5 Diversity, public space and places of encounter: unpacking perceptions of public space in a lower-income highly diverse neighbourhood

Abstract

Increasingly, public spaces are being regarded as important resources for fostering multi-cultural coexistence and for creating opportunities for cross-cultural understanding and dialogue, in that they can provide a platform wherein interactions across diverse backgrounds occur. This article explores the perceptions of public place in a highly diverse, post-war, modernist suburb of Toronto, and the extent to which public spaces play a role in fostering interactions between different groups and catering for diversity in the area. The analysis indicates that there is little evidence for encounters between diverse groups in public spaces, due to the lack of spatial infrastructure anticipated in the modernist design of the neighbourhood. In addition, social factors such as surveillance and policing, lack of appropriate symbols that cater to different user groups, and presence of gangs and violence have resulted in residents' self-exclusion from public spaces and undermined the frequency and quality of their social encounters.

Keywords: *public space, diversity, Toronto, modernism, multi-culturalism*

§ 5.1 Introduction

Public spaces in diverse neighbourhoods are those in which complex negotiations of spatial and identity formations take place (Peters, 2010). Unlike highly organised and managed spaces, public spaces can potentially provide opportunities for diverse people to meet and interact freely, and are therefore appropriate sites for realising multi-cultural coexistence. The importance of public spaces in cultivating diversity has been emphasised in a number of studies. Amin (2002) refers to these spaces as 'local

micro-publics of everyday interaction', where difference is negotiated and possibilities for urban interculturalism are created. Similarly, Wessendorf (2013) contends that public spaces provide opportunities for regular encounters. Both scholars acknowledge that everyday encounters in public spaces do not always lead to enhanced intercultural understanding, but they stress that the absence of such contact can exacerbate disengagement and prejudice. Amin (2002) further highlights the importance of the role of neighbourhood context, including local factors (physical and social) and particularities of place, in accounting for varying experiences vis-à-vis living with diversity in different neighbourhoods. This is particularly significant due to the vast variations in spatial and social formation across neighbourhoods.

Public spaces have always held great political significance as sites wherein the state reasserts its power through management and control, but also as forums for public action, participation and contestation (Madanipour, 1999). They are thus important in the creation and realisation of more just cities. Low (2013) emphasises that public spaces offer 'empirical means' for exploring diversity in relation to social justice, and indicates that one way of working towards justice in diverse areas is to gather knowledge about how public space is used and perceived by local residents with diverse ethnic, class, age, ability, racial and gender identities. Moreover, the study of encounters in public spaces is relevant to the interactional dimension of justice, which is reflected in whether people are treated in discriminatory ways, e.g. being targeted for harassment, insults, or other rude behaviour (Low, 2013). The societal relevance of studying public spaces is particularly significant at this point in history, due to recurring incidents of racially-charged violence (the most recent example of which was the mass shooting in a mosque in Quebec City, Canada), increased policing and fear-mongering, intensified xenophobia, and heated debates regarding the plight of the growing number of refugees in many Western societies.

This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of whether public spaces lead to encounters among different groups. Specifically, it interrogates the perceptions of and interactions in the public spaces of Jane-Finch, a highly diverse, modernist inner-suburb of Toronto. Like most post-war neighbourhoods designed according to modernist principles, Jane-Finch has a particular landscape and specific ways of managing public space. Modernist planning was developed in the early 20th century as an idealistic model rooted in rationality and technocratic modernism, which sought to transform the social order by means of design-based interventions (Harvey, 1989). This approach resulted in the construction of numerous new towns, estates, and neighbourhoods, mostly in the suburban zones of cities, which were developed on the basis of the modernist principles of high-rise apartment blocks overlooking expansive green settings, connected by a network of elevated highways and ground-level service roads (Tasan-Kok, 2015; Kostof, 1992). However, modernist planning approaches

have been extensively criticised. For example, Jane Jacobs, a savvy critic of rationalist planning, has criticized the approach for its lack of attention to the role of people and communities in cities characterised by complexity and chaos (1992). Modernist estates are further critiqued for their lack of planned social infrastructure and amenities (Tasan-Kok, 2015). Today, many of these estates are sites of concentrated poverty, ethnic segregation, and stigmatisation. The study of spatial infrastructure and public spaces in Jane-Finch is relevant to other similar modernist neighbourhoods, and to the role of public space in fostering contact and dialogue across different social groups. This is particularly so in terms of the importance of these spaces for marginalised groups living in the area. The study makes use of semi-structured interviews and participant observations to understand the interactions in and the meaning of public spaces for diverse inhabitants. Ultimately, it seeks to discover whether such 'spaces for encounter' can be found in modernist housing estates like Jane-Finch.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Firstly, a brief overview of existing literature on public space is provided, with a specific focus on its relation to diversity and the role of public space as a place for encounter. Secondly, the methodological approaches in collecting and analysing data are presented. Thirdly, the case study area is introduced and the particularities of the context of the study are described. Lastly, the results of the analysis are presented, along with the implications of these findings for interventions in and beyond Jane-Finch.

§ 5.2 Public space and diversity

The term "public space" often refers to formal spaces of planned cities, for example squares and parks (Carr et al, 1992, Carmona et al, 2003). Public spaces, however, transcend their mere physical definition in that they have considerable social significance, i.e. they provide common ground wherein interactions and activities that bind a community are conducted (Brown, 2005; Carr et al, 1992). Thus, public spaces encompass not only objects and spaces, but also "the people, events and relationships that occupy them" (Madanipour, 1996). In this study, a differentiation is made between three different types of space viz. private, semi-public, and public spaces. *Private spaces* refer to places that are owned by individuals or enterprises, wherein activities are controlled and regulated by owners. The term *semi-public space* refers to privately-owned and managed spaces where there is a legitimate degree of public and community use. *Public spaces* thus include all spaces that are not clearly delineated as

private, and accommodate activities for public purposes. Examples of *public spaces* in Jane-Finch include parks and greeneries, playgrounds, and libraries. *Semi-public places* include plazas inside malls, neighbourhood organisations, and community gardens, and *private spaces* include malls and private homes (Ahmadi and Tasan-Kok, 2015; Brown, 2005).

Madanipour (1999) further defines public space as a "place outside the boundaries of individual or small-group control, mediating between private spaces and used for a variety of often overlapping functional and symbolic purposes" (881). He identifies three dimensions of social organisation in relation to public space viz. access, interest, and agency. In terms of these three dimensions, the following propositions can be made about an ideal-type public space. Firstly, public space implies free access, meaning that entry to a public space is relatively unrestricted and should be free of charge. Secondly, these spaces are ideally inclusive, meaning that they are not intended for an exclusive group of people. Thirdly, activities in public spaces are in the interest of the public at large and do not serve a select group of individuals. Lastly, agency and influence over public affairs and resources is not exclusive to a select few. The two dimensions of agency and interest are particularly important in terms of user diversity, due to the multiplicity of views, activities, and values introduced to public spaces by diverse users (Madanipour 1999; Incirlioglu & Tandogan, 1999).

The notions of diversity and difference are becoming increasingly relevant to the planning of public space, which is not only the site where social difference is often encountered, but also the space in which difference is constructed and experienced (Iveson, 1998; 2000). Public spaces have symbolic meaning and convey gendered and class-based messages (Massey, 1994). Brown (2005) further argues that the way public space is defined, managed and used is a manifestation of social and cultural norms and political practice, which can either promote public space use by different groups, or hinder it, resulting in social exclusion. Cultural and behavioural codes are key factors that impact on the usage of public spaces by diverse groups (Morris, 2003). For instance, high security measures and policing can discourage visible minorities and the urban poor from using public spaces, while white middle-class residents are often more comfortable with heavily- surveilled public spaces (Noble 2013). Similarly, Low (2013) contends that new immigrant groups in areas with large newcomer populations are often excluded due to a lack of sensitivity to the cultural barriers they face, e.g. inability to read or speak the official language, non-verbal cues of formal furnishings and dress, and signs of cultural representation. Accommodating diversity in the public space thus requires sensitivity towards and consideration of the different ways in which social classes and ethnic groups value and use public spaces (ibid).

As previously mentioned, public spaces are particularly significant for cultivating diversity and multi-cultural coexistence in that they can create opportunities for encounters between strangers. While public space plays an essential role in shaping public behaviour, it is difficult to predict (let alone engineer) the dynamics of social interaction in the public sphere, since interactions are shaped and mediated by differences in experiences, expectations, and conduct (Amin, 2008). Social interaction between strangers, as Amin (2008) argues, rarely involves transgressing long-established attitudes and practices towards the 'other'. Similarly, multiple studies have shown how daily encounters in public spaces within multicultural neighbourhoods can coexist with the continuity of privately-held negative views towards other groups. (Watson, 2006; Valentine, 2008; Noble, 2011; Wilson, 2014). Amin (2008) further indicates that when diverse individuals are 'thrown together' (Massey, 2005) in public space, social pathologies of avoidance, self-preservation, intolerance, and harm can take shape, especially when power imbalances and exclusionary practices are present. Studying the role of public space in facilitating encounters between strangers in diverse neighbourhoods can help us understand whether or not the sentiment can go beyond 'lip-service to a myth of multiculturalism' (Incirlioglu & Tandogan, 1999: 60) to guarantee intercultural understanding.

§ 5.3 Methods and context

This study employed qualitative research methods to investigate perceptions regarding public spaces in Jane-Finch, as well as the interactions that take place therein. The data was gathered using semi-structured interviews with 50 Jane-Finch residents over a two-month period (September and October 2014). The interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Most conversations took place in informants' homes, unless they requested otherwise. Alternative locations for interviews included public libraries, coffee-shops, restaurants, and common areas in Jane-Finch. The conversations centred mostly on inhabitants' perceptions of public spaces in the neighbourhood, their usage of these spaces, and their interactions with other inhabitants in them. The informants were recruited via local associations and later through snowballing. The sample is representative of the diversity of Jane-Finch inhabitants in all but one area, as it is predominantly female (36 out of 50 informants). This was due to the fact that access to male informants, in particular young racialised male youths, proved difficult, due to their low participation rate in local associations. Detailed information about the informants can be found in the appendix.

§ 5.3.1 The Jane-Finch neighbourhood of Toronto

The selected case study for the study is Jane-Finch, an inner-suburban area located in the northwest of Toronto. Jane-Finch was developed as a model suburb in the 1960s according to modernist principles of expansive green spaces, wide roads, and high-rise tower blocks. Originally, the area was designed to accommodate a large stock of public housing in order to host a socially diverse population. Jane-Finch has since witnessed a significant wave of immigration, predominantly from the Caribbean, East Asia, South Asia, Africa, and South America. The area currently accommodates more youth, sole-supported families, multi-family dwellings, refugees, individuals without a high-school diploma, low-income households, and public housing tenants than anywhere else in Toronto. Currently, the housing stock in Jane-Finch consists mostly of high-rise apartment blocks (of five storeys or more), of which 66 percent are rented and 34 percent are privately-owned. In addition to the high-rise buildings, a few pockets of detached and semi-detached privately-owned houses, which accommodate middle-class households, are present in Jane-Finch (Tasan-Kok, 2015; Ahmadi & Tasan-Kok, 2014).

Both Jane-Finch and Toronto have experienced increasing diversity due to increased immigration over the past decades. New immigrants in Toronto, however, face many issues such as discrimination in the labour market and limited access to resources and affordable housing, especially in the context of intensifying income polarisation and segregation along class and racial lines in Toronto (Joy & Vogel, 2015; Siemiatycki, 2011; Hulchanski, 2010). Inner-suburban areas such as Jane-Finch, which offer cheaper housing, have thus been popular destinations for many immigrants. Currently, more than half of the Jane-Finch population (56 percent) speaks a language other than English and French (Census, 2013). More than 70 percent of Jane-Finch's population is comprised of visible minorities (see Table 1 for key characteristics of Jane-Finch). In addition to affordable housing, other key characteristics of the area include concentrated poverty, high resident turn-over, poor infrastructure, gang presence and gun-violence. This area makes a particularly interesting case study for the investigation of the role of public space in facilitating encounters among diverse groups in modernist neighbourhoods, due to its outstanding population diversity on the one hand, and its bleak modernist landscape of large wasteland and limited planned physical infrastructure on the other.

	TORONTO	JANE-FINCH
Area (km^2)	632	21
Total population	2,503,000	80,150
Age		
0-19	16.1%	43.4%
20-64	69.9%	43.1%
>65	14.0%	13.6%
Percentage of population not born in Canada	50.0	60.0
Persons 25 or over without a school certificate, diploma or degree	18%	35%
Average household income	C$80,300	C$53,900
Unemployment rate	6.7%	9.2%

TABLE 5.1 Key characteristics of Jane-Finch and Toronto / Source: Statistics Canada, 2006

In addition to interviews, participant observations were used to provide first-hand observations and experiences of public space of Jane-Finch, some of which are reflected in the following excerpts from the author's field diary:

"Often I find myself sitting at the bus stop at Jane and Driftwood to kill time between appointments, eating, reading or writing my notes. Even though there are occasional benches in the green spaces spread out across the area, they don't look all that inviting. They are mostly littered and unused. Sometimes you see people passing through but almost nobody ever sits down. I feel more secure waiting at the bus stop than sitting alone on a bench in the deserted park across the street".

FIGURE 5.1 Example of an open space in Jane-Finch./ Source: Author.

FIGURE 5.2 Examples of two housing types and an open space in Jane-Finch. / Source: Author.

"Once, after finishing an interview in one of the San-Romanoway high-rises, I sat down on a bench in the green area between the towers to have a quick sandwich, only to find out later that I was sitting right in the heart of a wind tunnel. The temperature must've been around 12 degrees Celsius, but the wind chills were so freezing, I could barely last through my lunch" [excerpts from the author's field diary].

The above excerpts imply that functioning and lively public spaces in Jane-Finch are rather scarce. While there are expansive open spaces in the inner-suburban neighbourhood, the majority of these spaces lack either the spatial infrastructure or the social activities to qualify as public spaces. Subsequently, activities of and interactions among Jane-Finch residents take place not only in public spaces, but also in semi-public and private spaces inside the neighbourhood.

§ 5.4 Data and analysis

The field observations and extensive conversations with informants reveal that there are a number of physical, organisational and social factors that influence inhabitants' perceptions and usage of these spaces in the area. Firstly, the neighbourhood's fragmented modernist layout comprises a number of physical push factors impacting the perception and usage of public spaces in Jane-Finch. These factors include high-rise towers with expansive open areas, poor public space design interventions (or the complete lack thereof), large distances, and environmental factors such as wind and pollution. Secondly, social and organisational factors negatively impacting public space use include littering, insufficient maintenance, high surveillance and policing, youth congregation and loitering, alcohol and drug use, and the perceived presence of gangs and violence.

Parks and open greeneries are the most common types of public space found in Jane-Finch. They are frequented mostly by families with young children, who make use of the space during the day for leisure, sports and recreational purposes. Many informants shared that, as their children grow up, there are fewer reasons to visit the parks. This is exemplified in the quote by Anna, a Jamaican single mother, who has raised two sons in Jane-Finch:

"The parks are okay but I don't really go to the parks, I just pass through when I am doing my walks and that is it! I guess when your kids were younger we'd go there. I think certain things I just don't do anymore because I have no reason to go there." [Female, Jamaican, 31-45, public-housing resident].

Informants often indicated that parks and open spaces lacked the facilities and pull factors to attract users. Moreover, they commonly complained about the general quality of these spaces. Samantha, a female Ecuadorian resident in her fifties, shared how a sense of seclusion due to the spatial organisation of public spaces negatively impacts her sense of safety:

"There is a small park that goes through the neighbourhood. It is very secluded so I don't feel safe when it is dawn, it has to be broad daylight and if I see families, like if I see a couple walking or kids and students with bicycle I will go. If not I go around on the street" [Female, Ecuadorian, 46-60, private renter].

When asked about the quality of parks, Evie, a Jamaican mother of three, said the following:

"To be honest there is no proper park around here. The park over there, there is dog poop in the sand of the kids. It is nasty. The one behind there is small and the kids [youth] from the building use it and they fight. A long time ago somebody got shot behind the park." [Female, Jamaican, 31-45, public-housing resident].

As suggested in the above quotes, the use of open spaces is further restricted by a perceived presence of gangs and gang-related violence, which undermines residents' sense of safety in the area. While this sentiment was shared by informants across gender, ethnicity, and age, safety concerns were greater for male youths as they are considered most at risk of being targeted or recruited by gangs. Rebeca, an El Salvadorian girl in her late teens expressed her reluctance to use parks due to feeling unsafe:

"I have seen a lot of people selling drugs in the parks so that is what I mean by not being safe. Also, I have heard a lot of women walking their dogs get sexually assaulted. That is the reason why I try to avoid parks, because they are isolated areas. You see a lot of crazy stuff." [Female, El Salvadorian, 18-30, home-owner].

Similarly, Odessa, a mother of two from Guyana, indicated that she does not feel safe being present in public spaces with her children due to gang-related activities and shootings:

"It is bad, shooting, drugs, I don't want my kids there. Last night they shot a 19 year old back at the community centre over there. Yes. He died. Behind there is bad. I don't want to go there with my kids." [Female, Guyanese, 31-45, public-housing resident].

Leah, a single mother of one, of Trinidadian descent, shared similar concerns about the safety of her young son in parks:

"The other day my son saw kids playing basketball in the park and he ran to go and play with these kids and I was like no we can't stay. He said mom, I said no. There were tons of kids having fun doing their own thing you know, but I just did not feel comfortable. I am like hmm will there be gunshots in ten minutes? So I was like no but he did not understand why we could not stay and why he could not go to the park and play with these other kids and it was hard for me because I couldn't explain it." [Female, Canadian-Trinidadian, 31-45, private renter].

These quotes demonstrate that the perceived presence of gangs and the occasional eruption of violence in public spaces greatly impact how residents perceive and use these spaces. The stigma surrounding Jane-Finch in the public imagination, due to negative representations in the media, further exacerbates collective anxiety regarding safety. As a poor area with a high concentration of ethnic minority households, many of which are welfare recipients, Jane-Finch continues to suffer a long-standing stigma. Negative sentiments surrounding Jane-Finch in the mainstream media and public perception are targeted mostly towards pockets of the neighbourhood with the highest concentration of Toronto housing and visible minorities, in particular black residents (most notably at the intersection of Jane Street and Finch Avenue, after which the neighbourhood is named). Anti-black sentiments, as well as paternalistic portrayals of recipients of welfare, especially single mothers, are quintessential to the establishment of the stigma surrounding Jane-Finch, as one informant shares:

"The stigma is basically people saying bad things about people on welfare and on social assistance, like young mothers being bad in general, being gang members. Just normal things that come with being racialised." [Female, Jamaican-Trinidadian, 18-30, public-housing resident].

Mauricio, an El Salvadorian senior resident who works as a youth counsellor in a Jane-Finch-based community organisation, describes how stigmatisation has undermined political interest and intervention in the area:

FIGURE 5.3 Community gardens in Jane-Finch. / Source: Author.

"The problem that we have is that the powers that be see this area as a wasteland. Because there are a lot of people on social services and many of the buildings are subsidised housing and they don't see it as people trying to come out, in their eyes, they say why bother." [Male, El Salvadorian, 61-75, home-owner].

Latoya, an Afro-Caribbean resident who was born and raised in Jane-Finch, shared similar insights into how political interest and investments in the neighbourhood have declined over the years:

"Growing up we had all day recreation programs, councillors all throughout the summer, after school homework clubs, swimming lessons, free swimming pool. Those were the foundations of our community and that is where we made our friends, and that is where our parents went to talk. Now we don't have camp councillors anymore, our pool was closed because of health reasons. There has been a huge cutback and a lot of the people who live in the community are on welfare, but when we had those services we were much better off. We get blamed for all those stuff but other communities have all these services that we don't have. There needs to be an equal plain field and that

is not sustained by our current regime. […] We are completely off the radar now and nobody cares." [Female, Jamaican-Trinidadian, 18-30, public-housing resident].

Furthermore, the stigmatisation of Jane-Finch coincides with intensified policing and surveillance measures in public spaces. Many informants indicated that increased policing did not enhance their sense of safety. Some added that they avoid these spaces altogether for fear of being racially profiled. Amidah, a Tanzanian resident in her late teens, says:

"I feel like sometimes they [youth] might be scared, usually a lot of police are out, maybe they don't want to be around the police. Because the last time I heard, when they [the community centre] had a party, the police was all around and guys and other people don't really want to get in, you know? They don't want to be questioned. Sometimes the police scares people away because they are not being nice, like most of them are racist, you know? Because if you are a Black guy, they are saying oh you can't go to school, college, university and they stop you for drugs, not everybody does drugs. […] They are always stereotyping," [Female, Tanzanian, 18-30, public-housing resident].

It was generally observed that the role of public spaces, like parks in Jane-Finch, is very limited in creating encounters between diverse ethnic groups or individuals. In fact, the lack of planned social infrastructure in the area has resulted in residents turning to semi-public spaces to have their social needs met. Plazas, located inside malls, are a good example of such semi-public spaces. Save for a few chain fast-food restaurants and coffee shops, Jane-Finch does not offer many indoor spaces where residents can come together and interact. Plazas, however, provide a space wherein a diverse group of people (mostly middle-aged and senior residents) can meet and interact across different cultures and genders (Ahmadi & Tasan-Kok, 2015). Emphasising the lack of social infrastructure in the area, Mauricio shares the following observations:

"I do not hang out at any of those places myself, I just go there do my shopping and go. Though I know these guys that hang out there, you go there after work you see them there, you go there on Sunday you see them there hanging out, you will see the same guys until the security guy comes and tells them to move. And they get up and walk and stand by Tim Hortons and after half an hour they come back and sit! But then the thing I want to tell you is that on this table we will have Latin Americans and south-east Asians and Asians. I would say mostly people in their late 40s. Not too many youth. […] everybody is co-existing and because I will say that it is the only affordable place for people to come and hang around." [Male, El Salvadorian, 61-75, home-owner].

FIGURE 5.4 An indoor community space in Jane-Finch: The Learning Enrichment Foundation. / Source: Author.

In addition to third spaces such as indoor plazas, the lack of planned social infrastructure has also resulted in the creation of informal gathering places in private spaces. A unique example is the so-called "private bars", i.e. private residential dwellings which also function as informal enterprises, where local residents can buy and consume alcohol (see Ahmadi & Tasan-Kok, 2015).

Informants commonly claimed that there are not enough resources to engage youth in the neighbourhood. Amidah, who grew up in Jane-Finch, shares her perceptions of the spaces in Jane-Finch as a young adult:

"You don't really see people my age really hanging out in this neighbourhood, going to community centre, cause there's only kids' stuff, somethings we are not really interested anymore. I'd rather just go downtown and chill more than stay in this neighbourhood." [Female, Tanzanian, 18-30, public-housing resident].

Similarly, Jake, a 24 year old native Canadian student at York University stresses the lack of available spaces for youth in the area:

"They don't have a lot of facilities for young people. Like they have the malls yeah but after hours they don't really have any bars or any kind of social area where people can go to. There is one just east of Keele and Finch, but that is a little bit out of Jane-Finch. But in Jane-Finch, there don't really have anything." [Male, White Canadian, 18-30, private renter].

Furthermore, public and semi-public spaces in Jane-Finch seemingly lack the symbols and qualities to engage youth. Vanessa, an El-Salvadorian mother of three, describes her challenges in finding activities in the neighbourhood that would attract her 18-year-old daughter:

"My daughter likes dance, she likes music and there is nothing on that unless in the community centre but there is only one class and when she went to the program it was only her and one other person. So like, even the environment is more for adults in the community centre so I guess it does not attract youth and when you go there it is like death! There is nothing that attracts a young person. I think they have to make it more attractive at least in that community centre and that is the only one in our area." [Female, El Salvadorian, 31-45, home-owner].

Participant observations further confirmed that spaces are not often designed to cater for the youth, and the number of available spaces and programs targeting youth remain scarce. There is often a shortage of funding and support for these spaces (see Ahmadi & Tasan-Kok, 2014) and they tend to lack the spatial and social qualities that appeal to a younger audience.

These observations are congruent with conversations with inhabitants, and reveal that public spaces in the area often lack the factors necessary for exerting a positive attraction or pull (i.e. symbols, planned infrastructure, attractive and functional design, and safety). Furthermore, the push factors of gang-presence, violence, pollution, littering, and policing discourage residents from using the limited number of public spaces in the area. Despite ongoing grassroots efforts to counter the lack of infrastructure (spatial and otherwise) in Jane-Finch, the available spatial resources for facilitating encounter interactions among the diverse members of the community, especially those catering for young people, remain fairly insufficient.

§ 5.5 Synthesis

In the case of Jane-Finch, the empirical analysis suggests that while there seems to be a great deal of open spaces and greeneries in the area, spatial infrastructure for inter-cultural encounters remains very limited. Public space in Jane-Finch does not transcend its physical meaning and functional role to fulfil social premises. Physical factors, such as the layout of the neighbourhood, public space design, location and accessibility, greatly influence public space use. In addition, inhabitants' perceptions and use of public spaces are influenced by social factors, including high surveillance and policing, poor maintenance, lack of appropriate symbols catering for different user groups, presence of gangs and violence, and loitering. These factors are relevant to many modernist suburbs which are becoming increasingly diverse and wherein issues and challenges regarding multi-cultural coexistence are on the rise.

This visible lack of planned social infrastructure in the neighbourhood has generated a range of de facto creative responses, e.g. the use of semi-public and private spaces within Jane-Finch, and grassroots organisation of events and initiatives to counter the lack of available resources for facilitating interactions and building community. The findings, however, demonstrate that these spaces are often underfunded, understaffed, and overburdened.

Furthermore, Jane-Finch residents seem to be living in a 'climate of fear', due to the presence of gangs and gang-related violence, and the stigma surrounding the neighbourhood. Public space as a place for encounter can thus become a potential site of hostility. Fear of violence, as Galanakis (2015) indicates, has resulted in inhabitants' self-exclusion from public spaces and affected the frequency and quality of their social encounters. Meanwhile, efforts to improve residents' sense of safety in public spaces have focused predominantly on policing and surveillance measures, which in turn alienate vulnerable and at-risk users, particularly racialised male youths. Interventions in public space which do not take into consideration the existing social reality of the neighbourhood will thus either have a limited impact or exacerbate social exclusion. The case study of Jane-Finch further demonstrates that creating encounters in public and semi-public spaces requires the tuning and adjusting of spaces and facilities to meet the needs and preferences of their intended users. Factors including interior design, cultural and linguistic symbols, colours, and music can influence the appeal of these spaces to different social and cultural groups.

There is also the potential for conflict when different groups compete for space in neighbourhoods where spatial and community resources are limited. The findings of this study demonstrate that, in the case of Jane-Finch, the perceived dominance of

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youth gangs in parks and open spaces considerably undermines residents' perceptions and usage of these spaces. Meanwhile, the evident lack of available resources to meaningfully engage youth in Jane-Finch contributes to the congregation and loitering in public spaces and engagement in informal or criminal activities. Improving youth-targeted spaces and resources can potentially create alternative platforms of self-expression and engagement for youth, and ease the conflict over space. Resources may be mobilised so as to counter the lack of resources (spatial and otherwise) in Jane-Finch to stimulate interactions among inhabitants of diverse backgrounds. An argument in favour of enhancing public and semi-public spaces needs to be grounded in an understanding of broader city-wide trends, e.g. income polarisation, segregation, and the unequal distribution of resources across Toronto neighbourhoods. Ultimately, the expectation for public spaces to provide platforms for creating meaningful exchange between strangers and facilitating understanding across cultural and social groups remains well-intentioned. Its materialisation, however, requires going beyond the provision and improvement of physical space, to challenge inequalities in power, position, and access.

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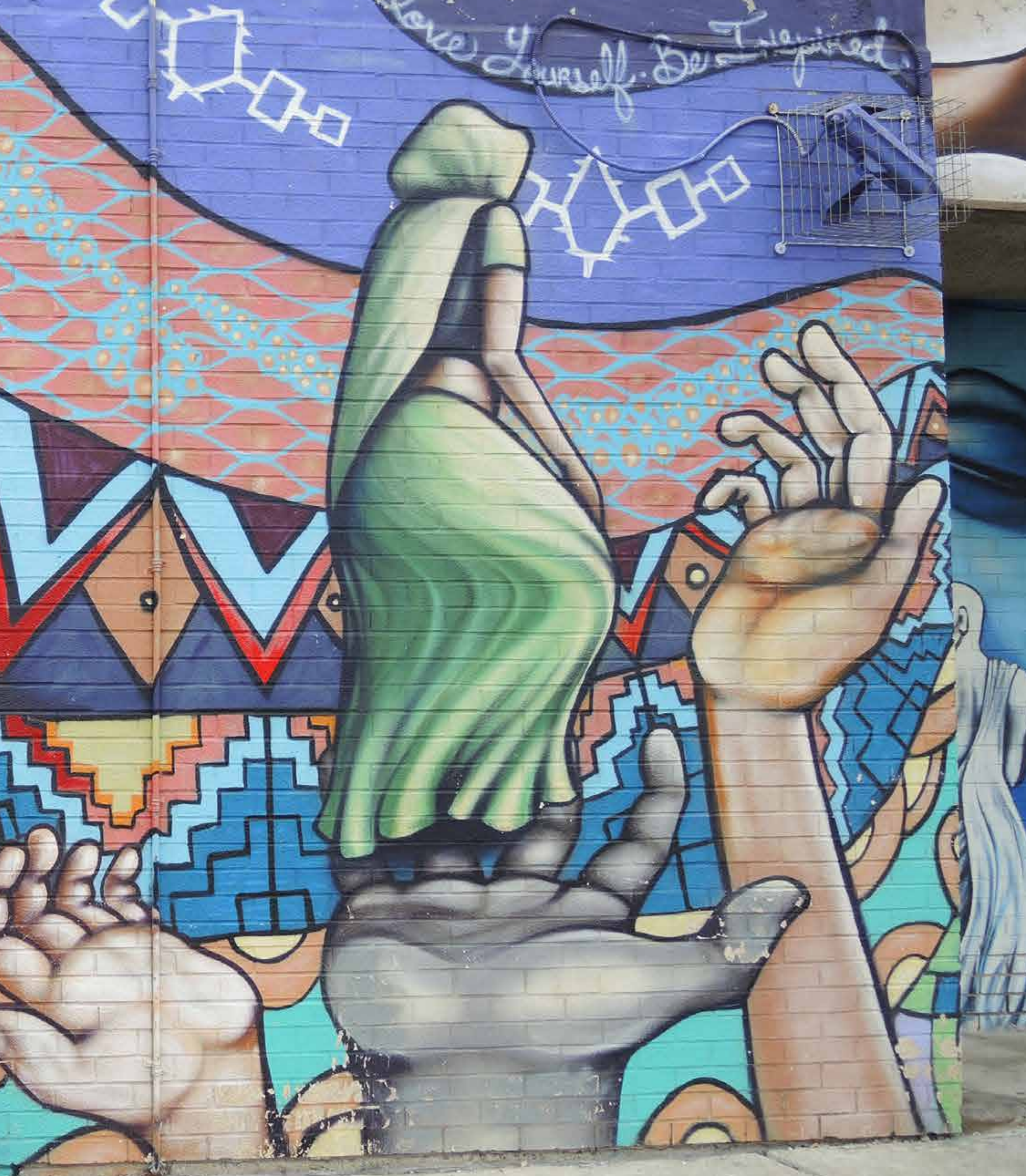
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