

Who's Your (Civic) Space?

Spatial Audits, Behavioral Analysis Participatory Action Research (PAR), and Spatial Activation Strategies as Methods to Understand Civic Spaces and to Form the Basis for Design Interventions and Programming Strategies

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1. Research Overview

With increasing concerns over resource utilization and consumption and the ever-expanding ecological footprint of the North American lifestyle, the pursuit of strategies to achieve community sustainability within urban environments is gaining momentum. While many aspects of sustainability are being explored including land use and configuration, built form and mix of uses, connectivity and movement systems, the role that the collective civic commons plays and the provision of urban open space in the public realm has received little attention. Based on the degree to which human activity influences resource consumption, this is an essential link to achieving more sustainable communities of greater built form density with smaller environmental footprints.

If we are to achieve community sustainability goals as evidenced through compact, connected and walkable neighbourhoods, mid-size cities must reinvest meaningfully and intentionally in the civic commons, the urban open spaces and collective public realm that form the social and cultural backbone of our cities- the experiential ligature and cultural connective tissue of community.

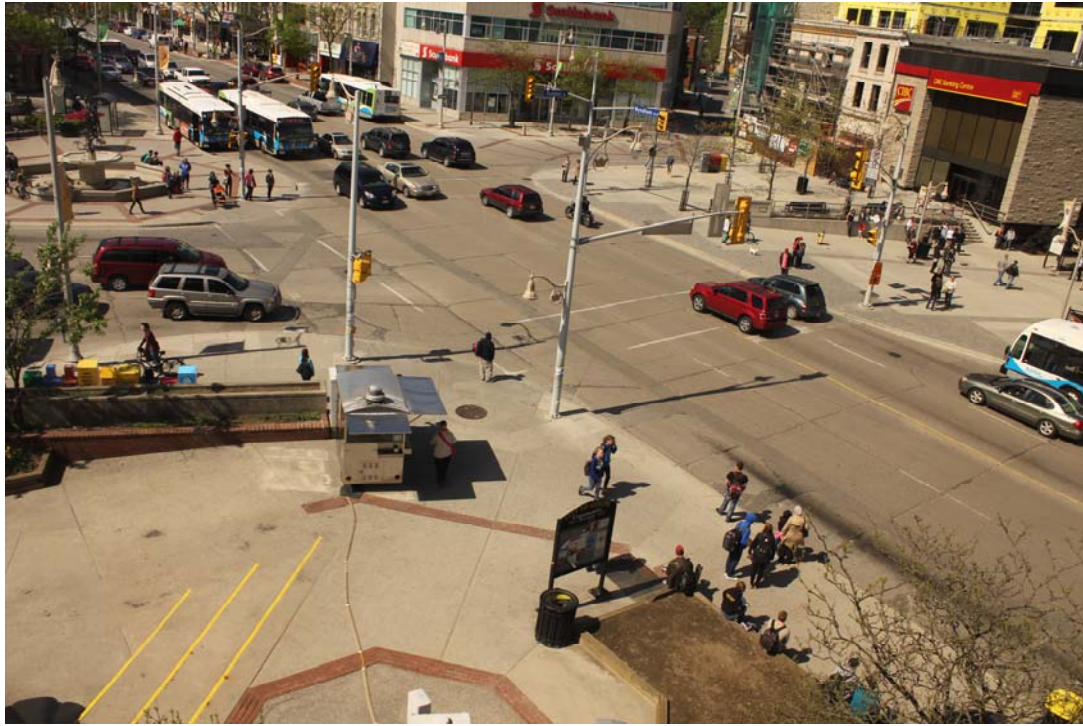
Historically, over the past century and a half within North America and other growth-focused settings, the provision, configuration, distribution and institutional framework within which these spaces developed have changed dramatically. The most significant change over the past century in both the value and vehicle for provision of these spaces occurred during the post WWII era when the responsibility for this was relegated, for the most part, to the private sector as a result of changing scales and responsibilities for community growth and development. With this change came, in many cases, the privatization of previously considered public space, the commodification of land as a private, economic resource, the individualization of community needs, and the resulting increase in consumption of land and natural resources on a per capita basis to accommodate this.

2. Research Context

Research methods were designed and undertaken in the mid-size city of Guelph, Ontario, Canada, with the explicit goal of better understanding behavioural interaction and responses in the three primary urban core civic spaces and the physical, social and environmental conditions that give rise to these responses. The context within which the case study was developed is a mid-size city with approximately 125,000 residents close to the highest density region of Canada, the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) in the province of Ontario, and the most populous province in the country.

The City of Guelph was established in the mid 1800's as a centre to serve surrounding agricultural production and has the distinction of being one of only two of the founding communities in Ontario that was comprehensively planned. The distinctive radial layout plan was designed by its founder John Galt. Two of the three civic spaces that are the subject of this case study have historically served as public gathering places from the time of the original town development with uses changing over time. The core area of the City is very attractive with one of its most significant attributes being the predominance of limestone structures

throughout the commercial area and residential neighbourhoods and it's setting within the confluence of two rivers.



St. George's Square. Guelph, Canada



Market Square (Guelph Station in background). Guelph, Canada.



Guelph Station (transit hub). Guelph, Canada

In developing the growth plan for the city with 40% of the growth to be taken up within the downtown core, it became very apparent early on in the process that the provision, design and management of civic space must feature prominently in the reconstituted fabric of City if the community was going to achieve its intensification targets. A common challenge in the evolution of the mid-size city, particularly those that are relatively young and evolving, is the need to increase the value and provision of, exquisitely designed urban civic space to enable citizens to embrace and enjoy more dense urban living. The City of Guelph was fortunate to enjoy two historic civic squares, one recently redesigned, and a third space that had historically served as part of the original civic space infrastructure but that had been recently repurposed as a multi-modal transit hub, the new Guelph Station.

3. Research Objectives

In working with the city's urban designers and land use planners, it was agreed that to better understand the past, current and changing use of these spaces, a multi-faceted research¹, observation and citizen engagement strategy would be required. The primary objective of the research is to provide a database and framework for the three primary civic spaces in the downtown core; St. George's Square, Market Square and Guelph Station. The results will feed into the City of Guelph's plan to explore the changing use of the spaces over the short and long term. A community engaged research strategy was then developed that included spatial audits, activity analysis, intercept interviews and visitor-employed photography (VEP), a research method developed and first utilized by Richard Chenoweth² while at the University of Illinois. Beyond the context of this study, the City, in collaboration with other civic focused organizations, is undertaking participatory action research (PAR), and spatial activation strategies as methods to understand the civic spaces and catalyse citizen engagement in preparation for public consultation on renewing and revitalizing and revitalizing St. George's Square and the approach generally to public space Downtown later this year.

The current conditions and, therefore, interest in data collection and citizen input in the three spaces differ significantly. Market Square is one of the two original core civic spaces and is currently the primary civic gathering space following the tremendously successful outcome of an ambitious redesign project that actively engaged citizens in its design and programming over a several year period. The new Guelph Station forms the hub of the transit system serving the intensified core and links inter and intra city bus and rail systems forming the foundation of the downtown and citywide public transit system. This space formed part of the original Market Square, which was adapted in the late 1800's to accommodate a national rail system. St. George's Square, the second of the two original civic squares, has undergone a number renditions over the years, with the original design serving as the centre for commerce and transit. Due to the differing circumstances of each space, the research methods vary to capture the foundational differences.

The key catalyst for designing and carrying out a community engaged research strategy for St. George's Square was to capture data on the changing use of the square, with one of its primary functions as a transit transfer hub being shifted to the new Guelph Station, two blocks away. The objective was to capture the change in use through "naturalistic observation" techniques that record data on users with respect to their numbers, activities engaged in, locations of activity and duration of use both while the space served as a transit transfer hub and after the buses were relocated to Guelph Station two block away. A critical criterion for the research design and data collection from the City's perspective was that it maintains citizen anonymity and not result in the identification of individuals in any form. All data gathered was to be aggregated to achieve this.

4. Research Methods

Activity audits were undertaken over a twenty-one hour period throughout a full week of activity to capture changing uses throughout the daytime and evening periods and throughout changes in weekday and weekend use. Activity observations began at 6:00am to capture the start of the transit service and continued to 3:00am to include the end of the nightlife activity following the closing of bars at 2:00am. Data was collected at fifteen minute intervals throughout the square documenting activities including space users walking, cycling, personal mobility vehicles, sitting, standing, talking/engaging, the location of the activity and observations on duration of activity. Data also collected on primary movement paths and directions and the presence of strollers with children and dogs. During the first round of observation, while the buses were still in the square, data was collected just prior to the buses arriving, while buses were stationed in the square, and just following the departure of the buses, to understand the distinction in use between those transferring on transit in the square and those utilizing the square independent of transit.

Two additional methods were designed to capture data about the users and their preferences. Intercept interviews were conducted throughout St. George's Square to determine the origin and destination of those using the square, the mode of transportation utilized to arrive at the square, the anticipated duration of time in the square, activities to be undertaken in the square and throughout the downtown, and the frequency of use of the square and downtown. As well, participants were asked of their impressions of the square and downtown, specifically about safety, comfort and vitality in the square.

Additionally, visitor employed photography (VEP) will be employed later in the study. Participants will be asked to photograph the areas in the square they most often frequent and feel most comfortable in, features and spaces that they like and those that they feel are negative. The method will explore on users perception and experience of security, comfort and vitality of the Square.

5. Research Results

5.1 St. George's Square Prior to Relocation of Transit

By way of overview, the results of the naturalistic observation data collected in the Square during weekday hours while the buses were operating indicated three peak use times in the square; the typical work day "rush hours" of morning start time of approximately 8:30 to 9:30 am and evening finish time of 3:30 to 5:30 pm, and lunch hour users. The rush hour peak times are distinctive for those working in the downtown and those transferring for work and school, with school including university, college and secondary school users. The morning peak was primarily composed of those transferring on transit through the Square, whereas the noon hour peak included many that occupied the Square for longer durations and engaged in activities including eating lunch outdoors, socializing, and people watching. The late afternoon peak also included many that stayed in the Square for longer durations to socialize and people watch.

Evening use was limited throughout the week but increased on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings. An early to mid evening minor peak observed throughout the dining period was relatively consistent with small peaks of movement through the Square occurring just prior to the typical bar patron start time of mid evening of from 10:00 to 11:00pm and following the closing of bar establishments at 2:00am. Much of the mid evening use consisted of patrons accessing cash debit machines at the banks that are located on three of the four Square quadrants while the activity following the bar closing was directed to the one food vendor in the Square. During the evening hours, very little pass-through pedestrian traffic was observed with most being destination oriented and directed to the banks and food vendor.

The overall peak activity occurred on Friday afternoons in the Square with the most intensive period during the Friday noon hour concerts programmed by the Downtown Guelph office.

Several anecdotal perceptions about activity in the Square while the buses operated from that location were verified through activity observations and intercept interviews. The activity associated with the most intensive use of the Square can be attributed to transit transfer activity. The number count of users of the Square would increase significantly prior to the arrival of the buses and diminish quickly after. Interviews confirmed this in that most of those using transit were transferring immediately and not staying in the Square. Some would stop briefly to make a quick purchase but most would travel through. The majority of those taking transit to the Square as a destination for activity were often accessing services including banks and health appointments and the majority of those interviewed indicated the northeast or north west of the City as their origin of travel. Most accessing the Square for other destination activity purposes including shopping, meals, meeting friends etc were primarily using other travel modes including walking, cycling and personal vehicles.

In addition to those moving through the Square briefly, the second largest user group identified through observation and interviews prior to the buses relocating are distinctive constituencies of citizens that occupy the four quadrants of the Square for longer periods of time. Collectively, those appropriating the spaces on a frequent, and often-daily basis, might best be described as 'actors'. They appear to be benefit from the 'audiences' moving through the space according to the bus schedule. It may also be that these constituencies take on the role of audience as well, people-watching the transit riders waiting at bus stops and moving through the Square to transfer. The constituencies include mixed gender groupings of youth, male youth gathering to break dance, and more senior gatherings of primarily males.

The third user group of the Square prior to the relocation of the buses is engaged in more diverse activities that are more intermittent and distributed over a longer time frame. Based on the intercept interviews, this group chooses to come to the downtown for a variety of activities including services- banks, health, business, public administration, and other activities including dining, shopping, attending programmed events etc. For the most part they like to frequent the

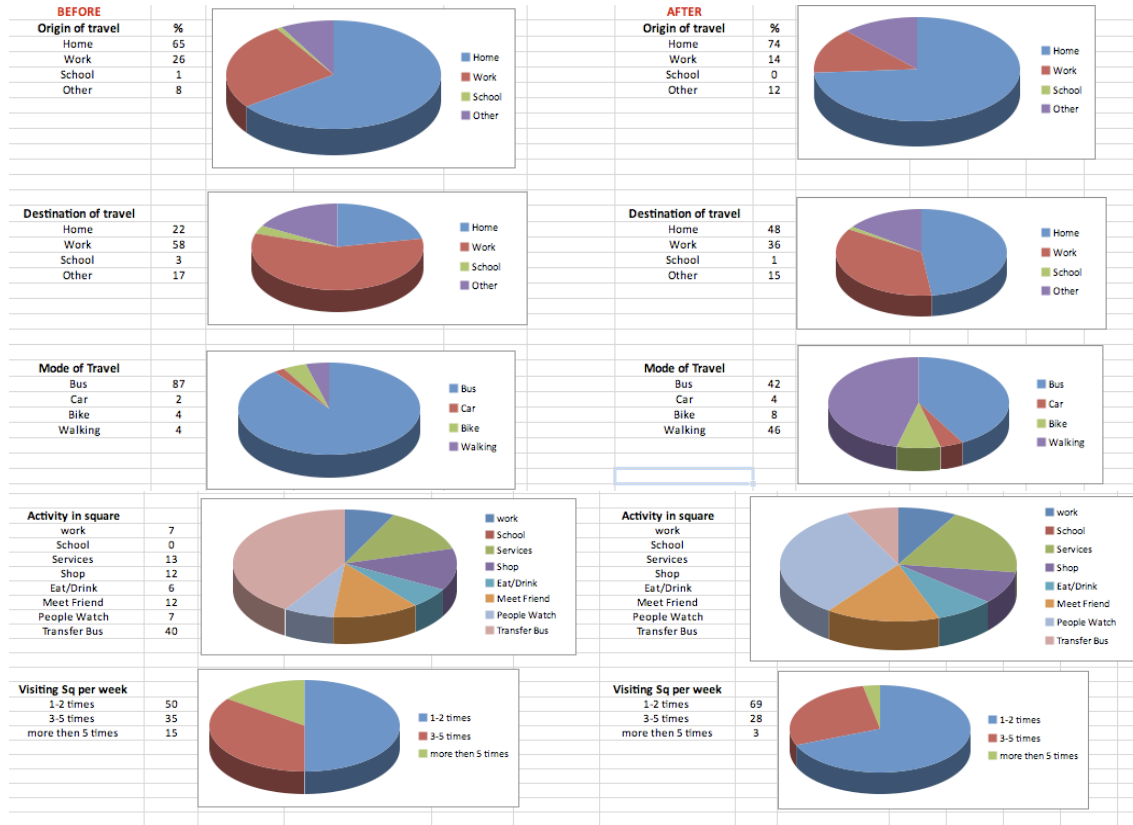
downtown but often expressed some dissatisfaction with the lack of physical quality and comfort in the Square, concerns about security and the potential for negative interactions with the constituencies or actors frequenting the Square. The majority of this user group accesses the Downtown by walking or by private vehicle. Those travelling by private auto frequently expressed the need for additional parking.

5.2 St. George's Square Following the Relocation of Transit.

The most dramatic finding following the relocation of the buses to Guelph Station was that while volume of user activity diminished significantly and the total number of users counted in the Square throughout the daytime and evening dropped substantially, it was very quickly observed and documented through intercept interviews that the duration of time spent in the square was extended by those engaging in intentional activities including eating lunch and taking coffee breaks, meeting friends, people watching and participating in programmed events. Many expressed that they felt much more comfortable in the square with the removal of the buses and the reduction of noise and exhaust fumes and were spending more time there.

As was communicated by resident Jasdeep Garcha, "eating her lunch Wednesday at one of several tables in St. George's Square, the space is a functional area for her to come on her breaks from work at a nearby jewelry store. Garcha, who is 18 and a resident of Guelph's south end and a University of Waterloo student, said the relocation of the buses from the square has made it a better place to relax. "I think it's a lot less, I don't know if rowdy's the right word, but it's a bit more peaceful, I think," said Garcha. Among the added bonuses of the square for Garcha are the free noon-hour musical concerts, held on Fridays throughout the summer and into September." I think that's kind of cool. It gives you something to watch during lunch," said Garcha." 3

Another significant shift in use that was observed following the departure of the buses from the Square is the reduction in the number and duration of those more frequent constituencies of users that tended to occupy the same space in groups over extended periods of time. While requiring further research to ascertain the specific factors that lead to the shift in use, the identification of this group as actors and audiences in the Square may be useful as a starting point in that it appears that there may no longer be a sufficient opportunity for performance in this space with the change in use.



Summary of intercept interviews conducted in St. George's Square.

5.3 Market Square

The three most significant and defining features of activity observed in Market Square in comparison with St. George's Square is the intensity of use, the duration of use and the extent of interaction of users of the Square. Activity begins to build in the Square in mid morning, peaks mid day and continues in intensity throughout the afternoon, tapering only throughout the dinner schedule and often re-building again throughout the early to mid evening. The Square draws a broad range of users from family members with young children to grandparents and seniors. Most are actively engaged in the large, interaction urban beach and splash pad.

The duration of use of the space is extensive with families often arriving with extensive recreational gear and food and drink with the intent of staying for an hour to most of the day. Participants planning to spend a significant amount of time in the facility establish themselves by occupying an area on site and marking it with their supplies either at the café tables and chairs or on the ground, if site furnishings are not available. The facility serves as a very strong destination with most participants coming fully prepared with the intention of a lengthy duration of use.

The highly interactive and dynamic water feature encourages movement throughout and thereby creates opportunities for engagement. Adjacent families will frequently interact and children engaging in the water feature will quickly interact with each other forming spontaneous playgroups. One of the key design features of the facility that invites movement and access for all is the seamless transition between the pavement and the water feature which eliminates any sense of material barrier and multiple forms of use including access for strollers, bikes, skateboards, pets and blow-up water toys. Opportunities are present for all abilities from very

active use to opportunities to sit and dangle feet in the water while enjoying the boisterous activity throughout the space.

Through observation and intercept interviews it appears that the range and origin of space users is diverse with many coming from the downtown and established core area neighbourhoods but also drawing from more distant neighbourhoods and adjacent communities.

Additional intercept interviews will be conducted over the next few months to better understand the origin and destination of users and also the mode of travel parking patterns and needs. As well, the change in use as the seasons change will also be monitored to understand the both the shoulder season uses in fall and spring and the winter use when the skating rink returns to the Square.

5.4 Guelph Station

Observations of activity throughout the Guelph Station was delayed by two weeks following the relocation of the buses from St. George's Square to enable to change in activity to stabilize prior to documenting use. While additional activity observations and intercept interviews needs to be completed, observations to date indicate that the transit hub is functioning well and is not congested as some speculated prior to the start-up of the facility.

It is apparent that users of Guelph Station are limited, for the most part, to those accessing inter and intra city transit. Although speculation that the shift in transit from St. George's Square to Guelph Station would be accompanied by a shift in the more resident constituencies that occupied the Square, to date this has not been observed. Additional observational and survey research will need to be conducted to ascertain where the constituencies have migrated to and what changing conditions specifically lead to the shift.

6. Conclusions and Future Research

The objective of the research in creating a baseline for future design interventions, programming and space management opportunities of the three spaces studies has been met by the research. Additional work needs to be done throughout the seasonal spectrum to understand the variations in use, limitations and potential to enhance physical and experiential comfort and vitality in these spaces throughout the year- particularly important in northern climates.

As well, more targeted research methods to track changes in space use of constituencies would be very beneficial in understanding not only where people are in the civic open space network within cities but also where they are transitioning to ensuring that the needs of all citizens are addressed and met.

Lastly, duration of stay within civic urban spaces has become apparent in this research as a particularly significant indicator of the comfort and vitality of civic space. Paradoxically, conditions that contribute to encouraging extended duration of use of civic space within the context of this study may differ significantly in desirability of various user groups. A critical area of focus for additional research.

References

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