

Decline of public space hard on homeless, says Calgary researcher

Privatization of public space a subtle threat to democracy

Montreal, Quebec – June 4 – The increased privatization of public space is leading to increasing marginalization of the homeless and the people on the fringes of society, says a University of Calgary researcher.

And that, she warns, may weaken democracy by keeping better-off people unaware of how others live.

Ann Levey examines the issue of public space in a paper presented at the 2010 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences taking place at Montreal's Concordia University.

Public space, she says, used to be a standard feature of urban life – think of Main Street or the town square or any place people gathered. But it's been declining in recent decades as vibrant downtowns have given way to shopping malls and power centres.

While shopping malls may seem like public spaces, they are not: They are privately owned, and they exist with an agenda: getting people to buy things. They also regulate who comes in and what goes on, generally forbidding such things as panhandling or political activity, says Levey.

Even charitable activities are subject to control.

A true public space, she adds, is not regulated. It is, she says, open to its surroundings, has multiple access points, is freely accessible to anyone, is open to a non-prescribed list of activities, is uncontrolled, without an agenda, and allows people to interact with each other.

"It's not a space where people do private things," she adds.

The interactivity generated by a truly public space, says Levey, is key. It helps bolster democracy by providing a space where people must meet and deal with people who are not like themselves.

As public space declines, says Levey, "one of the things this means is class segregation. The wealthy and the middle class are cut off from the rest of the population. And that has some serious impacts from the point of view of democratic possibilities.

"If you have groups who have no understanding about how the other half lives, you have polarization. "Public space is crucially important to people who have no private space," she adds. "So the privatization of public space is hardest on the people who have nowhere else to go."

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