The Socio-Geographical Effects of Exclusionary Space on Street Performers in Victoria, B.C.

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Introduction

Street performers are persons who will entertain in publicly accessible urban areas, receiving income solely by donation (Simpson, 2011). Street performers are valued for the spontaneity and conviviality they bring to public spaces, and are important for sense of place (Simpson, 2008; 2011). For a street performer, location is paramount. Important factors include foot traffic, sense of place, and the physical layout of space. The laws and regulations governing street performers, which differ between municipalities, effect these factors. Increasingly legalized since the 1980s (Smith, 1996), street performance is now mostly allowed in North America, but regulated by bylaws and permitting systems. The way these formal regulations attempt to control a street performer’s use of space is significant to their existence because street performers do not have fixed wages. The Lower Causeway is Victoria’s most illustrious place to perform, but permits are limited and must be auditioned for.

Research Goals

- Explore the socio-spatial consequences of formal regulation on street performers
- Identify individuals who this exclusionary space benefits or harms
- Seek solutions for those who do not benefit

Methods

- Semi-structured interviews
- Participant observation
- Textual analysis of online videos
- Transect walks

Table 1. Comparing regulations of street performers between public streets and the Lower Causeway of Victoria, B.C.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Streets</th>
<th>The Lower Causeway</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Governing body</td>
<td>City of Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual permit cost</td>
<td>$25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application process</td>
<td>Complete a form Have two pieces of ID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panhandlers</td>
<td>Allowed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing</td>
<td>Two hours at a location First come first served</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regulatory Differences

Summarized in Table 1 are the key differences between the regulations of public streets and the Lower Causeway. Most notably, the permits for the Lower Causeway are substantially more expensive, and may only be acquired through an audition process. However, it is also significant that panhandlers are not allowed on the Lower Causeway, and that performance times are scheduled by the performers. Since the Greater Victoria Harbour Authority (GVHA) is a distinct entity from the municipality, they hire a contractor to organize the street performers and vendors, and private commissioners to enforce regulations.

The Spatial Effects of Regulation

Since the GVHA implemented these regulations in 2003, the street performer community has been divided spatially and socially. Those who are unable to afford a permit, win at the audition, or wish to travel, are excluded from the space. Also excluded are the panhandlers, who are then concentrated on other public streets. By these exclusions, the Lower Causeway becomes a structured experience for the tourists to enjoy, and the Lower Causeway is important to their impression of the city. By granting selectivity, the audition process shapes the space to be diverse, but demands quality and image standards. Street performing has historically been dominated by men (Harrison-Pepper, 1990), but the audition process allows women to be preferentially selected. However, seniority means an equal gender split will take time to achieve. Additionally, certain types of acts do not work well with the regulatory structure. For example, clowns, chalk artists and bag pipers are not accepted. By dividing performers geographically, the places themselves are altered in the perceptions of the pedestrians that visit them.

Conclusion

Every exclusive space is simultaneously an inclusive space also. There is no evidence that the GVHA or the City of Victoria have exploitive intentions, and street performers spoke well of the bylaw officers, security guards, and organizers of the Lower Causeway. However, the Lower Causeway is a valuable resource for performers—and deciding who may use it is a geographical and political affair. The Lower Causeway offers a controlled environment for developed street performers to benefit from. Although excluded street performers are left with more flexibility, they must compete with other individuals for resources and space on the street.

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References