Interstitial Space: An Exploration of the Urban Landscape and Marginal Communities of Tacoma, Washington

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Introduction

Cities, and the urban landscape they comprise, are complicated collections of social, political, and historical forces. In the United States, and much of the world, these cities are simultaneously two things: a patchwork of private property and public space, and densely populated areas with a notable social fabric. In all cities around the world, there are better properties and worse properties, and considering contemporary inequality in America specifically, there are wealthy Americans and poor Americans. Of these poorer Americans, many live on the same city streets we see and walk down everyday. This project is an exploration of that junction — between urban space in America and American society.

With this project I have been researching the interactions between Tacoma’s homeless population and interstitial spaces. In conversation with Professor Andrew Gardner, who has conducted extensive field research on the subject in Doha, Qatar, the aim of this project was to research the vitality and social importance of interstitial space to the homeless communities of our society in this era of high inequality in America. The goal of this project is to explore Professor Gardner’s hypothesis that this space does in fact hold important social functionality to these marginalized communities and to work with him to further develop this concept with field-based empirical evidence. In this project I sought to explore new avenues and ways of thinking about this space to build a broader understanding of its presence in our urban areas and its functional possibilities.
Defining Interstitial Space

This unplanned or abandoned space can be seen throughout urban areas-- underpasses, abandoned lots, alleyways, and many other areas we are blindly trained to overlook. It consists of those spaces where planning and boundaries are unclear or non-existent; a space seemingly missed, un-calculated, or overlooked by city planners. Interstitial urban space can vary immensely in size, accessibility, and visibility. It is typically found between other things, which are often privately owned and have a noticeable, designated function. Interstitial space is a liminal space that serves as a sort of glue, interwoven into our cities, that fill the space between the start of one planned space and the end of another, the rugged edges between property ownership. These interstitial spaces are evident everywhere, and are especially dense in urban areas, but, by the nature of the space, often are overlooked by the city and the public.

As progress in the built landscape around us never ceases, these spaces can be thought of as a byproduct of spatial development and human activity. In other words, interstitial space is an externality of urban growth, a space that exists outside of the city we perceive. Historically urban planners, especially modernist planners pursuing the functional separation/distinction of spaces, have thought of it as a negative externality, a functionless space, a missed opportunity. In this analysis, however, I will attempt to reframe the concept of interstitial space as a positive externality, a space the serves a vital function for marginal communities, and a space that is underutilized and should be celebrated rather than actively avoided.
Background

In some of his recent, forthcoming work, Professor Andrew Gardner introduces and describes the concept of *interstitial urban space*. According to Gardner, this space “comprises the zones and spaces between plans, the unplanned, spaces that for some reason or another have elided planners’ gaze,” (Gardner n.d.).

Professor Gardner, in his forthcoming essay argues the importance of interstitial space and vital social functions it holds, particularly to more marginal groups, such as Gulf state migrant workers, in urban societies (Gardner n.d.). He has developed these new ideas through his extensive work in Doha, Qatar.

At first glance this space seems totally functionless - it was, in fact created with no functionality in mind. However, previous academic research suggests the possibility that interstitial space, or “junk space,” provides functions for communities overlooked by the general public (Koolhaas 2002).

Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg also identity this type of space in their ethnography *Righteous Dopefiend*. Through extensive field work, they reveal how homeless individuals use interstitial spaces as quasi-domestic spaces. Similarly, Kim Dovey describes these spaces as sought after spaces for drug users. These spaces can provide users with a space private enough to escape police intervention, but public enough to be noticed by passersby in the case of overdosing.
Common Identifying Features of Interstitial Space

Interstitial spaces are can be easily identified based off of a series of recurring indicators that signify the end of city or individual responsibility / concern. Interstitial space often signifies the cessation of space planned for pedestrian use-marked by sidewalk ends and the construction of fences around the perimeter. These spaces are often areas where trash and debris accumulate, as well as where invasive plant life thrive, spread rapidly, and limit access and use of the space. Another common identifying feature is graffiti. As these spaces are often less visible to the public eye, generally escaping scrutiny, graffiti artists are commonly drawn to them, typically filling any amount of wall space the area possesses. Signs of drug usage are also an indicator of the space, visualized by used needles, discarded tobacco/marijuana product containers, broken liquor bottles, etc. Lastly, these spaces are often occupied, or hold traces of occupation, by humans. Homeless encampments are a steady indicator of a space being interstitial, and, when first exploring interstitial space, was a factor that grabbed my attention the most.
Methods

In my research, I heavily utilized participant observation to observe how people interact with this space, what functions the space serves, what common happenings occur, and what common identifying features these spaces share. I observed normal everyday occurrences and abnormal events, the movement and attitudes of people, the mundane and the exciting. This participant observation helped me gain a hands on understanding of the domain, the people interacting with the space, and the spaces functionality. Also, as an element of participant observation, I was able to have informal, unstructured conversations with individuals that I would not otherwise be able to sit down with for a formal interview. These conversations, although often short and passing, really helped illuminate a perspective of this space that I was trying to understand.

As interstitial space is a concept more easily explained and understood with visual evidence, I also took photographs to help document these spaces.

Any interviews I was able to pursue were semi-structured in nature and conducted over the phone or on zoom. All interviews were conducted and analyzed using a modified form of grounded theory (Emerson et al. 1995).
Challenges

Similar to many other researchers, the COVID-19 pandemic was a difficult challenge for me in pursuing this project. Due to social distancing laws, new IRB protocols, and general concern for the health of myself and others, I was not able to pursue the formal interviews that were to serve as the backbone of my project. COVID-19 also restricted my access to shelters and other spaces around Tacoma.

Another challenge I faced this summer was time limitations. By the nature of this research grant, I was given ten weeks to complete this project. Ethnographic work typically requires a much longer span in order to fully immerse oneself in a community/space and build trusting relations with subjects (but with that being said I feel confident in the progress I was able to make and am excited about possibilities for continuing this research and further developing these concepts). In my initial project design I allocated much of the preliminary research and field mapping to my final project for Ethnographic Methods last Spring. Due to the pandemic at hand and the switch to remote learning, I was forced to pursue a different final project all together and pushed back this preliminary work to the beginning of this summer. This meant that much of the first half of the summer was spent mapping interstitial spaces around Tacoma and building the framework in which I was to build the field component of my research on.
Tacoma’s Homelessness Response

In 2017 the City of Tacoma declared a State of Public Health Emergency in attempts to address the health and safety concerns caused by growing encampments around the city. The city has continued to operate under this declaration for the last few years by extending the ordinance several times. In doing so they have eliminated a fixed end date and replaced it with a new metric: getting 95% of unsheltered individuals identified during the annual Pierce County Point-in-Time count access to shelter for three consecutive years. The Point-in-Time count is a one day event where outreach professionals volunteers survey homeless individuals in Tacoma to document their experiences, review trends in homelessness, and help plan for future programs. Also this is a useful snapshot for the city, many limitations, such as weather, availability of overflow shelter beds, number of volunteers, and level of engagement of homeless individuals, make this data a very rough estimate with limited comparative ability.

With this Emergency Declaration, the City of Tacoma layed out a three step plan to address problems surrounding homeless populations. In the first two steps the city focussed on “mitigation” (stronger enforcement of existing laws, site cleanups, etc) and the creation of temporary emergency shelters. Two temporary emergency shelters have been constructed and inhabited in Tacoma. The third and final step of of the original plan was to provide short term transitional housing to individuals experiencing homelessness. This housing has failed to materialize in the last few years, and no solid plans have been put in place to continue striving for it, despite the millions of dollars the City has put into funding this process.
Tacoma’s Homelessness Response
Tacoma’s Homelessness Response

The Emergency Declaration allows the City to rapidly adapt policy surrounding this issue and allocate new funding to provide shelter and resources to those currently homeless in Tacoma. I have found that it also allows for ongoing and targeted removal of homeless individuals from public space.

On December 1, 2019, the City of Tacoma officially banned camping/encampments in public parks. This ban allows the city to clear encampments in these spaces with little notice without guaranteeing adequate shelter for displaced individuals. The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, in a letter to the City of Tacoma, called the code “ineffective, cruel and expensive public policy to punish sheltering oneself in a public space when there are not adequate alternative locations to meet the basic need for shelter.”
Tacoma’s Encampment Cleanups and Site Reclamation

In 2017, Colin DeForrest, the then homeless services manager of Tacoma, described the city’s mitigation strategy as “a twisted game of hide and go seek.” Now, three years later, we see little progress or change in how the City of Tacoma is approaching these issues.

The city of Tacoma uses an Encampment Response Map to document 311 complaints, encampment removals and cleanups, and site reclamation interventions.

https://www.cityoftacoma.org/cms/One.aspx?portalId=169&pageId=153621

There have been many contentions over the city’s processes from activist groups, outreach organizations, and homeless individuals.

The following is a 5 step process the city claims to use to clear encampments:

1. City staff find or are notified of an encampment site.
2. The City's Homeless Outreach Team visit the site and determine next steps.
3. The site is posted with 72-hours' notice that the property will be cleaned up and those living in the encampment are offered assistance finding shelter and services.
4. On the scheduled cleanup day a private contractor or City services will clean up the site to meet Tacoma Municipal Code standards for public health and safety.
5. Site Reclamation may occur once the site has been cleaned to help prevent the encampment from returning.
Tacoma’s Encampment Response Map
Variance in Interstitial Space Functionality

Spatial Modifications:

These spaces are often minimized, blocked off, or modified to be functionless/inhabitable to individuals that commonly use/occupy the space. These modifications to the space are usually low cost solutions to restrict access and remove possibly attractions to the space. For example, the city commonly dumps large piles of boulders in flat portions of interstitial space to prevent homeless individuals from building encampments or having a comfortable place to sleep. These areas are also commonly fenced posted with trespassing warnings.
Variance in Interstitial Space Functionality

Terrain:

Spaces that are flatter, or have flatter portions, are much more likely to be used by homeless individuals than sloped spaces. Homeless encampments also seem to conglomerate in areas with tough, dusty soil that is unsuitable for plant growth. This allows for more freedom of mobility within the space and is more accommodating for encampments. Another sought after feature of many interstitial spaces is weather protection. Spaces that have overhead cover from rain and snow, such as pedestrian bridges and overpasses, and/or wind protection by surrounding walls, are used by homeless individuals more commonly than spaces without.
Variance in Interstitial Space Functionality

Visibility:

Possibly the largest factor to consider when thinking about the functionality of interstitial space is how visible it is to the public and authority. Even within larger interstitial areas, homeless individuals will almost always gravitate to spaces that are the least visible from surrounding areas. This gives the individual more privacy, more personal safety and protection of belongings, and attracts less attention from authority or others who, for one reason or another, do not want them in that space.
Capitol Hill Organized Protest

In congruence with the recent worldwide Black Lives Matter protests over the ongoing, widespread institutional discrimination and violence against Black individuals, CHOP (formally refered to as the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone) was an occupation protest and self-proclaimed autonomus zone established on June 8th in the Capiton Hill area in Seattle. Over the course of its nearly month long physical existence, I frequented the space as an extension of my research and sat in on community meetings and trainings, spoke with individuals occupying and/or living in the space, and recorded my observations of daily happenings. The space was not only an area for protesters to meet and organize, but also to live in, to gain access to free resources, and to experience and experiment with a democratic, bureaucracy free, and “people run” space that could serve as an example for what life could be without an institutionally oppressive police force. The space not only attracted protesters and organizers from across WA, but also a large amount of homeless individuals living in Seattle. These homeless individuals were able to live in the zone alongside protesters, and, like other occupants, had access to all the free resources it offered. These resources include: food, water, sanitation, bathrooms, space to camp, legal help, mental health professionals, medical care and first aid, and basic supplies such as masks and umbrellas. CHOP was officially disbanded by Seattle PD on July 1st over growing public safety concerns.
Capitol Hill Organized Protest
What We Can Learn From CHOP

Communally run spaces are possible and can make a positive impact across marginalized communities.

Spaces without fear of police involvement can attract homeless individuals from other spaces throughout the city where offering adequate resources is difficult and often unattempted.

Accessible spaces where homeless individuals are allowed to come together in larger numbers allow outreach organizations to come to individuals and offer resources where they reside rather than needing to be actively sought out.

Organized spaces like CHOP make resource distribution easier, especially in terms of sanitation.

Of course, there are also many concerns with these spaces as well. To name a few of the more legitimate concerns: personal safety, protection of belongings, cleanliness of common spaces, trash accumulation, and noise. These concerns were heavily debated within CHOP and required intentional reflection.
Possibilities for Future Applied work

Professor Gardner and I have been discussing the possibility for future applied work in the aftermath of this research project. Although I would like to pursue this kind of work with the background I will have through this research project, I have some hesitations that I would like to address. To start, I need to make sure that the information I choose to share cannot be used by the city or individuals to harm or further marginalize Tacoma’s homeless population. This will require thoughtful and constant reflection as I continue this research and present my findings. Ultimately, I intend to seek ways to turn this research into advocacy for the homeless community.

I am looking at James Spradley’s applied work in the wake of this ethnography *You Owe Yourself A Drunk*, to serve as an excellent and thought-provoking model of how independent research can be used to create lasting institutional and legislative change in advocacy of marginalized communities and silenced voices.

“Interstitial space in which liberatory and emancipatory possibilities can flourish” (Harvey 2005).
Conclusion

Interstitial space exists in abundance throughout our urban landscapes and is subject to many false understandings and missed opportunities from the public and the state alike.

This space serves as a vital resource to our city’s homeless population in terms of living space, comfortability, protection and general safety, and social community.

As a consequence of the City of Tacoma’s ongoing effort to push the homeless population further into the margins of our city, homeless individuals are increasingly utilizing interstitial space to fulfil their needs.

I believe Tacoma, and other cities around the United States that struggle with increasingly large homeless populations, must reassess their current strategies to seek a better understanding of this space, its functionality, and its importance to marginal populations.

Not only do I believe that these spaces should be better preserved, but also that these spaces could be harnessed by community members, outreach organizations, and city officials more intentionally to better serve these oppressed communities that are so often overlooked.
Sources

- Gardner, A. (ND). Interstitial Space and the Urban Landscape in Doha, Qatar.