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Art as a Bridge: Connecting Cultures and Generations at Waterfront Neighbourhood Centre

Introduction

The Waterfront Neighbourhood Centre (WNC) is a non-profit community centre located at 637 Queens Quay West, near the intersection of Barthurst Street. Established in 1991, the Centre has been serving the rapidly growing waterfront community for over three decades by offering diverse recreational and social programs catered to different age groups.



Figure 1: Waterfront Neighborhood Centre

During our initial visits, one observation stood out: the WNC's identity is deeply tied to its embracing of art as a defining feature. Murals, sculptures, and other forms of visual installations were seen everywhere, adding not just aesthetic value but further reflecting the community's diverse cultural history and shared heritage. These elements caught our attention and sparked the foundational question of our research: *How does the WNC use art to promote multicultural and multigenerational engagement?*



Figure 2. Observations of visual arts in the Centre

Specifically, we argue that, in a city as diverse as Toronto, spaces like the WNC showcase how art can be purposefully used to: a) promote cross-cultural understanding, b) bridge generational divides, and c) create an inclusive environment where different identities and shared experiences coexist.

For this research, we define each as the following: multiculturalism seeks the presence and interaction of diverse cultural groups within the shared urban space; multigenerational cohesion emphasizes building connections between children, youth, adults, and seniors to nurture bonding and social connections. And finally, art in its visual, explicit form—murals, sculptures, and installations—act as the unifying medium, transforming the WNC into a living canvas of collective identity and shared belongings.

Background/Literature Review

Our interest in the WNC stemmed from its location in Toronto's Harbourfront, a vibrant urban space known for being a spot of scenic beauty, tourist attraction and

cultural richness, making it a testament to the city's global reputation for multiculturalism—where various cultures, languages, and histories intersect daily. While these intersections provide remarkable opportunities for connection, they also present challenges in fostering cohesion across cultural and generational divides (Siemiatycki, 2011). Our initial observations of the WNC revealed that it seemed to be addressing these challenges using visual arts—such as paintings, photography, and storytelling exhibits, directly.

To frame our inquiry accordingly, we drew on three interconnected theoretical frameworks: Robert D. Putnam's Social Capital Theory, Henri Lefebvre's Right to the City Theory, as well as Leila Scannell and Robert Gifford's Place Attachment Theory.

Firstly, Putnam's Social Capital Theory (2000) focuses on how networks, trust, and shared norms underpin cohesive communities. His distinction between "bonding" social capital (connections within homogenous groups) and "bridging" social capital (connections across diverse groups) is particularly relevant in multicultural urban spaces like Toronto. At the WNC, art is a medium for building bridging social capital by creating shared experiences that transcend cultural and generational boundaries. However, as Lin (2001) critiques, social capital can often reproduce structural inequalities, with marginalized groups excluded from the networks it weaves due to unequal distribution of resources.

Moreover, the Right to the City Theory offers another dimension, addressing the power dynamics of urban spaces. Lefebvre (1996) argues that urban environments should be participatory and inclusive, reflecting the needs and identities of all residents. Public art, in this context, becomes a tool for democratizing urban space and amplifying marginalized voices. At the WNC, murals and other visual installations showcase local histories and cultural narratives, allowing community members to reclaim their space and assert their presence in the rapidly changing Harbourfront.

Finally, Place Attachment Theory examines the emotional and psychological bonds people form with specific places. Scannell and Gifford (2010) describe how these attachments arise from personal memories, cultural narratives, and shared experiences within a space. At the WNC, artistic interventions deepen these bonds by embedding local and cultural stories into the physical environment, and collaborative programming such as Dominoes by the Bentway, which will be further explained later, evokes a sense of belonging and continuity. However, as Manzo and Devine-Wright (2014) note, place

attachment can also be exclusionary, with established groups resisting changes that invite broader inclusivity. This duality highlights the delicate balance required to create spaces that honour existing attachments while remaining open to new perspectives.

Despite these theoretical insights, the existing literature rarely investigates how these dynamics—social capital, urban rights, and place attachment—intersect in shared community spaces. Studies by Mitchell (2003) and Kwon (2002) have explored how public art fosters identity and dialogue, while Sternfeld and Miles (2004) focus on art's capacity to promote social cohesion. However, these works often address cultural or generational divides in isolation, failing to consider how art can simultaneously bridge both. Similarly, research on place attachment tends to prioritize homogenous populations, leaving questions about its applicability in multicultural and multigenerational contexts unanswered.

This gap in literature, then, is particularly relevant in Toronto's Harbourfront, where rapid urban development and redevelopment and cultural diversity converge. While studies of public art and community spaces are extensive, little attention has been paid to how community spaces like the WNC intentionally use art to create cohesion across both cultures and generations. Henceforce, we aim to specifically address this gap by uncovering how art transforms community spaces into inclusive environments that reflect and connect Toronto's diverse populations.

Methodology and Reflection

In addition to our initial observations, we used three key research methodologies: mapping analysis, ex-situ research, and semi-structured interviews. First, we conducted a mapping analysis of the WNC, which helped us assess its spatial layout and explore its connections to broader city art initiatives, such as the Bentway. Our collaborative ex-situ research with the Hunter College team from New York City led us to review official reports from WNC, the BIA, and local NGOs. Finally, our interview with Chase Tam, the Manager of Program Administration & Recreation at WNC, provided us with rich insights into the arts programs, including their structure, content, participants, and future challenges.

Throughout the process, we also applied Jane Agee's approach to developing research questions: we developed our questions through direct engagement with the site, allowing them to evolve based on observation. Rather than starting with fixed

hypotheses, we began with broad, open-ended questions that we refined as our interaction with the WNC deepened (Agee, 2009, p. 445).

Moreover, our positionality as University of Toronto students inevitably shaped our research. Coming from outside the community with an academic and observational lens, we acknowledge the privilege of accessing a space as tight-knit as the WNC. Our limited time and lack of direct participation in the arts programs gave our perspective, admittedly, an extractive quality, offering only fragmented insights into the Centre's dynamics. Additionally, our reliance on a single interview further limits the scope of our understanding, as one perspective cannot fully capture the complexities of WNC's multifaceted community.

Results/Data

The findings from our research align with our initial observations that the WNC plays a crucial role in encouraging artistic expression through visual arts. However, it extended our understanding by demonstrating that the centre's influence reaches further than we had initially recognized.

First, our map revealed that the WNC's strategic location in one of Toronto's most multicultural and rapidly developing areas enhances its ability to engage a broad spectrum of the population, including middle to high-income residents, newcomers, refugees, and low-income families. We also learned that the WNC's multifaceted art programs are designed to engage a diverse range of participants, including children, adults, and seniors. These programs are centred around visual arts, music, and dance, and they emphasize multigenerational participation, with activities available throughout the day to ensure accessibility for different age groups.



Figure 3. Alternative Cartography of the WNC

Furthermore, the ex-situ research revealed that the WNC's proximity to larger art initiatives, such as those organized by The Bentway, places it at the center of city-wide art activities. As part of a partnership with The Bentway, the WNC also participated in the Dominoes public art project, which brought together communities through a 2.5 km journey of 8,000 giant falling dominoes. This collaboration underscores the WNC's involvement in broader urban art projects, elevating its role from a local community center to an integral part of the city's cultural transformation. As highlighted in the findings, the WNC has a long history of integrating art into its programming, dating back to the 1990s, positioning it as a key site for artistic expression and community engagement in the area.

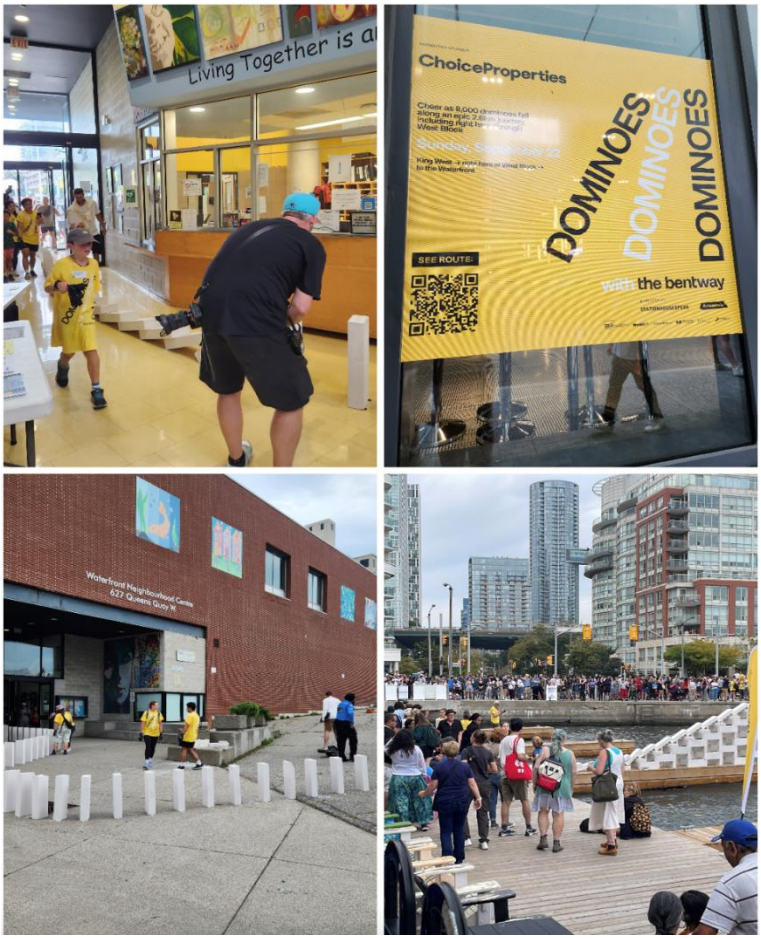


Figure 4. The Bentway's Dominoes Project taking place at the WNC in September 2024, as discovered in research by Hunter College, NYC's ex-situ research

Lastly and most importantly, our interview with Chase Tam, the program manager at the WNC, illuminated how the center's programming promotes multigenerational and multicultural engagement. Tam explained the importance of Art Night Out, a program that invites community members such as youth and seniors to create murals, facilitated by a professional artist. "It's our main art class," Tam explained, "and it's facilitated by a professional artist who works here as well. She is a muralist and does a lot of murals around the city." This explicit art program is just one example of how the WNC integrates art into its daily programming. On the contrary, Tam emphasized that the center focuses on offering a diverse range of artistic forms to ensure that all participants find something that resonates with them, stating, "Usually, when we think about art, we think about painting or drawing. And realistically, not everybody likes visual things. So, we make it a point to include a variety of art to access." This diversity of artistic offerings

then include a multimedia studio for dance class, recording music and podcasts as well as a theatre, which ensures accessibility for individuals with different artistic preferences.

Another example of the Centre's multigenerational focus is seen in the seniors' Bollywood dance class. Tam noted that seniors' consistent participation is a clear indicator of the program's success, stating, "They are the superstars of this community, and their retention is one of the clearest signs of success. If they keep coming back, you know the program is meaningful to them." Moreover, the WNC's intentional celebration of cultural events—such as Diwali, National Day, Muslim Month, and Indigenous Peoples' History Month—ensures that participants not only express their own cultural identities but also engage with and learn about other cultures. Tam remarked on this inclusivity, saying, "We'll do everything, based on the feedback from our community and the changes we see in the people coming in ourselves. It's very intentional on our part."



Figure 5. Bulletin Board at the WNC with flyers showing the variety of embodied art programs as stated by Chase Tam

Analysis

Thus, it became clear that our initial focus on visual arts—murals, paintings, and other static art forms—as the central way the WNC used art to engage its community, was limited in scope.

In reality, we found that the WNC's use of art went beyond traditional visual forms, incorporating embodied art such as dance, movement, and performance, which played a significant role in promoting both multicultural and multigenerational engagement. This shift in focus from purely visual art to embodied art emerged as one of the key insights from our data, as we began to identify how movement and interactive art forms created more immediate, visceral connections across cultural and generational divides.

Our data analysis was guided by a process of coding, where we carefully examined our observations and the interview data, identifying recurring themes and patterns. The key codes that emerged were: art programming, multicultural engagement, multigenerational engagement, and partnerships. At the outset, we had expected the visual arts to dominate as the primary means of engagement, but in our findings, embodied art, which includes dance and movement workshops, became a focal point in our analysis. Specifically, these forms of art were not merely secondary or supplementary to visual art; they were essential in creating more immediate connections. For example, programs like Bollywood dance classes are not just about performing or learning a particular style of dance; they are about shared physical experiences. These embodied art forms create a communal atmosphere where physical movement becomes a medium for connection, transcending language and cultural barriers cultivating engagement in a way that purely visual forms could not.

This embodied art, then, resonates deeply with Place Attachment Theory (Scannell & Gifford, 2010), which highlights how individuals develop emotional bonds with spaces through their experiences and interactions within them. When individuals come together in an embodied creative process, whether through dance, music, or other interactive art, they are physically and emotionally invested in the space, contributing to a collective memory that strengthens their connection to the WNC. It is through these physical engagements that participants form strong attachments to the community space, not only as a place to express their own identities but also as a space that invites and values the contributions of others. For example, seniors' consistent involvement in these programs, as noted by Chase Tam during the interview, is a testament to the significance of this type of engagement, pointing to the fact that embodied art, in fostering both physical and emotional connections, creates lasting bonds with the space and with other participants, reinforcing a sense of belonging and community.

We also found that multicultural engagement was not just a byproduct of visual art but was actively facilitated through embodied forms. The dance programs at the WNC, including Afrobeat and Bollywood, reflect the changing demographic of the area, where immigrant populations have become a significant part of the community. The WNC uses these art forms to celebrate and showcase the cultural diversity of the area while encouraging engagement across generations. As Right to the City Theory (Lefebvre, 1996) suggests, urban spaces should be participatory and inclusive, reflecting the needs and identities of all residents. By integrating cultural dance forms into its programming, the WNC not only provides a platform for cultural expression but also transforms public space into an arena for shared cultural experiences, enhancing the sense of ownership and participation within the community.

Lastly, our analysis also highlighted how partnerships with organizations such as The Bentway and MASSIVart have expanded the reach of the WNC's art initiatives, facilitating collaborative public art projects that bring together diverse communities in shared creative spaces. Through these partnerships, the WNC has managed to link local community building with city-wide art movements, extending the influence of its programs while ensuring that local cultural narratives are preserved and celebrated. The collaborative aspect of these partnerships reinforces the idea that public art, especially when it incorporates both visual and embodied forms, has the potential to democratize space, enabling a wide range of people to contribute to the artistic and social landscape of the city.

Conclusion

During our research, our key question changed. From the beginning, we thought WNC put more emphasis on visual art in their programs, the same as how they decorate the interior and exterior spaces of WNC. After investigation, we found art is embedded in programs, and art stands as a more implicit idea. Therefore, the research question changed to "How does the Waterfront Neighbourhood Centre's art programming address the unique needs and priorities of its multicultural and multigenerational community? " What we found are:

1) WNC designs arts programs based on the needs of different ages (babies, children, youth, adults, families, and seniors), trying to build a life circle and enhance community belongings;

2) WNC designs multi-types of arts programs, embedding art into programs rather than focusing on purely visual art;

3) WNC designs arts programs revealing the multi-cultural background, encouraging the engagement of diverse demographics, and opening opportunities for cross-cultural understanding and connection; and

4) WNC combines its own arts programs with bigger city projects, enabling community members to engage in city-wide art initiatives.

Ultimately, this research has reshaped our understanding of art's role in community spaces, highlighting both its potential and limitations. Art can be a powerful tool for inclusivity, facilitating cultural exchange, telling shared stories, and forging lasting connections. However, it can also be exclusionary, often shaped by elite preferences that marginalize certain voices. For community centres like the WNC, the challenge lies in balancing these dynamics while navigating issues such as limited resources and the sustainability of artistic programs over time.

In Toronto's context, we believe the city should look to the WNC as a model for future public projects and community spaces. Rather than facilitating a transient "in-and-out" culture, the WNC demonstrates how art can cultivate genuine, lasting relationships, build trust, and reflect the city's diverse, multigenerational fabric. By integrating collaborative, community-driven art programs, public spaces across Toronto can become places people do not just pass through, but truly inhabit—spaces where every identity is valued and seen.

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