighbourhood (both affluent professionals and low-income migrants).¹⁰ While self-representation and story-telling were essential elements of the festival's projects, there were no final or fixed definitions of who *the* community of Main Square was. Thus, articulations of the public were negotiated and iterative.

Similarly, the placemaking activities were experiential and ongoing. The festival did not feature a permanent high-profile public art installation, nor did it provide a single distinctive iconography to the site. The projects of the festival encouraged people to wander through the square at their own pace and to experience the square anew through the varied provocations and interventions. Participants claimed that this changed how they thought about the space (author's interviews). Through using and making the space anew, participants thus altered the material practices of property defining the space—transforming a privately-owned and managed site into something more communal. At the same time, the festival had an important external message. Artists told us that they felt it was important for the wider neighbourhood “to see stuff happening there” and noted that that the festival succeeded in “bringing awareness from the wider community who don't necessarily encounter that space on a daily basis though they might see it” (author's interviews). Removing spatial stigma, the festival forged new meanings about the place of the neighbourhood and city. Notably, participants claimed that rather than diminishing the importance of the festival, its peripheral location in the (east) East End gave it “more of an impact” and made its significance “that much more profound” (author's interview).

The festival did not have social justice or equity goals front and center and the artists did not necessarily frame their projects in terms of redistribution or advocacy. Yet the festival did temporarily address some urgent community needs and lessen the marginalization of certain residents. Free arts workshops held weekly on site throughout July provided cultural programming in an underserved community where many—especially low income and racialized—children do not participate in arts or sports activities (Toronto Child and Family Network 2013). Select workshops also specifically catered to helping alienated newcomers to Canada represent their connections to place. The installation “Block Party” provided modular street furniture which residents could move around the square, use at their will, and make their own. Although questions of poverty, racism, and colonialism were decidedly not front and center in these conversations, the participants did collectively create heterogeneous forms of community and place. The well-established Bangladeshi community was particularly visible in these efforts. There was also optimism from many involved that the excitement, energy and activism from the festival might translate into further voluntary community action and issue-specific public mobilizations.

The festival was not immune, though, to the problems and tensions typically associated with public art. The funding for the festival was restrictive, the participation at the event was uneven, and the ‘participatory’ aspirations of those involved were not fully met.¹² Residents also complained of being abandoned when the workshops and festival were over (author's interviews). Notable for our study, the potential of the festival to create an inclusive and equal public space in Main Square was also limited. The street furniture, for example, stayed in the square for almost three months, but was removed after the building manager complained that it was being used by homeless people. While the festival partnered with several Bangladeshi organizations, few other local racial or ethnic institutions took part. There were also no appreciable changes between participation at the festival and increased capacities of residents to determine their own realities, calling into question whether the festival achieved its goal of generating a “traditional public square” that would act as a common deliberative forum. While some residents and neighbours of Main Square realized their ability to imagine and experience new uses for the square, by and large, community members still did not feel empowered in the aftermath to participate in ongoing planning processes that would determine the future outcome of the square (author's in-

Public space contributions	Activities ¹¹	Noted effects
Developing a sense of community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Life Size Collage” • “Cross/Section” • “Main Stage Monologues” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brought together those who would otherwise not interact • Facilitated new communicative and tangible networks • Expressed history, needs, identity and aspirations of the various communities comprising the neighbourhood
Developing a sense of place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local history walk • “Life Size Collage” • “Lets All Meet Here!” • “Inverting Perspectives” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collective world-making through public encounter • Made site and residents widely visible • Represented a diversity of residents’ experiences of the place
Developing civic identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involvement of various community groups (e.g. businesses, cultural associations, arts organizations) • “Echo” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Led to the emergence of the Danforth Village Community Association • Generated dialogue amongst residents • Encouraged public speech
Addressing community needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Block Party” • Arts workshops for kids, adults, and families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided street furniture • Provided cultural programming
Tackling social exclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newcomer artist workshop “My Art, My New Land” • Bangladeshi dance performance • Financial support for the creation of a new mural at the Bangladeshi community center 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Made visible Bangladeshi and South Asian community • Involved marginalized populations including the homeless in the making and hosting of the festival
Educational value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arts workshops for kids adults, and families • Opportunity for cultural workers to meet with Toronto Arts Council staff • Affiliated educational workshops for children at Main Street Library 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networked artists and community members • Provided professional development for cultural workers • Provided children’s programming

Table 1: Public Art and Community Development through Main Squared

terview). Moreover, any racial and class conflicts between attendees (and importantly, those who did not attend) was made invisible through the emphasis on the square hosting pleasant encounters and through the neutered language of a consensual and “diverse” public sphere.

Finally, although the festival was “not meant to be permanent” the ephemerality of the project makes it difficult to judge any lasting durable effects on public space. Viewing the square over a year later, little has visibly changed in the public realm. Several of the projects do remain in and around the square, but these are difficult to see and are infrequently engaged. There was for many a sense of futility, that *Main Squared* was a “last hurrah” before the site “goes back to the pigeons” and before it inevitably will be demolished (author’s interviews). There are discussions to host a temporary storefront for East End Arts on the site and to repeat the festival on a yearly basis as long as the square remains, but these possibilities have not yet materialized. Without more fundamental changes in access, ownership, or activity, the temporary public features of the festival are not likely to endure.

If *Main Squared* was at least partially successful in producing new publics and inspiring civic life during the festival tenure, the question remains as to what extent the initiative might foster a broader ethic of publicity and inclusivity and provide further venues for active interaction between citizens. This concerns not only whether the animated public the festival achieved can be sustained and made durable, but also whether the social and spatial benefits created by the festival can be retained by their producers. For all the emphasis on the “public square” theme, little mention was made in the promotional materials for the festival or in the critical conversations therein as to how the event might be situated with a broader political economy of neighbourhood transformation. To what extent is the festival complicit the aesthetic valorization of neighbourhood in a way that engenders commodification and therefore a reduction in public space?

In terms of property relations, the festival raised the city-wide profile of arts in the community and of the neighbourhood. Whereas previous news stories, for example, were more likely to describe the neighbourhood as gritty and associated with prostitution, gun violence, and homelessness, stories about the festival emphasized the amenities of the neighbourhood, its unique charms, and its diverse composition. Sean Micallef (2017) writing in *The Toronto Star* proclaimed that the “Main Squared festival shows what a great apartment neighbourhood can be.” The proposed private developments around Main Square will undoubtedly intensify the neighbourhood in part building on the energy and dynamism of this depiction. Indeed, the “Canvas” condominiums just West of Main Street explicitly advertise the neighbourhood as creative and heterogeneous: “The area’s bustling eateries, eclectic retail, artsy galleries, fresh markets and night spots have seduced many of the city’s noted artists and performers to call Danforth Village home” (Marlin Spring 2017). In the absence of a strong BIA and cohesive local growth coalition to market the neighbourhood, cultural intermediaries—both community artists and real estate marketers—are leading the conversion of Main-Danforth from indefinable to something distinct. Stakeholders repeatedly mentioned that the area is “not yet” gentrified (author’s interview) or “not fully” gentrified (author’s interview) but nearly all saw this on the horizon as hype for the Main-Danforth neighbourhood builds.

In this process of gentrification, Main Square and the surrounding public realm are poised to become more exclusive. When the apartment block redevelops at an unknown time in the future, the units will remain rentals. This is aligned with the City’s planning priorities and is desperately needed in a time of a sustained housing crisis. However, unlike other high-rise buildings in the neighbourhood, Main Square has a reputation for extensive screening of new residents and will frequently reject applicants who cannot prove sustained employment for at least a year (thus turning away newcomers and precarious workers). The promised new units will be attractive in the Toronto market where rental vacancy rates are at their lowest in sixteen years (Mathieu 2017), and the selection process will be competitive. Undoubtedly, the influx of residents associated with the new units will fundamentally alter the character of the neighbourhood—presumably making it less accessible. The *Main Squared* festival is not a direct cause of these changes, but it did give new life to existing revitalization plans. Further, regardless of open and utopian imaginaries enacted by the festival, once the square is replaced by a new residential tower, the proposed public realm additions are not set to be street facing and will not attract foot traffic or commuters in, further limiting public entry. The community benefits assured by the city will not change this.

The festival’s long-term impact on the potential for public encounter and engagement at the site is more difficult to predict. Insofar as the festival was meant to bridge the divide between art and everyday life, it drew attention to the misleading characterization of artist-led gentrification as being driven by a discrete and elite self-proclaimed group of “Artists.” Following the City’s revised cultural programming, it also emphasized that

arts in spaces beyond the city center are not exceptional or rare (as is so often thought) but an everyday element of being with others. The grassroots nature of the *Main Squared* activities (made possible in part by their peripheral location) means they are not easily or fully capitalized upon; they exist in the living tissue of the community. While the site may indeed be gentrifying, the social bonds, affects, and information generated through *Main Squared* will continue to exceed the apparatuses of capitalist accumulation.

Conclusion

While there are clear limits to the use of public arts to address systemic inequities, our research has shown that arts can be a positive, if not an essential feature of neighbourhood vitality and civic activism. Our research demonstrated that insofar as it enabled diverse convivial encounters and produced a meeting place for residents, public art at Main Square engendered trust, belonging, and feelings of commonality. It enabled the expression of place-based and cultural identities and enabled forms of individual and collective representation necessary for effective public dialogue. Moreover, public art transformed Main Square into a more accessible, inviting, and inclusive place of free common use. Community-engaged arts can animate arenas for public encounter and deliberation—if only temporarily—and can have immediate and perhaps lasting effects on the composition and orientation of neighbourhoods. Moreover, we have argued that the unique non-central urban location of Main Square, while preventing it from being the target of priority large-scale arts investments, affords it more flexibility in terms of community engagement and may offer a distinct opening to kinds of convivial city building that are foreclosed in the core.

Nevertheless, the development pressures on this neighbourhood and community are real threats. Its position both as a transit hub, and as a dense, plural, and vibrant site suggest that the public space gains made by *Main Squared* may be short lived. Indeed, in this case the ‘positive’ aspects of community development and vitality celebrated at the festival have already been translated into marketized place-making and branding activities that are set to benefit private interests. As the neighbourhood at large becomes more expensive and elite, and as its character transforms, it is inevitable that public space and public life will suffer.

In the long run, it is unlikely that the Eastward tide of gentrification in Toronto will be stopped by arts. Yet neither are the arts inevitably driving this movement. The *Main Squared* festival reveals a much more complex and contradictory dynamic of arts practice and public space transformation. The Main Square site thus provides an interesting case study for thinking otherwise about the role of artists beyond victim or hero narratives and for thinking creativity, not as a commodity to be bought and sold in an urban marketplace, but as an essential feature of everyday life. It further suggests that spaces beyond the city center are essential to understanding arts and neighbourhood change.

The patterns identified at Main Square are in many ways singular. Yet the qualities of place that conditioned *Main Squared* and its aftermath—a hyperdiverse community, a mixed built form, ‘undervalued’ and ‘underutilized’ space, experimental cultural policy, and a thriving local creative sector—would suggest that similar dynamics might be at play in the diversified non-central areas of many cities across Canada and internationally. Indeed, paying attention to a wide variety of urban sites and urban arts practices can enrich our understandings of public space and of creative placemaking.

Notes

¹ Main and Danforth is located in the East End of Toronto. While it is formally part of the old City of Toronto, it is located well beyond the urban core in what was historically a transit-linked downtown extension.

² The racialized retrenchment of urban arts policy in central city areas has been well documented. However, it is unclear whether these patterns operate in the same way in suburban areas. While gentrification in the suburbs takes place in a context of racial hierarchies, the geography of these in a city like Toronto is complex. Our study suggests that more work is needed to understand both how “diversity” is framed in suburban arts projects as well as the racial and cultural content of arts-led transformation.

³ This claim could not be verified, nor could the content of Tory’s speech, but this story was mentioned by several of our interviewees.

⁴ The Leona Drive project (<http://www.leonadrive.ca/>) is another recent example of public art in Toronto that plays with the notion of urban/suburban space and how it is configured and represented.

- ⁵ The East York neighbourhood, including Main-Danforth, was the Cultural Hotspot in 2017.
- ⁶ This new interest in the colloquial suburbs is not only from policy-makers, but also emerges from artists who have been previously uncared for in the city's arts scene (or been pushed out of their downtown lofts and studios) and from arts organizations who are beginning to recognize the unique value and significance of peripheral spaces. Artscape, for example, a creative social enterprise and arts organization famous for redeveloping the Junction, Queen West, the Distillery District, and Liberty Village in downtown Toronto, announced in 2017 that its strategic plan for the next five years will be to invest in "mainstreaming creative placemaking" by targeting creative and cultural hubs beyond the city center (Artscape 2017, 5).
- ⁷ 2016 census data show the immediate vicinity of Main Square to be 31% visible minority, while surrounding community has pockets ranging from 21%-88% visible minority.
- ⁸ Hall and Robertson's other main lines of critique—that public art produces essentialist notions of place and community and are driven by technocratic operation of public art production do not really apply in our case.
- ⁹ One of our respondents said it was important, for example, for residents of the apartment towers to "see that people care." (author's interviews).
- ¹⁰ Race is a crosscutting category across these various participant groupings. No formal demographic data was collected on attendees, but both organizers and participants repeated that the festivalgoers were a "diverse" group.
- ¹¹ A comprehensive description of the curated works and festival activities is available online at <http://main-squared.com/artists-and-projects/>.
- ¹² Artists mentioned the challenges of engaging the apartment community in revisioning and rebuilding exercises and admitted it was difficult to encourage widespread participation.

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