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SOCIAL COHESION CREATED THROUGH PUBLIC SPACES IN TORONTO NEIGHBOURHOODS

KOHERENCJA SPOŁECZNA UZYSKIWANA
DZIĘKI PRZESTRZENIOM PUBLICZNYM
W ZESPOŁACH SĄSIEDZKICH TORONTO

Abstract

Social cohesion is the binding force that brings people together in a neighbourhood, especially in the context of diversity. Toronto is a multicultural city that exemplifies how social cohesion is achieved through unique urban planning. When it comes to public spaces, Toronto demonstrates how social cohesion can be achieved not only through spaces that have to be defined by civic leaders. In this unique city, each neighbourhood brings people together with its character and atmosphere, allowing a simple street can be used as a mixed-use public space.

Keywords: social cohesion, diversity

Streszczenie

Koherencja społeczna to siła skupiająca ludzi w zespołach sąsiedzkich, którą rozpatruje się przede wszystkim w aspekcie różnorodności. Toronto, miasto wieku kultur, jest najlepszym przykładem na to, jak można osiągnąć spójność społeczną poprzez jedyne w swoim rodzaju decyzje w zakresie projektowania urbanistycznego, które w odniesieniu do przestrzeni publicznych wspomagane są przez działalność „miejskich liderów”. W tym wyjątkowym mieście każdy zespół sąsiedzki jednoczy swym mieszkańców dzięki swojemu charakterowi i atmosferze, sprawiając, że zwykła ulica może być użytkowana jako przestrzeń wielofunkcyjna.

Słowa kluczowe: koherencja społeczna, różnorodność

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“The term ‘social cohesion’ can be identified in culturally diverse neighbourhoods where people are strongly united together, therefore increasing the livability in a community. These multicultural neighbourhoods are socially inclusive and integrated, allowing for citizens to mesh together through positive interactions.

Social cohesion also refers to how intensely people feel connected to a city, and the degree to which the diversified community members share their experiences, identities, and values with each other”¹.

Public spaces play a crucial role in facilitating community interaction within a neighbourhood; we use them on a daily basis, and consequently they contribute to our general wellbeing. Mixed-use public spaces, such as successful downtowns, waterfronts, and town centers, are positive public spaces that have the ability to create a sense of place where the life of the community plays out.

Urban planners, architects, and communities must work together to create these kinds of neighbourhoods, where a range of activities and destinations located in close proximity to each other create a dynamic atmosphere that attract people into the neighbourhoods. A great public space cannot be measured by just its physical attributes; instead, the function of the public space should be put ahead of its form. The community should be a source of inspiration for the public space in order for the citizens to feel it is their own. A mixed-use space should take advantage of a local community’s assets, inspiration, and potential, ultimately creating good public spaces that promote people’s health, happiness, and well-being².

Toronto is a unique city that demonstrates how social cohesion is achieved through unique urban planning. With about half of its population born outside of Canada, Toronto is one of the world’s most diverse cities. The diversity of the community began with the numerous waves of immigrants after World War II. By 2001, Toronto had become one of the most multicultural cities in the world, where one hundred fifty-two languages and dialects were spoken³. Whereas the United States can be viewed as a melting pot of cultures, Toronto is seen as a mosaic where cultures are distinct from another and celebrated through a variety of events and festivals. Today, Toronto is a large and complex urban city. The purpose of this paper is to describe how the city creates social cohesion through its clearly defined, contemporary mixed-use public spaces, such as with its Nathan Phillips Square, while old Toronto neighbourhoods, such as Greektown and Little Poland, demonstrate how public spaces do not necessarily have to be defined by civic leaders—with good urban planning and atmosphere, a simple street can be used as a mixed-use public space!

The square plays an important role in the life of a city—it is a gathering point, a shared space, and a place a local community feels it has a sense of belonging to. Toronto’s mixed-use Nathan Phillips Square successfully creates social cohesion between local downtown residential communities and tourists of all different cultures, by creating a sense of place where the people simultaneously partakes in a variety of activities. Nathan Phillips Square is an energetic public place situated in front of Toronto City Hall, located in a neighbourhood that is constantly evolving. The Square meets the expectations of citizens and tourists, by hosting small and large-scale activities and events such as concerts, art displays, a weekly farmer’s market, the winter festival of lights, and other public events, including demonstrations. Flexibility of the Square is crucial, and the consequently it transforms from season to season. During the summer, locals and tourists can take a moment to relax around the reflecting pool, and in winter, it is used as a skating rink. Skates are available for rent, and visitors can conveniently use indoor change rooms, and take a break at the snack bar. Locals and tourists may also socialize around outdoor chess tables and monuments that symbolize freedom. The community is also united with arches that stretch over the reflecting pond/ice rink, which were named “Freedom Arches”, and a piece of the Berlin Wall lays at the base of the centre arch.

The citizens of Toronto dedicated these arches to the millions who struggled to gain and defend freedom, and to the tens of millions who suffered and died for the lack of it. In the middle of the Square, the Peace Garden honours the commitment of Torontonians to the principle of world peace, while free speech is promoted by a speaker’s podium located at the southwest corner. Lastly, beneath Nathan Phillips Square is one of the world’s largest underground parking garages, with space for twenty-four hundred cars⁴. This functional mixed-use public space is successful at bringing the diverse residents of

local downtown Torontonians together with tourists for small weekly events and activities, as well as large annual events, while also uniting them in a spiritual way through its symbolic monuments. It transforms depending on the time of year, and from one event to the next in order to facilitate the range of activities that take place within it.

However, Toronto's public spaces do not only consist of specific and defined spaces designed by city planners. On the contrary, many of the streets in Toronto's patchwork quilt of neighbourhoods have evolved to become an integral part of the city's identity, and also change in change in function and form at different times of the year. Toronto's neighbourhoods have evolved in many ways – some began as small villages or towns and others were simply created by city planners. All of Toronto's neighbourhoods have their own unique rich histories. Greektown, for example, is located on a street called Danforth Avenue, otherwise known as "The Danforth". This Greek community has grown to become the second largest outside of Greece itself. The street's strong character and welcoming atmosphere has created a vibrant public space that is always full of energy. The streets are lined with blue and white Greek flags, and signs are displayed in both English and Greek. It has become a popular destination for shopping, eating, walking, and people watching. Every August, an annual "Taste of the Danforth" festival is held along Danforth Avenue for three days and street is transformed as it celebrates Greek culture by bringing out the cuisine of the local restaurants into the streets. Greek bands play while locals and tourists enjoy delicious food and entertainment together. Past attendance numbers have reached as high as one million people over the three days⁵. The culture of the street transforms the public space and brings it to life while welcoming locals and tourists to experience the neighbourhood.

Another example of a street that has evolved into a mixed-use public space is Roncesvalles Avenue, known as Little Poland, which is the centre of Toronto's Polish community. There are several Polish-speaking restaurants, delicatessens and shops specializing in Polish goods and the sign "Mówimy po polsku" ("We speak Polish") is displayed in many storefronts. The office of *Gazeta*, Toronto's Polish language newspaper, is located on Roncesvalles Avenue as is the headquarters of the Canadian Polish Congress. Polish culture is also reflected in Roncesvalles through religion, where the Catholic faith is practiced. Two large Catholic churches on Roncesvalles, St. Casimir's Roman Catholic Church and St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church, are attended by Polish-Canadians who are dedicated to their faith. Just as with The Danforth, an annual Roncesvalles Avenue Polish Festival is held. In the fall, the festival transforms the street by featuring amusement rides, clothing, craft and food stands and outdoor musical entertainment, including polka music. Over seventy-five thousand people have attended the festival, and it is considered the largest Polish festival in Canada⁶. In these ways, Roncesvalles Avenue is a cultural hub in Toronto, which binds locals and tourists together through its distinct identity created by Polish cuisine, language, religion, and events.

In conclusion, a successful neighbourhood is one where people are brought together and feel a sense of belonging to. Toronto's public spaces exemplify how a diverse population can be brought together in an inclusive, integrated public space where positive social interactions take place. In these public spaces, experiences are shared, and identities and values of different cultures are celebrated. Successful public spaces can be clearly defined as in the case of Nathan Phillips Square, but they can also evolve over time from simple streets. Danforth Avenue and Roncesvalles Avenue are streets that have proven contribute to Toronto's cultural mosaic. They celebrate particular cultures, and invite others into their neighbourhood to experience them. Toronto's patchwork quilt of neighbourhoods that seamlessly coexist help make Toronto one of the more livable cities in the world.

Endnotes

- ¹ Peer Smets, Living apart or together? Multiculturalism at a neighbourhood level, *Community Development* 41 (2006), 293-306.
- ² Project For Public Spaces, What is Placemaking?, 5 May 2010, http://www.pps.org/what_is_placemaking/.
- ³ C. Benn, *The History of Toronto: An 11,000-Year Journey*, City of Toronto, Toronto 2006, 5 May 2010, <http://www.toronto.ca/culture/history/history-1951-onward.htm>.

- ⁴ City of Toronto, Toronto City Hall tour – Nathan Phillips Square, City of Toronto, Toronto 2010, 5 May 2010, http://www.toronto.ca/city_hall_tour/nps.htm.
- ⁵ Tourism Toronto, Greektown, The Toronto Convention and Visitors Association, Toronto 2010, 5 May 2010, <http://www.seetorontonow.com/Visitor/Explore/City-Neighbourhoods.aspx>.
- ⁶ City of Toronto, Roncesvalles Village BIA, City of Toronto, Toronto 2010, 5 May 2010, http://www.toronto.ca/bia/roncesvalles_village.htm.

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- [2] *Roncesvalles Village BIA*, City of Toronto, Toronto 2010, 5 May 2010, http://www.toronto.ca/bia/roncesvalles_village.htm.
- [3] *Toronto City Hall tour – Nathan Phillips Square*, City of Toronto, Toronto 2010, 5 May 2010, http://www.toronto.ca/city_hall_tour/nps.htm.
- [4] Project For Public Spaces, *What is Placemaking?*, 5 May 2010, http://www.pps.org/what_is_placemaking/.
- [5] Smets P., *Living apart of together? Multiculturalism at a neighbourhood level*, *Community Development* 41 (2006), 293-306.
- [6] Tourism Toronto, *Greektown*, The Toronto Convention and Visitors Association, Toronto 2010, 5 May 2010, <http://www.seetorontonow.com/Visitor/Explore/City-Neighbourhoods.aspx>.