Stability and Crisis: Creating a Sense of Home in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

by

Sophia Taylor

Bachelor of Arts, University of British Columbia, 2021

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in the Department of Anthropology

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Supervisory Committee

Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier, Supervisor

Department of Anthropology

Daromir Rudnyckyj, Member

Department of Anthropology

Abstract

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) is an extensively researched neighbourhood, as the nexus of the city's affordable housing crisis. The lack of affordable apartments and houses in the area has led to widespread improvisation and adaptation among community members. Many living spaces, such as SRO hotels and streets, do not provide the same sense of privacy and control common among those with access to private, self-contained suites and houses. Despite the unique nature of these practices, the process of home-making in the DTES has gone largely ignored by ethnographies of home. This thesis presents community members' own stories of home, shared in interviews, to argue for the broadening of the ethnographic understanding of the home.

In the DTES, community members speak not only of a private, physical home in their rooms or suites, but of a broader social home consisting of friendships, family, and other interpersonal supports. These two meanings of the word "home" coexist in the neighbourhood, and often overlap to demonstrate a strong sense of place-based community. This thesis argues for the inclusion of these definitions of home in home ethnography, broadening ethnographic understandings of the home to allow for the improvisation and flexibility that are so common in contexts of housing insecurity. The DTES described by community members provides a vibrant, layered home for its residents. Although many community members struggle to find stable housing, many already have a sense of home; this sense of home is presented here at the intersection of home and urban ethnographies.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the Downtown Eastside community members who generously shared their stories with me, and to anyone whose definition of "home" may diverge from traditional understandings of the term.

Chapter 1: Home-making in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside

Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (DTES) is somewhat infamous, often referred to in sensationalist news reporting as “Canada’s poorest postal code.” The neighbourhood is known as the centre of Vancouver’s housing and drug crises. When I first came to Vancouver at age 18, an acquaintance told me that “if you walk around in the Downtown Eastside for an hour, you’ll see someone OD; if you walk around for three hours, you’ll see someone die.” This was, of course, a massive exaggeration, but it speaks to the common perception of the neighbourhood by those outside of its community. The Downtown Eastside is treated as a place to be avoided, a place characterized by associations with death, poverty, and tragedy; this perception, however, rarely considers the lived experience of DTES community members, and ignores their agency in building communities and making homes within the area. By virtue of being occupied, the DTES

is a home, and people who live there find comfort and joy in their surroundings, a fact often ignored in the quippy descriptions given by those who have spent little time there.

The DTES, like any urban environment, is layered with meanings given by people who live there. However, home-making in the Downtown Eastside is a process that has often been ignored, and where it has been researched, it is not referred to as home-making. Community building, property rights, and place-based identities have all been explored, but their intersection in the framework of home has been missed, potentially due to the powerful assumption that people struggling with poverty and housing insecurity do not *have* homes to make their own. Home ethnography has, historically, interpreted a lack of stable housing as a lack of home, and thus ignored the important features of the home that emerge in these contexts. In anthropology, the home has largely been considered in terms of control, as a space customized to the occupant's comfort (Pink 2004; 2015; Pink et. al 2020; Lenhard & Samanani 2020; Cook 2014). However, this focus on the control of the physical environment ignores the home-making practices of people who may not have such control over their physical environment. I argue that people experiencing housing insecurity in the DTES still have a clearly defined sense of home in the absence of control, albeit one that has slipped through the cracks of previous iterations of home ethnography. As a result of this oversight, the home experiences of marginalized people have not been accurately represented in home ethnography. People who may not have a private or permanent place to live do not lack a sense of home. However, their sense of home may take alternative forms to the values of privacy and control that characterize home ethnography.

This research identifies the forms that home commonly takes in the Downtown Eastside, and examines, through the stories shared with me, the ways in which home feelings tie people to this specific place. The social and physical home, as I refer to them, are two sides of the same

coin, comprising parallel ways of relating to space. All the community members I spoke to, when asked what felt "like home" to them, referenced specific people, relationships, and social environments, in addition to specific physical spaces. In some cases, community members were unable to put their finger on a specific physical place, but spoke easily about *people* who felt like home. Where the physical home consists, broadly, of a physical place in which the occupant feels safe and secure, the social home refers to the interpersonal context in which the same is true. The social home in the DTES is tied directly to identity with the neighbourhood, making it a deeply place-based and interpersonal concept. In conducting interviews for this project, I asked each participant to show me a place that felt "like home" to them. As a result of this, I found myself in a remarkable variety of spaces radiating out from the DTES. I met with community members not only in their apartments or rooms but in parks, restaurants, community centres, and on the street itself. Despite the wide variety of types of places participants chose, few wanted to travel far from the DTES. The locations themselves ranged from central, downtown locations, East to Commercial Drive; this whole area is only 3 km East-West. Within this area, it seemed as though any place that existed was considered home by someone. The following chapters will each contain specific vignettes of places, and conversations I had there.

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Vancouver's DTES has, historically, been home to much of the city's affordable and temporary housing. The area's combination of industrial zoning and proximity to the city's downtown core has long made it affordable for working-class and poor residents. While proximity to the downtown core has obvious advantages, nearby industry also kept rents low and

housing abundant. The DTES covers a roughly ten-block area centred around the intersection of Hastings and Main St (see fig. 1). This is a former industrial zone, now filled with single-room accommodation (SRA)[1] hotels and other forms of affordable and low-barrier housing. The area borders the popular commercial district of Gastown and blurs into Vancouver's Chinatown and Strathcona areas, making it a prime breeding ground for frontier gentrification in recent years (Wideman and Masuda 2018), although community activism and the coronavirus pandemic have slowed commercial development (DTES SRO Collaborative).

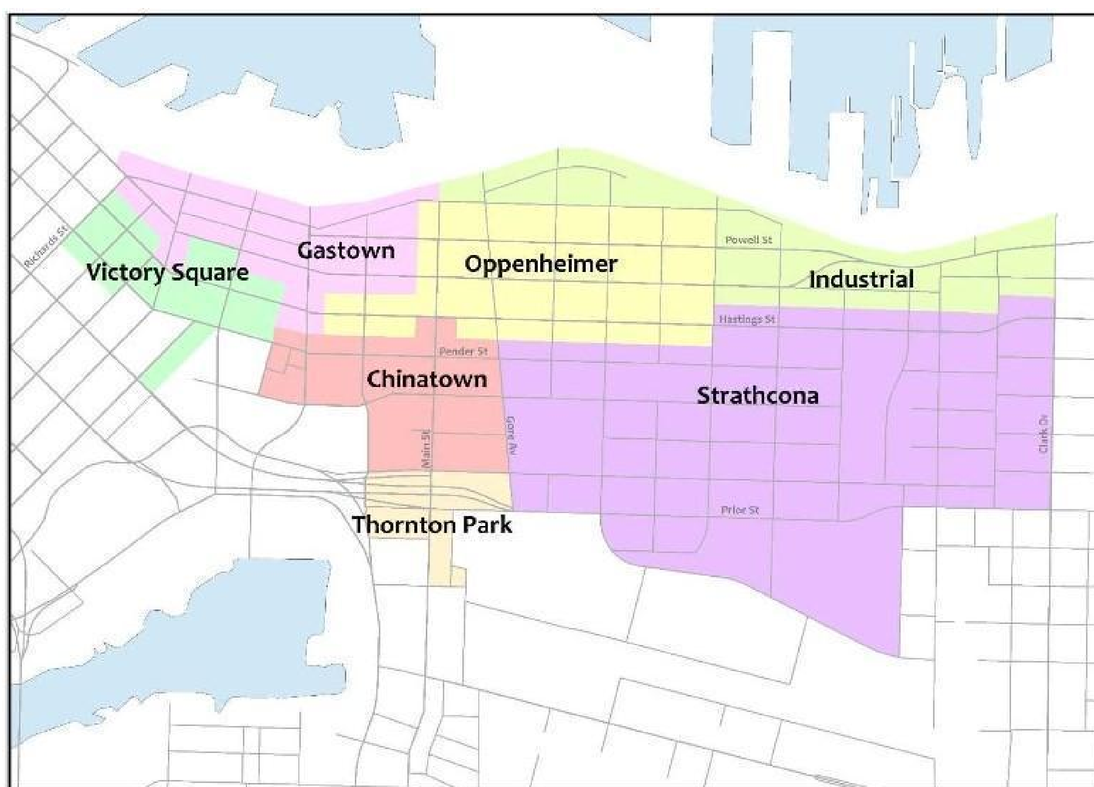

Fig. 1: A map of the various districts East of Vancouver's Downtown (Huang 2019); the Oppenheimer district encompasses most of the Downtown Eastside, and is commonly referred to as the DTES in government and city planning; however, parts of Chinatown, Strathcona, and the industrial zone to the North and East are colloquially considered part of the DTES.
Source: https://www-deslibris-ca.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/ID/10103046

[1] The terms single-room occupancy (SRO) and single-room accommodation (SRA) are interchangeable; "SRA" is most commonly used in Vancouver's bylaws, zoning, and planning, but colloquially, and in much of the academic literature, "SRO" is more common. Because I refer to official city documents in this section, I have chosen to use SRA here to limit confusion; however, because of its more colloquial usage, I switch to "SRO" in later chapters when discussing community members' personal experiences.

Much of the literature on Vancouver's DTES focuses on the impact of the opioid epidemic and lack of adequate housing, two issues that are closely intertwined (Collins et. al 2018). As the area of the city most affected by these issues, the DTES has a concentration of social services, such as shelters, detox centres, and free and low-cost food services; as a result, DTES community members do not necessarily lack social service support. That being said, many community members still feel that services, particularly around housing, are inadequate, due to long wait times and insufficient affordable housing.

Much of the affordable housing stock in the DTES is in the form of SRA hotels. Single Room Accommodations (SRAs) or Single Room Occupancies (SROs) have long been a part of Vancouver's urban fabric. Both privately and publicly owned, SRA buildings generally consist of multiple single rooms with shared bath and sometimes kitchen facilities, as opposed to an apartment building, in which units are self-contained with private bathrooms and kitchens. Because of the necessity of sharing space with so many people, SRAs tend to be priced significantly below local market rates for self-contained units, thus placing them in the category of affordable housing. Affordable SRA rents generally run between $375 and $500 per month, with $375/month being considered shelter rate, meaning that it is the standard amount allocated for housing for individuals relying on disability (PWD) or other social service benefits (such as PPMB, the category of funding for Persons with Persistent and Multiple Barriers to employment). An increasing number of individuals pay upwards of $700 per month in SRA buildings (City of Vancouver 2020); as a result, in 2021, the City of Vancouver introduced the SRA Vacancy Control Policy (2022) which attempted to regulate rent increases in designated SRA buildings. Unfortunately, the amendments allowing the Vacancy Control Policy were struck down by the BC Supreme Court in August 2022, rendering vacancy control unenforceable (City

of Vancouver 2022). The original SRA Bylaw (2020) still stands. According to the SRA Bylaw (2020), an SRA must be within the DTES or the surrounding area. Specifically, legal single room accommodations are zoned between Clark Street to the East and Burrard drive to the West, and extend north from Terminal Avenue to the Burrard Inlet (City of Vancouver 2020). Despite this relatively broad area, however, 91% of SRAs were in the DTES as of 2019 (Huang 2019). An up-to-date map of this area can be found in fig. 2, demonstrating that the 2019 trends still hold.

fig. 2: SRA locations in Vancouver, as displayed on the City of Vancouver Website (City of Vancouver 2023). Note that the largest concentration of SRAs is in the DTES.
Source: https://vancouver.ca/people-programs/single-room-accommodation-bylaw.aspx

Not all DTES residents live in SRA housing, however; there are several buildings with self-contained units in the area. These are often non-profit run, and may be more likely to be family-oriented (while SRAs are, as named, only suitable for single occupants, and generally do not allow residents under 19). Waitlists for affordable, self-contained housing are extremely long,

and community members often find themselves waiting years to receive an offer. Community members I spoke to who did have permanent, self-contained units in or outside of the DTES counted themselves extremely lucky, and took great care to make their private spaces feel like their own (see chapter 3). Some, who lived in cleaner, more well-organized SRAs (like Earl; again, see chapter 3) had a similar sense of comfort and accomplishment; however, I have noticed that dissatisfaction with housing is, in general, much more common among community members living in SRAs.

Research Questions

The central questions I intend to answer in this thesis are as follows:

1) *How do people conceptualize "home" in the DTES?*
2) *How can this concept of home be mobilized in affordable housing design and policy?*

In my fieldwork, I did not seek to define what home *should* mean for community members, but what it *does*; I am collecting and interpreting the multifaceted meanings of the term in practice, observing and analyzing how individuals define and operationalize *home* in their day to day lives, rather than how it is defined for them institutionally. I intend to view these discussions analytically, to propose alternatives to dominant assumptions surrounding the meaning of "home."

Sense of home

Sarah Pink's approach in *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (2015) and Pink et. al's *Making Homes* (2017) is particularly useful when it comes to sensory interviewing. In her version of participant sensation, Pink conducts interviews of approximately two hours, in participants' living spaces. In these interviews, she asks participants to show her around their homes, and then to demonstrate some of their day-to-day activities and practices, such as listening to music (Pink 2015; Pink et. al 2017). Pink also records participants describing their own sensory experiences, such as the smell of an air freshener or the feeling of a carpet (Pink 2015; Pink et. al 2017). I used this general format of semi-structured interviews, focusing on the sensory experience of home. However, conversations often expanded beyond this, to consider how participants experience the world outside their homes. Capturing the way in which community members see themselves and their homes within the DTES and in its complex history is key to characterizing a sense of home in the DTES. To properly capture what was truly important to community members, I took a back seat in the interview process; although I asked questions to lead toward the sensory focus, I generally allowed participants to take the lead, telling me what was most important to them about the spaces we occupied. Often, the things that stood out to me about a place were not the things that they chose to focus on. Where I might comment on the broad physical layout of a space, a participant might focus on the minutiae[2]. In this way, interviews were largely participant-led, and focused on the elements of the home that were most important to the individual I was speaking to. This yielded a great variety of responses, which I have characterized, as best as I can, into broad categories; however, it is important to note that, despite

[2] See my discussion of cutlery in Chapter 3 for a more in depth exploration of this topic

their value for presenting information, these categories are fluid, overlapping, and ever-changing. No two participants expressed the same experience. What I have done in this thesis is identify common threads that came up in multiple conversations, and attempt to provide some context for them.

In sensory ethnography, "home" is often defined as a site where people exert agency over their sensory experiences (Pink 2015; Clarke 2001; Douglas 1991). Furniture, fabrics, colours, textures, and spatial layouts are all personalizable with this concept of home (Clarke 2001). Specific music, foods, cleaning products, and air fresheners can be selected, controlling the sounds, tastes, and smells associated with home (Pink 2015). Essentially, in much of the existing home ethnography, the home is considered to be a private space, controlled largely, if not completely, by the occupants in ways that cannot be extended to public urban spaces. What I found in this research, however, was that where people did not have this kind of physical control over the space, they found a sense of home in the social connections formed there. Friends, family members, service providers, interpersonal supports came to comprise a central part of home feelings in this context. Although these social connections may seem intangible, and therefore unrelated to sensory ethnography, the relationships discussed were closely tied to space. Community members associated their relationships with specific places, and tied the sensory experience of being in those places to the importance of the relationships formed there. The experience of coming to the Carnegie Community Centre, for example, was not only about visiting and using a public space. The presence of tables, chairs, and cushions provided a physical comfort, as did the dryness and physical and emotional warmth of indoor community space. The sense of being welcomed was tied to the physical environment of the place, designating it as a space for relaxation and social connection.

In this research, "home" quickly became divorced from "private space," making much of the existing sensory definitions of "home" irrelevant. To quote a brief summary from my proposal for this project, which has rung true in the practical application of these methods:

> Duyvendak (2011) introduces the concept of "home feelings," which somewhat divorces "home" from "living space." According to Duyvendak, "home feelings" simply refers to the feeling of being "at home," which is deeply connected to notions of comfort and familiarity. I have found the concept of home feelings incredibly useful in attempting to deconstruct the implied notion that "home" is synonymous to "living space." For Duyvendak, "home" may refer to large areas containing both public and private spaces.

Zandy (1990) provides a similar definition of "home" as a place "where there is no sense of otherness" (Zandy 1990, i). This definition, while similar to Duyvendak's, is especially relevant considering the stigmatization and exclusion of the DTES, and of DTES community members, from the rest of Vancouver. "Home" in the DTES thus transcends the ideas of control set out in previous ethnographies (Douglas 1991: Culhane and Robertson 2005; Pink 2015). There is a physical, private home that exists in the DTES, of course; however, this concept of home is not universally encompassing in the way that it is often framed. Participants who did not have access to private space still had homes in public spaces and with other people, that were equally tied to place. Thus, the concept of "home feelings" became an increasingly important designation as I had more conversations based in public space.

Before I go any further in my description of my methods and experiences, I must set out the definition I use when I refer to "aesthetics." The category of aesthetics is extremely complicated, and has never been clear-cut; the notion of aesthetic value creates a hierarchy of sensory experiences, which often shifts the focus to sensory experiences that are pleasurable. Meleau-Ponty defines an aesthetic response as simply a response to a sensation (Merleau-Ponty

2002). Morphy and Perkins build on this with a more specific understanding of aesthetic as "a physical, emotional and/or cognitive response to qualitative attributes" (Morphy and Perkins 2006, 14). This is as specific as I am willing to make my definition; I do not wish to categorize aesthetic value according to whether experiences are pleasurable or not, as negative aesthetic responses tell us just as much about a space as pleasurable ones do. By viewing aesthetics through the lens of sensory response, anything that evokes a response may be taken into account. Community members, unsurprisingly, mostly associated pleasurable sensory experiences with the comfort of home; however, negative sensory experiences were often described to provide a form of contrast, setting up a home and a not-home in conversation. By considering both of these to be equally valuable aesthetic experiences, the contrast is highlighted, thus throwing the experience of home into relief.

Positionality

My own experiences with the DTES go beyond this research project; although I am not resident, and have not directly experienced many of the struggles common in the DTES, I have worked in the area in various capacities since I was an undergraduate student. My work in the area began as a housing support volunteer with Mission Possible, in which I met with area residents to connect them with affordable housing resources. I now have a much more open-ended role as an outreach worker, in which I work one-on-one with a number of service users and provide support in a number of areas, ranging from rides to medical appointments to emotional and personal support. As a result of the sheer range of my engagement with service users, I have spent much of my time in the DTES not only providing a service, but connecting

socially with residents and attending community events and gatherings, and have made a number of friends and acquaintances in the area. This work still comes from the position of an outsider; I am not a resident of the area, and I have not experienced life there 24/7. However, I do have some insight, particularly regarding the accessibility (or lack thereof) of social services and supports, and have engaged directly with the experiences of community members navigating life in the DTES. In the interest of making this project as collaborative as possible, without putting undue pressure on community members to do the unpaid labour of editing my work, I have reached out to all participants with the option to provide feedback and input on my draft. Some responded with updates to their stories, although I unfortunately encountered many disconnected phone numbers, issues with internet access, and other complicating factors associated with housing insecurity and transience.

Throughout this thesis, I often use the terms “community” and “community member”; these are similarly drawn from my own background in non-profit and outreach work. The term “community member,” in this context, is closely related to “resident,” although it is a preferable term for my purposes, as it allows the inclusion of people who no longer reside in the area, but maintain strong social connections there. Similarly, “community” broadly refers to the group of individuals with social and home-related ties to the space. These are the common terms in my work, and I chose to use them in this context to emphasize the importance of social ties in participants’ stories and experiences of the DTES.

Methodology

In conversation, community members described their relationships to the spaces around them, showing me the social activities in each space. The spaces community members identified as their homes can be broadly sorted into three categories: formal housing (such as apartments and SROs), indoor gathering spaces like community centres, libraries, and coffee shops, and outdoor spaces, including parks and sidewalks.

Much of the housing stock in the DTES is in the form of SRO hotels. Several of my interviews took place in these. Twice in particular, I spent time in the Astoria and Avalon hotels. The Astoria in particular has historically been a community hub, featuring a boxing ring, a now-defunct pub, and, more recently, a community garden. All of these areas are intended for use by residents. Beyond that, the Astoria has become a community pillar simply due to its longevity; the building itself is over a hundred years old. The community described at the Avalon was similar. During conversations in both buildings, I was introduced to more people than I could keep track of. Although they spoke of the downsides of SRO living, including pests, shared bathrooms, and lack of kitchen space, community members clearly had strong, positive relationships within these environments. This was a common thread among those in self-contained suites, as well; despite having their own, private space, residents knew and interacted with one another, and often credited word-of-mouth for having brought them to their current homes.

In total, although I have connected with countless community members, I engaged in in-depth interviews for this project with 9 of them, between July and August 2022. Interviews took place in community spaces; one particularly memorable conversation occurred in the sitting area of Carnegie Community Centre, a longtime DTES community hub, libraries and coffee shops came up numerous times, as well. Unfortunately, the library was not a viable option for interviews due to the verbal nature of this research, but I met several community members in coffee shops. Carnegie Community Centre provides a number of services for the DTES community; mailboxes, low-cost meals, and social services are all accessible there, as well as simply free, indoor areas to sit when weather does not allow people to comfortably spend time outdoors. Coffee shops were described as providing a similar service, although for a small cost and with considerably more judgement attached[3]. Community members described feeling comfortable spending their days in coffee shops only if they were not visibly unhoused; those that were aesthetically identifiable others tended to avoid locations associated with business. The third location that came up time and time again was outdoor spaces. Most conversations were had at least partially outdoors, in parks and on streets. Community members valued their outdoor space; Rob even described Oppenheimer and CRAB Parks as being some of the best parts of living in the DTES. These outdoor spaces are well documented as both gathering spaces and alternative housing spaces for DTES residents, making them just as central to the life of the DTES as other, more formalized gathering spaces such as Carnegie.

To avoid imposing my own assumptions about the concept of "home" on participants and producing confirmation bias in my research, I chose to leave large amounts of the decision-making process up to participants. They each chose the location of the interview, and, to

[3] See my conversation with J. in Chapter 4 for more detail on this

a large extent, the tone, pace, and direction of the conversation. I did prepare some interview questions, creating a semi-structured design, if only to direct the focus of the interview to sensorial and aesthetic elements of the space; however, not every question applied to every participant, resulting in impromptu questions to clarify or expand on statements. For this reason, I did not have a script for the interview, and the actual interview transcripts did not perfectly match the questions I had laid out in advance.

The goal of these interviews was for participants to demonstrate their own definitions of "home" and home feelings. Thus, I elected to ask participants to show me a place that “feels like home” to them, and to conduct the interview there. This did not have to be their home address; as previously discussed, many individuals living in inadequate or unstable conditions may not feel *at home* in their homes, and the feeling of being *at home* is at the heart of my research question. This request was deliberately vague, as well. As part of my research is intended to observe how various individuals in the DTES define home, I left this request open to interpretation. To make my request more specific would have required some interpretation on my part regarding what “home” means; if I were to specify a quiet or private space, or otherwise place limits on where participants could suggest the interview take place, I would be imposing assumptions and definitions based on my own middle-class experience of home, which would largely defeat the purpose of asking this question. As a result of this open-endedness, interviews took place in a remarkable variety of locations, ranging from private homes to parks, community centres, and streets.

Interviews were all audio recorded, and later transcribed; however, there was an additional question at the end of the interview, in which I suggested taking photos or videos of the space. Participants did not have to consent to photo or videos in order to participate in the

project, as the bulk of the analysis will be done based on the audio recorded interviews. I included the last question based on Pink's (2015) assertion that writing and audio are not always sufficient to communicate sensory experience. This last question is intended to give participants the option, if they feel they can express themselves more effectively through a visual medium, to either take photos and videos of the space themselves, or direct the researcher to do so. For privacy reasons, only a few participants consented to the use of photos, and even fewer agreed to their photos being released. As a result, the bulk of this thesis is text-based, reliant on my own interpretations of conversations and images; the experiences reflected here are thus filtered through my own experience of the space.

Field notes recorded my responses and observations in the moment; important gestures, tone, facial expressions, and so on can be recorded this way and analyzed in tandem with the transcripts. I also used field notes as a method of recording and reflecting on my own sensory experiences; in visiting participants' homes, I was simultaneously experiencing the space, and my own observations here were critical to exercising reflexivity and analyzing my own responses to various spaces. Field notes were taken immediately following the interview, although I also wrote a summary of my impressions later the same day. Thus, a combination of interview data and field notes was analyzed to produce a multi-dimensional sense of each space.

In addition to the interviews, I attended public hearings regarding rezoning and development of housing in Vancouver. In these hearings, institutions are given the opportunity to communicate their plans to the public, and community members are given the opportunity to respond. This provided a venue to observe the institutional motivations and intentions, to contextualize the individual experiences that will be the focus of this project. Rather than participating in these hearings or interviewing attendees, I simply observed, as a way of

understanding the conversation around rezoning and development. The hearings are all recorded, and many are available online, which allowed me to revisit specific hearings after they had ended.

Urban Ethnography in the Downtown Eastside

Much of the focus and methodology of urban studies today is rooted in the work of the Chicago School of Urban Ethnography in the early-mid 20th century. The Chicago School relied heavily on participant observation, framing the city as "a key character in the text" (Timmerman and Pricket 2019, 54); this centring of the city itself is the legacy of the Chicago School's methods. The methodological focus on the city as a legal, social, and physical actor, directly interacting with participants rather than serving as an inert backdrop, is a method I have incorporated into my analysis of Vancouver's urban life. Life in the DTES cannot be understood separately from the DTES itself; the streets, buildings, and histories in place must play a central role. The community members I spoke to are not only making homes, they are making homes *in the Downtown Eastside*. This emphasis is necessary to understand the impact of the environment on the sensory home.

This research echoes earlier studies of home in the DTES, such as the *Health and Home Project* (Roberston 2007; Culhane & Robertson 2005). This project involved an ethnographic investigation similar to mine, although with a more direct focus on the relationship between health and the sense of home in the DTES. Much like I discuss later in this thesis, Culhane and Robertson (2005) find that interventions in the area, particularly those surrounding housing, typically characterize people living in the DTES as transient, and have little regard for the

long-term social connections that exist in the area. This is a theme that emerged in my conversations with community members, as well (see my discussions of the social home in chapter 4, as well as my discussion of urban commoning in the conclusion).

Robertson also characterizes the DTES as an elsewhere, although she does not specifically name the concept as such. For Robertson, the DTES is “defined by a sense of apartness” (Robertson 2007, 528) from the rest of the city, much like Persak’s (2021) assertion that exclusionary urban planning simply moves marginalized groups around, rather than addressing issues of housing insecurity and resource scarcity. Although community members found a sense of home in the familiarity of the DTES, there was an ambivalence, as they simultaneously associated the place with negative experiences that they had had there (Robertson 2007; Culhane & Robertson 2005). This is a dynamic echoed in my research as well, although it is more true for some residents I spoke to than others. Anne and Tyler, for example, spoke of many more negative experiences than Carol and J, suggesting a wider variety of experiences than typically addressed in discussions of the DTES.

Everyday Urbanism

Coined by Crawford, Chase, and Kaliski (1999), “everyday urbanism” refers to the mundanity of the city. While urban ethnographers emphasize the city as an agentive player in interactions within built environments, everyday urbanism normalizes these interactions, contextualizing them as part of people’s quotidian experiences. Pink defines the home as “where the intimate and mundane aspects of our lives are lived out” (Pink et. al 2017, 1); in everyday urbanism, the city, as a whole, fits this designation. In his 1999 ethnography *Sidewalk*, Michell

Duneier makes use of both urban ethnography and everyday urbanism, developing relationships with sidewalk book vendors in New York City. In doing so Duneier is able to see interactions between book sellers and bylaws, law enforcement, customers, and passers-by. Discussing everyday lives lived within the urban landscape, Duneier draws clear connections between the urban environment and the people who live in it. In this case, Duneier enacts the relationality of urban ethnography, combined with the mundanity of everyday urbanism. In this project, I focused extensively on people's interactions with the urban environment. Community members build homes within existing structures, including sidewalks, community centres, and parks; in each of these environments, people use existing structures in unique, sometimes unintended ways, rendering the intention behind the design somewhat irrelevant. Along Hastings Street, for example, people often live in tents which take up most or all of the sidewalk. In this case, people who do not have access to indoor space have physically transformed public space to fit their needs; they turn the sidewalks into homes, and the streets into walking spaces. In this sense, urban space is altered by the everyday practice of living, directly enacting the principles of everyday urbanism.

Social Control through Affordable Housing

As I will address in the following chapter, the aesthetics of a housing crisis include a necessary deviation from the aesthetic norms of the city. People use spaces in ways that violate their original design intention; living spaces extend into parks, sidewalks, and doorways, meaning that much of people's private lives become visible in ways that may be taken as offensive by housed residents. Lundberg (2021) points to the criminalization of day-to-day

activities in anti-homeless policy, which often relies on relocating unhoused people to limit the offense taken to their presence by housed residents and tourists. This reaction of disgust toward unhoused community members is further explored in Chapter 2; however, I want to briefly discuss it here, as it is relevant to the process of social control in the DTES.

As part of this project, I observed a number of public rezoning hearings in the city of Vancouver regarding housing developments. In each of these hearings, proposed developments were discussed, and the floor was opened for members of the public to share their thoughts regarding whether the rezoning should be approved. Most of the hearings I attended were small; very few people observed, and each proposed rezoning had 5 or fewer speakers. The proposals passed or were denied with relatively little fanfare, and life in the city continued on, as usual. Some hearings, often those involving displacing current residents for the sake of new builds, received more attendance from those in their community, and the occasional reporter. However, the hearing which drew the greatest attention (of those that I attended) was a proposed affordable housing development in Kitsilano. Kitsilano is generally considered a wealthy area; clean, well-connected, and boasting a large amount of greenspaces, beaches, restaurants, and boutique shops, it is occupied by many families and students from nearby UBC. The proposed affordable housing development would be made up of single-occupancy studio suites, 50% of which would be priced at shelter rates (up to $375/month), while the other 50% would be at income-adjusted rates. The postal code across the street from the proposed development, meanwhile, boasts a median monthly shelter cost of $2080 in the 2021 census (Censusmapper 2021).

The multiple hearings held to address this proposal were some of the most contentious that I saw. In summary, Kitsilano residents who attended were angry. Hundreds of speakers signed up, and even more sent in written comments to be read in their absence. Much of the

public speech was monitored by council members, who often interrupted speakers to recommend against ad-hominem attacks on the hypothetical residents of this building. Despite this, the observation area was full of private conversations, whispered around me as the hearing continued. Although I had chatted casually with a number of observers and speakers on the way into City Hall, asking them about their viewpoints, the environment suddenly became adversarial once the hearing began. On the way into City Hall, I talked with a speaker who gave me a short summary of what she intended to say; she was mainly concerned about harm reduction measures in the area, suggesting that they would invite increased public drug use and related litter. She emphasized that she was not against affordable housing *in general*, but just thought that her neighbourhood was not the place for it.[4]

Once inside, however, very few people were willing to discuss their perspectives with me. One woman approached me during a break and asked about my interest in the hearing. When I told her that I was not there to be “for” or “against” the project, but that I was a graduate student studying “housing in Vancouver,” and just looking to observe, she scoffed and moved away from me without saying another word. It quickly became abundantly clear to me that I was not well-liked in the observation area, and from that point on the conversations continued around me as though I was not there. In these conversations, residents expressed fear of the people they assumed would be moving into their neighbourhood; their conversations centred around drug use, littering, and violence. A woman stated that she feared her children finding used needles on the playground; another said, with disgust in her voice: “they're all going to hang out at the Skytrain all day!” Many residents publicly discussed that they feared for the safety of the children at the school across the street. “The homeless” were also often brought up negatively by

[4] The proposed development was not geared toward harm reduction, or drug use in general; however, this perspective, which assumes that the two must go hand-in-hand, is not uncommon in my experience.

speakers, despite the fact that the proposed residents would have housing and, by definition, would not be homeless. When speakers were in favour of the proposal, the observation area filled with derisive laughter, and when speakers were against, the observers around me were either silent or applauded.

Surprisingly, at the end of a months-long series of public hearings, the proposal was approved, and construction is set to begin this year; however, the public outcry around the proposal demonstrated the fear borne of the stigma Lundberg (2021) discusses. It also speaks to the exclusion of unhoused residents from the streets of Kitsilano, publicly designating the space as one where unhoused community members cannot expect to be treated with respect. Persak (2021) speaks to the enactment of this prejudice in the physical environment, analyzing the advent of so-called anti-homeless architecture. Architecture which makes sleeping or sitting for long periods of time (or at all) uncomfortable, inherently discourages the presence of those who tend to make use of public space in these ways (Persak 2021). In this exclusion, Persak argues, the lack of space for unhoused people does not solve the problem of lack of housing, but instead displaces its victims. In Vancouver, the exclusion of unhoused people from certain neighbourhooods through lack of services, social acceptance, or welcoming spaces pushes them to spaces where they may feel more welcome; that is, the Downtown Eastside.

In the following chapters, I further explore the casting of the DTES as Vancouver's "Elsewhere," a space in which individuals who are excluded from other realms of urban life find themselves. This is an iteration of the neighbourhood that has been brought to my attention by community members who have experienced homelessness, and who found the DTES to be a welcoming space in a city which broadly rejected or overlooked them. The concentration of resources and social services in the area adds to this, creating one of the more accessible

environments for those struggling with housing insecurity. Nonetheless, this is far from the only iteration of the DTES; community members have diverse interpretations of the neighbourhood, and wide-ranging experiences within it. As a result, there are a multitude of homes in the space. Broadly, I have categorized these as the private and social homes. “Private,” in this context, refers to the normative assumption in home ethnography, of a home built in a private space; this coexists with the social home in the DTES, in which individuals build a sense of home through their relationships with those around them.

Overview of Chapters

Each of the following chapters focuses on a different theme that emerged in my fieldwork. Broadly, my goal has been to represent varying ways of relating to the DTES as a home in all its physical and emotional iterations. I have met many people who chose to leave the DTES, and I have met many who choose to stay; the DTES, like many neighbourhoods that have been stereotyped as “bad,” is most often represented by its struggles. Most often, in public representations, the reasons residents may have to leave the area are thrown into relief. My intention here is not to discount or devalue residents’ negative experiences, but to shine a light on the reasons many stay. Many stay in the DTES for years, decades even, and set down permanent roots in what is often represented as a largely transient area. In Chapter 2, I examine, and reject, the common association between marginality and transience; many of my interlocutors are direct examples of marginalized people who remain. Instead, I adopt elements from a variety of lenses regarding the association between aesthetics and marginality, to build a sense of what “home” can mean in the context of the DTES.

Chapters 3 and 4 lay out the two most common themes that appeared in interviews; the physical home and the social home, respectively. The physical home most closely resembles the common definition "home" in sensory ethnography: a private space in which individuals exercise control over their sensory environment. Community members I spoke to who chose to show me their own private rooms and suites generally exercised control over the space, and identified this form of home with privacy. Other community members chose public spaces, such as community centres, parks, and streets. In these more public interviews, interpersonal relationships and place-based communities were emphasized as being associated with feeling at home; this is what I refer to as the social home. In almost every conversation I had, these two forms of home coexisted and overlapped. As such, these are not intended to be strongly delineated categories of home; instead, I intend to demonstrate the ways in which home feelings are flexible and contextual, building on a broadening of existing understandings of home.

Chapter 2: Aesthetic Exclusion and Alternative Uses of Space in the Downtown Eastside

Tyler

I met Tyler for the first time when he was in the queue for a free lunch at the Union Gospel Mission (UGM) on Hastings Street. He knew all the outreach workers there by name, and we struck up a conversation as he told me about his goal of eventually becoming an outreach worker himself. He told me he was free the next morning for an interview, but when I asked him where he considered home (i.e. where the interview should take place), he was entirely unsure. After a bit of discussion, during which he told me that he spent most of his days around UGM, we settled on meeting at a picnic table on the street outside.

The picnic table was set right off the six lanes of traffic on Hastings Street. Cars rushed past, people walked and sat and chatted nearby, and the occasional siren burst through all the

noise of people’s day to day lives. There is a liveliness to the Downtown Eastside that often goes ignored; as often as people may sit quietly on the sidewalk, they enthusiastically greet each other and have loud, exuberant conversations either sitting on the sidewalk or at the picnic tables that sit along each side street. The interview itself was one of the most community-integrated ones I had done; sitting at the picnic bench outside, Tyler greeted what seemed like the majority of the people walking by. He told me that he had grown up in the area, and had been in the DTES for much of his adult life. The time Tyler had not spent in the DTES, he had spent in prison. As a result, he struggled to define his sense of home in terms of a physical place, as he had recently been released from prison and was now staying at the UGM shelter. Tyler’s current goals are to first get into a detox centre, and then to get a permanent home. Tyler’s sense of home as a physical place is thus based entirely in an imagined future; to him, a physical home is simply constituted by “a place where I can leave my bags.”

Despite Tyler’s lack of a physical home, he described to me a vast network of social connections. He was familiar with all the outreach workers and managers at his shelter, who he saw as being ‘on his side,’ and he told me long stories about his family and friends, many of whom he had lost through social rupture or death. However, he was hopeful for his relationships with former friends and partners who were still alive. By the end of the interview, it became clear that Tyler’s home was not a specific physical place, but a social one; he felt at home among people who he felt supported by.

A Sense of the Downtown Eastside

Walking down Hastings Street from the west, the first indication of entering the Downtown Eastside is the increasingly crowded sidewalks. People walk around, chat, shop, or sit outside among the bustle. Approaching Main Street, the sidewalks of East Hastings are lined with tents and people selling clothes, food, or any number of other items, with a thin walkway between the homes and vendors. There are areas where the sidewalk is so full that people walk on the street or edge around parked cars. The sounds of day-to-day life in the city fill the air: traffic, sirens, and voices raised to compete with the rest of the noise. On the Southwest corner of Hastings and Main, the Carnegie Community Centre stands a bit grander than the other buildings, elevated, requiring people to climb a set of stone steps to the front door. Carnegie is a central gathering place, containing a library, a gym, housing and food services, and just a quiet, indoor space to sit. People often sit on the steps, but always leave a path in and out of the building.

The crowd begins to thin as I walk further East; more sidewalk space is clear, and there are more awnings and side streets where people can sit. There are more gathering places here, too; Oppenheimer and CRAB parks are both on the Eastern side of the neighbourhood, where greenspace fans out around Hastings. Between Cordova and Powell streets, a block North of the Patricia Hotel on Hastings, Oppenheimer Park sits right in the middle of former industrial space. Oppenheimer Park is only one (small, downtown-sized) city block, but it provides a central location for any outdoor events happening in the area; the annual Powell Street Festival, as well as food services, Powwows, and other gatherings, are centred around Oppenheimer Park. One DTES resident, Rob, remarked to me that Carnegie and Oppenheimer Park were two of the first

places he visited upon coming to Vancouver; to this day, those are the public spaces he most closely identifies with his sense of community.

On the Northern edge of the DTES, CRAB park sits on the waterfront, with a small beach and a view of the Vancouver Harbour. Less central to the area, CRAB park is less often a site for community events like Oppenheimer is, and has recently become more residential in nature, providing a space for people to live in spite of recent street sweeps. Plenty of greenspace is available to the South of Hastings, too: Southwest of Hastings and Main, Strathcona has quiet tree-lined streets and larger parks. Many DTES residents I spoke to remarked on liking to go for walks in that area, which provides a break from the noise and bustle.

All along Hastings, the city is dirty in the way that many urban centres are: lived-in, buildings covered in a layer of dust and grime turned up by a combination of auto and foot traffic. Particularly around the major intersection of Hastings and Main, every inch of space is used as a social space, a market, a path, or a sleeping space. The sounds and smells associated with urban life feel magnified here, almost to the point of overwhelm. Life is perceptible on the streets of the DTES in a way it is not in other places. Here, people's homes extend into the streets not only through sleeping spaces, but through community involvement and social life, creating a uniquely visible community life.

While the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings of the DTES are often discussed, they are rarely engaged with. The DTES is, at least aesthetically, described as a problem to be solved rather than a living, breathing environment to experience. Aesthetic descriptions, that is, descriptions of the sensory experience of the DTES, thus walk a fine line in terms of ethical representation. It is not that the aesthetic and sensory elements of the environment are not discussed; in fact, they are often the focus of conversation. However, aesthetic description of the

DTES more often relies on making a spectacle of the neighbourhood rather than engaging with it, dehumanizing community members in the process. Knell (2016) begins an otherwise celebratory account of the DTES community by describing his perception of the neighbourhood on first glance:

> It was, for me, one of those mornings to count my blessings. Now, on the corner of East Cordova, a young woman in her early twenties passed me, her face a picture of anguish. A friend called to her. She turned and as she spoke, her words seemed to disappear into silence as the full horror of her young toothless mouth revealed itself to me. Nearby a priest, I presume (he was dressed in street clothes but with rosaries in hand), was ministering to another woman in a state of distress. Others stood by, waiting for salvation. I looked back toward the crowd in the park. The scene looked almost Biblical; the priest's task seemed virtually hopeless. (Knell 2016, 206-207)

The image created by this description is one absolutely laden with judgement that appears time and time again in conversations surrounding homelessness and the aesthetic of the urban environment (Cooper, Cook, & Bilby 2018; Volont 2022; Lunderg 2021). Given Knell's fixation on the people he sees, this is not only an aesthetic judgement of the neighbourhood, but an aesthetic judgement of the people living in it. This may be taken as an attempt to demonstrate reflexivity, openly recording one's deeply biased first impressions; but what good is it to recognize one's bias without deconstructing it? Although Knell goes on to describe the cohesion and sense of community in the DTES, this vivid opening is never fully examined. Instead, the distinctly negative description of the local residents serves a "hook" to draw readers into an explanation of the ways in which the Downtown Eastside is 'not as bad as it looks'. I want to halt that narrative right at the beginning, and linger on how it looks; the aesthetic of the environment as an inherent part of day-to-day life, which deserves as much respect and humanity as any other component of community. In fact, the scene Knell describes can be found in almost any busy part

of any city: a woman runs into a friend, and a man demonstrates his religion to passers-by. The "horror" of a young woman missing teeth, and the broader environment of the sidewalk "awash with wheelchairs and what appeared to be stroke victims and people with mental illnesses" (Knell 2016, 207) are all aesthetic descriptions, employed to make a spectacle of the environment and its inhabitants. Despite taking an aesthetic focus myself, my goal is to do the exact opposite of what Knell does. I want to drop the spectacle and its inherent dehumanization to describe an environment, through an aesthetic lens, as a place where people live: that is, a home.

In other articles attempting to humanize DTES residents, the aesthetic turn is almost completely avoided. Li, Moore, and Smythe (2018) discuss *The Heart of the City* Festival, which has been happening in the area since 2004, celebrating the pluralized cultural identities of DTES residents. Although participants discuss the aesthetics of the festival, referencing the impact of sound and sight in their experience, the researchers themselves do not include their own aesthetic experience, nor do they analyze participants' aesthetic descriptions. The focus of this research is on memory, community, and sense of self, with a strong focus on *what* is being said over *how*. Similarly, Masuda and the Right to Remain Research Collective (2021) have published specifically on sanitary conditions in SROs, without needing to describe the sensory experience of entering an SRO. A historical summary of the public health abandonment of SROs is undoubtedly a powerful argument in and of itself, and, once again, the refusal to engage with aesthetic description can be taken as avoidance of a representation of unhoused people that may be easily weaponized against that very same group. In a context in which aesthetic categorizations are often used in discriminatory ways, it seems reasonable to implicitly or explicitly discount the impact of aesthetics; however, this does not prevent the aforementioned

discrimination. Residents I spoke to, discussed this form of discrimination in great detail. According to J, “with homelessness, living in poverty, you know, you can’t dress all that well . . . I just felt, walking into some places, people would judge. People would just judge my appearance.” Carol expressed a similar sentiment regarding her self-consciousness about how she was perceived: “I was bottom society. That’s how the world looked at me, I was bottom society.”

Building “Elsewhere:” The Subversion of Aesthetic Prescription

According to Lefebvre (1996), the use of space is prescribed by a symbolic language of design. Urban space is visibly broken up into streets, sidewalks, buildings, and so on, each piece with a designated use. We walk on the sidewalks, not the street; the buildings are used for living, shopping, eating, and so on, according to their design and zoning. In the DTES, however, this symbolic language is disrupted; people who cannot live in the buildings make their homes, shops, and leisure spaces on the sidewalks and in the parks, and when the sidewalks are full, pedestrians spill into the street. The symbolic communication of design is rejected, evoking discomfort in those unfamiliar with these new uses of space. In addition to this, the people who occupy this space are often marginalized, meaning that the DTES is perceived as doubly unruly, containing people and norms that do not fit tradition for the rest of the city.

In Persak’s (2021) analysis of defensive architecture, she emphasizes the key argument of those opposed to street sweeps, anti-homeless design, and so on. These practices and design choices are meant to keep the marginalized away, to send them elsewhere; but where is elsewhere? Defensive architecture, in the form of angular benches, ornate fences, and sculptural

spikes comes to comprise a part of the design aesthetic of the city; its goal is to keep people out without suggesting the question of who needs to be kept out (Persak 2021). Defensive architecture is a form of aesthetic alienation, in the sense that, through careful urban design, it aims to push away those with the wrong aesthetic: that is, the aesthetic that evokes negative associations for the general public. “It does not really tackle social problems; it just eliminates them from a certain space, pushing them out of sight, underground, *elsewhere*. It does not eliminate or reduce the social problem; it only displaces the unsightly” (Persak 2021, 68; emphasis mine).

I would like to focus on this concept of “elsewhere” here; if there is an elsewhere, where is it? In this thesis, I want to establish the DTES as Persak’s elsewhere; a place for people who have been rejected from the rest of the city, where they establish their own norms and resist assimilation and relocation. Leslie Robertson has described the DTES as “a terrain defined by a sense of apartness” (Robertson 2007, 528). In using the term ‘elsewhere’ I seek to condense the pervasive understanding exemplified in this phrase, of stigmatized places as marooned, islands excised from the city as a whole, where stigmatization is resisted through solidarity. Aesthetics are of central importance in this resistance. “Cleaning up” the DTES means removing all visual and sensual traces of current residents, from their homes to their physical selves. It is not that people living in the area don’t want clean spaces that appeal to their own senses; they want those cleaned-up spaces to be *for them*, not for the purpose of increasing the city’s creativity index (Florida 2004).

There are several theories that attempt to address the “elsewhere”-ness of places like the DTES; however, there are none that I have found satisfactorily descriptive of both the inner workings of the place and its external relationships to the rest of the city. The term “non-places”

is often used to refer to areas that are ignored, forgotten, or outright rejected (Kindynis 2019). Kindynis (2019) relies heavily on hauntology to explain the power of abandoned places. The DTES is, of course, far from abandoned; however, it has been socially abandoned, its residents often left to fend for themselves (Masuda et. al 2021). Hauntology (De Certeau 1984) is undeniably a powerful subject to invoke in the DTES, in the context of the losses that so many residents have experienced (May 2021); however, this is not an appropriate focus for my analysis, as I have a distinct fixation on what there is to experience, rather than what is lacking. Augé's (1995) differentiation between places and non-places also relies on a lack of social connection, which is the exact opposite of what I, and many others, have observed in the DTES:

> Clearly the word 'non-place' designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have in these spaces . . . non-places mediate a whole mass of relations, with the self and with others, which are only indirectly connected with their purposes. As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality (Augé 1995, 94).

In this context, the DTES would certainly constitute an anthropological place, but one that is marginalized and rejected by its surroundings. In his analysis of non-places, Kindynis invokes interstitial ethnography, which focuses on the ethnography of marginal places (Kindynis 2019; Ferrell 2016). Like theories of non-places, interstitial ethnography also involves a liminal, transitory nature, which my research does not have; the DTES is stable in its existence, and many of its residents spend their whole lives there. What Kindynis does with this topic that is really useful to me, is to establish a framework for understanding transgressive and marginalized spaces. The DTES, as I have stated many times already, is a place that does not abide by the

same rules as the rest of the city. Many of the rules being broken are aesthetic in nature, regarding the appearance of the space, which is where I later invoke visual criminology.

A similar theory to interstitial ethnography and non-places is Edward Soja's Thirdspace (1996), a reaction to Lefebvre's notions of space and place. In Thirdspace, Soja emphasizes the trialectic, a rejection of the perceived 2 options of firstspace, the simple categorization of space, and secondspace, which is Lefevbre's interpretation of the city as a creative endeavour, focusing on the importance of the architect in creating urban space (Soja 1996). Thirdspace proposes a third option, blending design and use, where the creative vision, scientific study, and actual use of urban space all intersect. Thirdspace is thus a useful lens for the study of the DTES, as it is a place where the norms of the rest of the city are disrupted; the symbolic language of sidewalks, streets, and buildings is often ignored, and space is used in unconventional ways. In creating new methods of using space, DTES residents undermine secondspace thinking by demonstrating agency in the aesthetic construction of the city. Soja dismisses materiality as part of secondspace thinking, but I disagree; materiality is central to the experience of the world, and thus is just as compatible with thirdspace thinking as it is with secondspace. If thirdspace is to encompass all ways of approaching space, materiality is just as important within a thirdspace lens as it is elsewhere. Thirdspace, however, has a similar liminality to non-place and interstitial thinking, with an emphasis on intersections and pliancy; in response to this, I again want to point to the stability and enduring nature of the DTES, which continues to exist in spite of gentrification and relocation efforts. Again, the association between liminality and marginality fails to encompass the actuality of the DTES as a place where people live out full lives and make long-term homes. Although I draw on all of these theoretical lenses, I wish to propose another option, in which we

consider marginalized places as permanent and stable in their existence, and view their long-term influences on the city as just that: long-term and enduring.

Elsewhere in Practice: Experiencing Space in the Neighbourhood

According to Untea (2018): "the particular challenge that homelessness poses consists of the fact that it may appear simultaneously too familiar (rendering the aesthetic object invisible) and too strange (provoking either disgust or existential fear)" (Untea 2018, 18). This description echoes sentiments from interlocutors like Carol and J, of being simultaneously ignored and looked down upon. Visual Criminology provides a method to emphasize the aesthetic nature of this marginalization; "Visual criminology examines the way sensory information gives rise to understandings of crime, crime control and resistance" (Lundberg 2021, 112), echoing the comments made by participants who reflected on being looked down upon due to their lack of access to housing. Lundberg (2021) examines the association between visible homelessness and crime in Australia. Lundberg directly ties physical appearance to stigma, citing the number of services focussed on allowing people to avoid the stigma of "looking homeless" (Lundberg 2021, 111) by providing haircuts and new, clean clothing. Central to visual criminology is the argument that connections between crime and aesthetics are culturally mediated; specific aesthetic 'flags' are associated with nonconformity, and become problems in and of themselves which need to be removed (Cooper, Cook, and Bilby 2018; Lunberg 2021; Ferrell 2017). For Cooper, Cook, and Bilby (2018), this refers to the visibility of urban sex workers, while, for Lundberg (2021), it results in sweeps of tent cities.

In the Downtown Eastside, as well, there are several practices by the city, intended to remove the sensory evidence of homelessness. “Street sweeps,” in their very title, identify the supposed need to cleanse the sidewalks of alternative use. In the DTES, city workers will come through lived-in streets with garbage bags and instructions to clear the spaces that are meant to be used as walkways. Sweeps are not to be confused with the sanitation workers who remove litter and potential dangers, such as broken glass or syringes. Street sweeps, which are focused on clearing the sidewalks, have been known to occur in makeshift residences, accompanied by police officers, removing entire blocks of tents, lean-tos, and other shelters that are being used by residents. Residents have reported their personal belongings being taken from them, meaning that they lose not only their shelter, but also any keepsakes or otherwise valuable items they may have. As of June 2022, the Vancouver city council agreed to end police presence at street sweeps; however, the sweeps themselves have not ended. There was particularly strong outcry in August 2022, when tents and other shelter were removed from sidewalks under a fire order. This was not technically a “sweep,” due to the fire marshal’s involvement; however, the effects were the same.

The vitriol with which the street shelters are regarded among housed inhabitants of the city has been on display, as well; on August 15, 2022, flyers from an anonymous source were distributed threatening to set fire to tents on August 23:

Flyers threatening arson against DTES residents, August 15, 2022.
Source: Trey Helton on Twitter

Although these flyers came to be an empty threat, they could not be taken as such; after a number of fires in SROs in the area, the threat resulted in panicked requests for donations of fire extinguishers and water. Violence against DTES residents is not uncommon, either; before beginning a formal interview, Tyler and I had a conversation about the police and ambulances on Hastings that day, which had blocked traffic and caused me to be late. Neither of us knew why there were so many police and EMTs, but Tyler suggested that “there’s always something going on down here. Like, there was that young girl that got lit on fire. That could’ve happened again.” While I responded with shock, Tyler only looked sad; this was not the first act of violence against community members, and likely would not be the last.

Sweeps, fires, and violence against community members all point to not only the desire to cleanse the city aesthetically, but to remove DTES community members themselves. These threats and municipally sanctioned actions demonstrate a direct rejection of the use of space in the DTES. People are using the sidewalks incorrectly, therefore creating aesthetic disharmony with the rest of the city. This disharmony may cause discomfort among residents unfamiliar with this use of space; it may feel like a communal space is being encroached upon (Blomley 2004). The evidence of this encroachment is above all aesthetic, in the sights, sounds, and smells of people living in places not designed for such activities. By refusing to abide by the official plan for the space, sidewalk residents' presence is undeniably felt in the area. The fact that the sweeps generally don't involve adequate attempts to actually provide suitable housing further demonstrates Persak's (2021) argument, that displacement is not focused on helping the neighbourhood, but on clearing it of its current residents.

The definition of aesthetics that I rely on here is based largely on perception. Although, on the surface, this appears a rather literal (and therefore straightforward) definition, it is problematized by contexts in which perception may be avoided. One key experience that participants almost universally linked to their experiences of homelessness was a sense of invisibility. J described his experience of housing insecurity as "a lonely time, because . . . people don't see you, and you can become kind of invisible." Rancière (2015) refers to people who face this type of neglect as "'the part without part': the silenced ones, the invisible ones, those whose utterances are non-sensed within the administrative apparatus of social governance" (Volont 2022, 142-143). For Volont, the part without part is key in the process of urban commoning, the process of decommodifying and communally occupying public space. Sensations that are ignored are not perceived or processed, and thus are often not identified as

having an aesthetic presence in any positive sense; when they are processed sensorially, they may be categorized negatively, as problems to be dealt with. This is the perception demonstrated by the aforementioned street sweeps and defensive urbanism. However, despite their treatment by non-community members, people experiencing homelessness do perceive and process their own context, producing an aesthetic image that is far more nuanced than the one that identifies the DTES exclusively as a problem to be solved.

The importance of outdoor space in the DTES is best described by the concept of urban commoning, in which public spaces are used communally outside of top-down market-based uses. The use of sidewalks and parks as living and gathering spaces, shared among DTES residents, constitutes a shared home made in public, as well as echoing Volont's notion of the part without part as the driving force of urban commoning (Volont 2022). Among participants I spoke to who identified the DTES as their home, all had stories of shared public occupations associated with their sense of home there. J shared his experience as a member of the occupy movement, which was a movement directly focused on urban commoning. Others referred to the sense of the community on Hastings Street, in the way that "people look out for each other" in the face of discrimination and harassment. The aesthetic component of urban commoning comes in the broad resistance of displacement, and the making of the street in the image of the people that live there. Public spaces in the DTES are shaped by community members to fit their needs, therefore constituting the urban commons.

Many people live their whole lives in the neighbourhood, and may maintain community connections even after they leave. Each participant told me stories not only of where they had lived, but what they had done: relationships, activities, and hobbies, all situated within the home of the DTES. Rob talked extensively about his family, most of whom were still living in

Northern Ontario; as a result of being so far removed from his family, he identified the DTES as providing those community connections. In particular, Carnegie Community Centre provided the kind of gathering place he missed. He described it as a place where he was able to stop in and do day to day activities: checking mail, checking flyers for nearby events and organizations, and a place to meet new people. Although he now lives a short bus ride away in Olympic Village, Rob emphasized that he still chooses to spend much of his time in the DTES, frequenting CRAB park and other outdoor spaces. When things get too hectic outside, or when the weather is bad, he chooses to sit inside Carnegie and read the paper until it calms down. After spending nearly twenty years in the area, Rob was eager to defend both the neighbourhood and the people there: "When I was having my seizures, they [sex workers] would come over and they would hold me until I came to . . . I only got robbed like, one, two times, and all they did was take my bus pass. People on the streets and that, they're pretty good people. I see them, always helping people in wheelchairs and that, opening doors and that." Key to Rob's description of Carnegie, and DTES more broadly, was his emphasis on the people there, and the support that they are able to offer each other in place of family, medical, or other supports and systems.

Tyler, similarly, focused the conversation on social aspects of his life in the DTES, and spoke extensively about relationships both within and without the neighbourhood. Having spent his whole life in Vancouver, he had an extensive list of connections both through himself and his parents. His father, childhood friends, past relationships, and community connections made through his frequenting of the UGM shelter all played a role in his experience of home. In fact, Tyler seemed confused by my question regarding where he considered his home to be; to him, home was not a physical place, but was grounded in his social connections. Unlike Rob, who emphatically described how comfortable and safe he felt in the DTES, Tyler described his desire

to leave the DTES. Although he did not necessarily want to lose contact with friends in the area, he described wanting to go into detox and hopefully find a permanent home outside of the neighbourhood. Permanence was the key word in this conversation; to Tyler, the DTES represented his current sense of instability. His description of his ideal home was, in this way, deceptively simple: “a place where I can leave my bags.”

Conclusion

There are key differences between indoor and outdoor space in the DTES; private, indoor space is scarce, meaning that those that have it tend to value it highly. The residents I spoke to that had permanent homes showed great care in taking efforts to make it their own. Home ethnographers (Miller 2002; Pink 2017; Clarke 2002) often discuss the process of making a space feel like home, but tend to take the fact of that space for granted. Because of this scarcity, a sense of home in public space is of central importance to those that feel at home in the DTES; a sense of home is not only rooted in the private space of the house, apartment, or room where one lives, but in the communal spaces one shares with other community members. Gathering places, such as parks, community centres, and in some cases, sidewalks play a central role in shaping a sense of home in the context of housing precarity in the DTES.

Although I have not found an aesthetic theory that fully encompasses the variety of meanings and experiences of the DTES, those discussed here all shed some light on particular aspects of the sensory experience of the area. There are particular distinctions between indoor and outdoor space, and public and private space, in the DTES; in particular, private space is at a premium, meaning that public space plays a much more central role in people’s everyday lives

than it does elsewhere. The wide range of experiences of DTES residents is also based on what types of space they have access to, resulting in pluralized definitions of home. Going forward, I intend to explore some broad categories of home feelings, separated by the same private/public categorizations that apply to spaces in the city. These categorizations are imperfect in a capitalist system, as a space that is privately owned may be effectively public, and vice versa, and there is a large amount of overlap; however, in a heuristic sense, this division of space is closely related to varying experiences of home. People may have multiple homes situated within a variety of uses; in the broadest terms, this is what I aim to analyze based on the stories shared with me

Chapter 3: Building a Physical Home in the Downtown Eastside

When discussing the physical environment of the home, a key element of the environment is design, both aesthetic and functional. Homes are arranged, at least in part, to make day to day tasks as simple as possible (Pink et. al 2017); shoes go by the front door, pots and pans within reach of the stove. A key part of the design of the home is convenience; however, what makes a home convenient varies widely depending on the individual. Ingold (2012) explores the specificity of design by casting the breakfast table as "an obstacle course" (Ingold 2012): pouring the correct amount of cereal from the box, adding milk from a heavy jug without spilling, and moving cereal from bowl to mouth without dripping. In some way or another, the table cloth ends up soiled. Although all these acts may seem simple, Ingold reminds the reader that "manipulating spoons, sitting on chairs and eating from tables are bodily skills that take years to acquire" (Ingold 2012). Although humans may have designed chairs, tables,

spoons, bowls, cutlery, cereal boxes, and milk jugs, learning to operate these items requires various adaptations of our own. These behaviours "do not make things any easier for us" (Ingold 2012), in that they make our lives easier only if we have previously learned them. In the same way that we shape our environments around ourselves, we may also change our relationship with material objects to fit our environments.

This flexibility echoes my previous discussion of the streets of the DTES in chapter one, which emphasizes the malleable nature of urban space. When people do not have access to indoor space to sleep, eat, shop, and socialize, they use public space, simultaneously adapting their lives to their environment and their environment to their needs. I use the term "plasticity" to refer to this tendency that emerged in the stories shared, as community members adapted both themselves and their environment to fit together. There is a way of meeting in the middle here, which, although it is recognized in the anthropology of design, is rarely recognized in the anthropology of the home. The notion behind the private home in the DTES, then, echoes that of the sidewalk: a functional home is not a one size fits all product, but a specific melding of the self and the space, such that both are accommodated.

Carol

I entered Carol's apartment around midday. When I arrived, she had been with some other residents in a meeting room just off the lobby. After letting me in, she poked her head back in the room to let everyone know she would be going back upstairs for a while, and then led me over to the elevator. Her apartment is on the sixth floor, with floor to ceiling windows facing North, directly onto Hastings. There is a bathroom door on one side of the entryway and a closet

on the other, leaving a narrow hallway which opens into the rest of the apartment. Aside from the bathroom, the whole apartment is one room, with clearly delineated spaces despite the lack of walls. A full kitchen sits just around the corner on the right, not visible from the front door; the fridge, oven, sink, cupboards, and counter space fill one corner of the room, and a small table with one chair sits against the opposite wall. Turning left from the entryway, you face the bed and the window on the far wall; in between the bed and the window is a small seating area with two armchairs, and a door that opens onto a balcony. There is a cat somewhere in this room, but I'm told he doesn't like strangers and prefers to hide when other people are around.

Carol offers me a sparkling water from the fridge, and I sit down at the kitchen table with my recording equipment. She sits on the bed, and we are barely an arm's length apart. She immediately jumps in and tells me that she has been living here for fifteen years, the same amount of time she has been sober; she had been living with a friend before, sleeping on their couch and drinking together. It was after she moved in, and had a steady place to live, that she was able to enter a twelve-step program, one that she has stuck with ever since.

To me, the apartment looks recently renovated, almost brand new. There was a fire a couple of years ago, started by a neighbour, after which Carol and some friends came together to clean the soot off the walls and restore the space to a liveable condition. In the process, Carol tells me they updated the space to look cleaner than it had before; all the wall are freshly painted, the kitchen cupboards are shiny and modern, and the large mirror that makes up the sliding closet door is free of any scratches or chips. Although this is a subsidized rental building operated by a nonprofit, the responsibility fell on Carol to repair her own space after the fire; she describes scrubbing the walls and restoring them to their original white, as well as her careful design choices for the space. The colour scheme for her furniture and decor is blue, which stands out

against the white walls in the sunlight from the window. The armchairs are blue velvet, and numerous (mostly blue) trinkets sit around them. Every available surface has some sort of decoration on it, but the apartment does not feel cluttered. Carol has been prepping some leeks to cook earlier, and the apartment smells fresh and slightly sharp from them. There are mugs hanging from hooks around the kitchen, all with bright, swirling patterns on them, and some sun shapes made of pottery hung on the kitchen walls. The suns are painted in a variety of bright blues, oranges, and yellows, swirling together in similar patterns to the mugs. On the wall opposite the window, hidden from the sightline of the entryway, is a sculpture made out of horseshoes, reading “Carol, I ♡ U.” Carol tells me that his piece was something she had custom made after the fire, as a reminder that “I have to love myself. And one of my ways of loving myself is setting boundaries and respecting others, and being accountive [sic].”

On the flat surfaces, including shelves, window sills, and side tables, Carol has an impressive collection of crystals and cobalt glass, the latter of which I comment on as something I also love. She tells me that she has been gravitating towards the crystals much more lately, and trying to get rid of her glass. As she tells me this, she walks over to the corner by the balcony door, and offers me two cobalt glass tealights and a small vintage ashtray shaped like a blue swan, insisting that she’s only going to give them away anyway, and that they should go to someone who really likes them. She then has me get up and walk around the room with her, putting various crystals in my hands and describing them. Some are polished and shaped into balls and towers, and others are raw, rough and glittery. On her bedside table alone, Carol has golden tourmaline, and both polished and raw fluorite, which glitter blue and purple.

Carol emphasized to me that the thing that makes her apartment feel like home is not only having access to the space, but filling it with things that are *hers*. This includes the small

elements of decor as much as the large bed and chairs which dominate the floor space; it all comes together to form a place that is purely Carol's. This room is comfortable for her not only because of its cleanliness, its newness, and its floor-to-ceiling windows, but because of its colour scheme, its kinaesthetic layout, and its various glass, crystal, and pottery decorations.

Earl

The Avalon Hotel stands among a row of buildings on West Pender Avenue, just down the street from the International Village (formerly called, and still colloquially known as Tinseltown) Mall. The Avalon is not technically in the DTES, but sits in a downtown area frequented by DTES residents, just south of Gastown. From the outside, the Avalon blends into the buildings around it; despite having walked by it hundreds of times, and knowing of its existence, I was never sure exactly where it was until visiting Earl there.

I first met Earl at the daily free lunch offered by the Union Gospel Mission on East Hastings; after a casual conversation there, which bounced from hiking, to public transit, to his (somewhat) recent move from Alberta, he invited me to meet him the next morning to talk about life at the Avalon. I met him first thing at the nearby Victory Square, we walked to a nearby coffee shop for a morning coffee before walking back around the corner to the Avalon. The location was something Earl mentioned repeatedly: "I live in Gastown for $600 a month, which is crazy. To live down here for that amount of money!" The Avalon is almost perfectly central, less than a five-minute walk to almost any amenity; grocery stores, coffee shops, restaurants, and the Skytrain (Vancouver's most reliable form of public transit) are all within 3 blocks.

The Avalon, like many SRO hotels, was first built in the early 20th century and has had basic upkeep with occasional more intense renovations since. Inside, the building definitely shows its age. The stairways are extremely narrow and the hallways lean slightly to one side; however, as Earl promised, it is far cleaner than any other SRO I have been to. The floors are made of old hardwood painted grey, and the walls are white stucco. It all looks recently painted, still shiny and uniform. The doors to each room match the floors. Each floor is laid out the same: the stairway from the main entrance opens from a heavy door onto a broad landing, with two rooms (the largest ones, Earl tells me) right next to the stairs. From there, identical doors line a long hallway. I did not count the doors, but considering that the Avalon has 86 rooms in total and the building is only 3 stories tall, there are a significant amount. Around the middle of the hallway are two washrooms, and at the far end is a communal kitchen. The kitchen is slightly more run down than the hallways, featuring a few missing floor tiles and a layer of grease on the appliances. According to Earl, the kitchen is rarely used. Each room is equipped with a mini fridge, a sink, and a microwave, which Earl, at least, is satisfied with. On the far end of the kitchen, another narrow staircase leads out to the back of the building.

Earl lives in one of the larger rooms, right off the landing at the front of the building. The main feature of the room is a huge window that overlooks West Pender Street, with a view of the trees and heritage buildings that surround the Avalon. Earl's room has the same grey flooring and stucco walls as the hallways, and is laid out for maximum functionality. When you walk through the front door, you pass through a small kitchen area containing the fridge, microwave, and sink; on one side, sharing a wall with the landing, is the closet. On the far side of the room, Earl has a futon (currently in couch position) facing a TV. These both sit perpendicular to the far wall, with the window stretched out in between them. The air throughout the building has a characteristic

‘old apartment’ smell of aging wood and fresh paint, which is not entirely unpleasant. Aside from a few fruit flies, who Earl jokingly refers to as his “friends,” the building appears to be absent of the pests that typically occupy SROs. We sit on the futon while Earl points to his favourite parts of the room, mainly focusing on the window. He tells me about the three-bedroom townhouse he lived in in Alberta, and explained that he had felt incredibly unprepared for the rental market in Vancouver upon moving here four years ago. Trying to get a spot in BC Housing, he eventually came to understand that “the system is flawed . . . but in this city, those kinds of systems are necessary, because if you don’t [have them], places like this will run you four thousand dollars a month for an apartment.”

Earl’s view of West Pender Street; the landmark Sun Tower is also visible just to the left of the frame.

Earl’s home, then, is a process of doing the best he can with what is available, and he takes pride in his ability to do this. The three-bedroom townhouse layout of his previous home is

unavailable in his context, so he has instead found a space that, although smaller, is affordable, clean, and close to the amenities he deems most important. This is a form of agency expressed through alteration of both the self and the space. Earl's expectations of place have changed to fit the new context; however, he has also poured huge amounts of effort into taking a relatively cookie-cutter space and cleaning and arranging it to fit his needs. There is a central compromise here; as Earl adapts to his environment, his environment must simultaneously adapt to him.

The Home as Site of Design Agency

What this discussion of flexibility speaks to is the amount of agency involved in building a home in precarious circumstances. The private home in the DTES is a separate entity from the social home of the sidewalk and community; it is a form of home that not all DTES residents have access to, and is therefore highly valued. According to Heidegger (1971), an object becomes a thing when it is imbued with purpose; while objects are against us, things work with us. For an object to become a thing, with meaning, then, requires some form of human connection and a sense of use. In this context, "design" refers not so much to the physical shaping of an object, but the planning. The choice to keep an object around in anticipation of its use constitutes a part of its design, just as much as the object's creation and physical place within the home. Use may be emotional, as well as practical; I argue that things that help us remember or feel have as much purpose as any more practical item (not that these categories are mutually exclusive). Consider Carol's description of her furniture; although things like a bed, a table, and a kitchen are practically designed in the sense that they have an anticipated physical use in day-to-day life, having these things *belong* to her imbues them with a new emotional meaning,

which has a purpose in and of itself; these objects tell a story, of how she came to find her home and how she made it hers. This is a story she was proud to tell me, and a story she can engage with at any time, simply by being in her home.

Barthes describes plastic as embodying possibility; plastic is a material that can be made into anything, and, in its unshaped form, exists only as a potentiality (Barthes 1957). It could become any number of things, and, as a result, plastic itself is nothing. It is a building block for what will become a thing, but, once shaped, it ceases to be plastic; it is made of plastic, but its core identity is as a toy, a car bumper, a cup, and so on. There is a material connection between home and plastic, as plastic provides the foundational material for so many of our household items (Shove et. al, 2007); however, there is an additional metaphorical similarity. Home is similar in its potentiality, as a home is not defined by the space that makes it up. Each participant who spoke of a physical, private home spoke not of the house, apartment, or room itself, but of the modifications they had made to it; the modifications were, at its heart, the thing that identified the place as "home." This took the form of specific objects, like photos, furniture, decor, or some combination thereof. Being able to sense the self in the space was key. Earl's sensory alteration was cleanliness; his room was not only carefully arranged to fit his exact needs, but he had spent months deep cleaning each and every corner to make it comfortable. He emphasized that his room had next to no pests, aside from a scattered few fruit flies. This contrasted with the majority of SROs; walking through the common areas of other buildings i've been to, where my shoes stick to the floors, was an entirely different experience to Earl's private space. Others altered their space in more visual ways. Carol, for example, quite literally put her name on one wall as a way to remind herself that "I have to love myself."

Thus, agency and design potentiality are key characteristics of the physical home in the DTES. The home-ness is not in the place itself, but in the use of the place; the placement of objects, the modifications for personal use, and the act of actually occupying a place all contribute to the meaning built into the home. Key to a sense of home in private space, then, is agency (Pink 2015); this is something that is denied to individuals living in more temporary or precarious situations, making it that much more valuable. Anne, for example, described her ideal home to me specifically and repeatedly; it would be in a walkable neighbourhood, full of trees and families. She specified that the interior of her space always began to feel like home when she had put up her "photo wall," with pictures of herself and her family. At the time of our interview, however, she was living in temporary housing in the DTES, with a two-year lease that was coming to an end. In her temporary apartment, she had never put up her photos; they, like many of her belongings, remained in boxes, waiting for a permanent home. She told me that she had never fully settled into her current apartment, knowing that she would have to leave relatively quickly after setting up. When I last spoke to her, she was a week away from moving into a new apartment in the Commercial Drive area, and we agreed that I would call her once she had been there a while to catch up; unfortunately, when I made that call, her phone had been disconnected, so I can only hope her new, more permanent apartment felt like home more than the temporary one.

Rentals, which comprise a large portion of the housing stock in Vancouver, are an inherently insecure form of housing. One can live in the same place for months, years, or decades, but should the legal owner of that space want to use it themselves, a tenant can be asked to leave with only a few months' notice. Although this insecurity is most commonly associated with rental homes, in many cases our homes may be deceptively insecure; tenants can be evicted

for personal use at any time, and homeowners can be priced out of neighbourhoods through rising property values, leading to higher taxes (Easthope 2018).

Secure occupancy is central to a sense of home in the DTES. Short-term tenancies lead to a sense of precarity, in the way that Anne experienced. Carol, J, and Rob all related their sense of home to the length and security of their tenancy; a key part of having a home, in the physical sense, is having a place in which to envision the future (Easthope 2018). The physical home in the DTES, like the physical home explored by Pink et. al (2017) and Clarke (2002), are built around an imagined future. The ability to project the future onto a space is both a product of design and an expression of control over the space; designing the home is thus a key step in creating it. The accompanying sense of control was echoed in interviews; J referred repeatedly to the positive feelings associated with having "a place to call home," while Carol emphasized the importance of having things around her that were exclusively hers. The fact that no one else could claim these items gave her a sense of security in her space.

In my conversations with community members, two parallel senses of home emerged. The private home is the form of home on the DTES that most closely resembles the subjects of traditional home ethnography, which tends to focus on private spaces and elements of control. "Home," in these contexts, is a place where we exert control; we choose the scents, textures, physical appearance, and, to some extent, the physical layout of our homes (Miller 2002; Pink et. al 2017). When I move into a new apartment, I move in my own furniture, in colours of my choosing, and I arrange it in a way that is comfortable for me. I put my own art on the walls, my own sheets on the bed, my own throw pillows on my own couch, and my clothes in the closet. I begin cooking and eating there, and the kitchen smells like foods I love. Through this process of choice, the home becomes *mine*. In her introduction to the topic of home ethnography, Sarah

Pink identifies the home as "the site where habitual but infrequently discussed aspects of everyday life play out" (Pink et. al 2017, 1); that is, the site of our private lives and private choices. The implication, spoken or unspoken, in the process of home ethnography is that home is a private place, in which we exert control over our spatial and sensory experience. This contrasts with the public sphere of urban ethnography, where people perform day to day public tasks, such as walking, working, shopping, and, in the case of unhoused residents, living (Timmerman & Prickett 2019).

The Little things: The importance of Cutlery in Housing Insecurity

Kitchen access is a luxury in the DTES, a private kitchen even more so; hence, cutlery, as something deeply personal and intimate, is often cast as representative of privacy. The kitchen was thus a room that came up again and again in interviews. Multiple participants referenced cutlery as being central in making a place feel like home. Because of this, I want to dig deeper on the significance of small objects in general, and cutlery in particular. Zoe Sofia's (2000) discussion of container technologies and "dumb spaces" provides a useful lens for this. Sofia argues that containers are often viewed as "dumb spaces," useless until filled. Containers, referring to small household items such as bottles and bins, but also to larger spaces of containment, such as rooms and buildings, thus have no meaning in and of themselves, but are purely vessels for the meaning of the items within them. Sofia also connects this oversight to the fact that containers are so often associated with traditionally feminine work; laundry hampers, interior decoration, and, of course, anything taking place in the kitchen. Although my focus is on cutlery rather than containers, there is a clear parallel here. Cutlery falls into a category that may

be referred to as “technical objects:” that is, objects that are purely utilitarian in design, and are thus ignored except in their functionality (Akrich 1992). Like Sofia’s “dumb spaces,” there is the obvious connection to the kitchen, as well: items associated with the kitchen, and the kitchen itself, may be overlooked and taken for granted, as the work that happens there goes unexamined.

More than any other kitchen item, cutlery breaches the physical boundaries of the body in its very design. It is one of the only things we own that we regularly put inside our bodies. In contradiction to this intimacy, however, is the shared nature of cutlery; unlike sex toys or bathing tools, which are deeply intimate and individual, cutlery is shared among every person who may eat in our homes. Dinner guests, family members, and housemates all use the same cutlery, making it simultaneously intimate and public. As a result of this, cleanliness may be especially central to the keeping of reusable cutlery. Cleanliness and reusability requires an infrastructure that is uncommon in shelters, SROs, and on the streets. In order to clean a fork, one needs to have access to more than just a fork; one needs a sink, a specialized dish soap, a sponge, and a towel (at the very least). The fork must then be stored somewhere where it won’t get dirty again before its next use. Even in SROs where residents have access to sinks, dish soap, and sponges and/or dish towels, storage may present a problem, making temporary plastic cutlery a more reasonable choice.

“We have, for some time now, known that the meaning, meaningfulness and often also practical usage of things are as much a matter of people’s everyday practices as it is a matter of the designers’ intent” (Redstrom 2012, 82). Functional objects are thus often imbued with meaning beyond their design, based on the personal history, values, and emotions of their users. In the context of transience and precarity, cutlery can be a sign of permanence given its size and

inherent difficulty to keep track of. Participants often discussed seemingly little things: a designated space for meals, a private bathroom, and a personal coffee maker all came up in conversations. Walker (2022) similarly found that children of divorced parents, who lived between multiple houses, recognized feelings of both comfort and alienation in seemingly small aspects of their respective houses. One interviewee specifically expressed her sense of alienation by saying, "I don't know where all the cutlery is in my dad's house" (Walker 2022, 222). Cutlery thus appears to be one of these small, everyday objects whose meaning transcends its design. Cutlery is not only representative of a kitchen infrastructure that is rare among those experiencing housing insecurity, but it is intrinsically representative of home in its mundanity. It is a physically intimate item that we use every day and share with anyone who enters our home as guest or resident.

Conclusion

When taken out of the traditional purview of home ethnography, the concept of what makes a home become slippery and elusive; thus, this chapter describes what are potentially the most traditional aspects of this research. The private home is the one that requires the least flexibility from its inhabitants. Creating a private home is about bending a space to fit one's own needs, rather than altering one's habits to fit the space. Although I argue that the entirety of life in the DTES is about the interplay between these two flexibilities, they exist in varying amounts dependent on context. In the private home, where a permanent future can be imagined, individuals enact agency over the space in a way that they cannot in more precarious situations. In this context, each thing in the home carries a huge amount of meaning; the furniture and decor

all come to be representative of the self to an extent that tents and sidewalks cannot be. So many community resources are one-size-fits all by necessity, as well; free meal programs offer one, sometimes two choices, with little room for customization. Shelters, detox centres, and safe injection sites are all similarly medicalized spaces; room after room or cubicle after cubicle, each with the same furniture, white, beige, and stainless steel surfaces. Although these elements are undeniably sensory in nature, they are not personalizable, and thus may not reflect the self in the way that an individualized space would. The element of personalization is thus what makes the private home in the DTES; in a context where opportunities for full personalization are few and far between, having a personalized space is a privilege.

Chapter 4: Home in Public: The Social Home in the Downtown Eastside

As private, physical homes are few and far between in the DTES, not all community members have a private space they can personalize, or that they feel comfortable being in. In this context, the neighborhood itself becomes a home, characterized not so much by the personal design touches, but by the personal relationships that community members form within the space. In addition to a private, physical home, community members described a social home, a sense of personal belonging and interreliance. The social home was the common denominator among community members I spoke to; although they all had varying levels of comfort and access to a physical home, when asked about what "home" meant to them, they almost universally gravitated toward describing the people around them. As such, the social home appeared to be a central feature of life in the DTES. Although the social home in the DTES echoes the anthropological concept of the household (Netting et al. 1984), there are some key

differences. A household implies a form of consistency and closeness that is not necessarily implied in the social home. Many community members described close relationships that were flexible in nature; people who they could go several years without being able to reach, before coming back into each other's lives and picking up where they left off. Similarly, several, such as Rob, described a sense of home among strangers. In this context, Rob described feeling safe and cared for in the presence of strangers who were going through the same experiences he was. In this context, having an ongoing personal relationship with the people in one's social home is not necessary to its existence nor to the sense of comfort it provides. Some community members do describe their household as providing a social home. However, the social home extends beyond the commonly accepted understandings of the household, to encompass passing and transient relationships that contribute to a sense of safety. In this chapter, I intend to explore the role of the social home to complement the previous chapter's focus on the private home. By exploring five participants' descriptions of their social home, with an in-depth focus on two of them in particular, I intend to demonstrate the importance of the social home in the DTES.

Home Ethnography and The Public/Private Dichotomy

Much of the existing literature on home ethnography has focused largely on the physical home as a bounded, controlled space. Pink (2004; 2015), Pink et. al (2020), Lenhard & Samanani (2020), Cook (2014), and numerous other authors all imply or directly establish "dwelling" and "home" as one and the same. In all these studies, the default "home" is the dwelling, and methods for understanding the home are the same as for understanding the dwelling; to conduct interviews *in situ* at home means to conduct them at a participant's main address. When it comes

to the sensory experience of home, then, the convention is to describe the experiential aspects of the private, physical space that an individual lives in. To return to my arguments in previous chapters, the focus here (implied or explicit) is on control; to feel at home, in much of the existing literature, means to feel a sense of control over one's surroundings. Within this lens, everything experiential is about the physical interaction with private space; however, I argue repeatedly in the preceding chapters that control is only central to the establishment of one type of home. If we can forgo the assumption of control as central to home-making, we can see public space as a home in its own right.

The emotional importance of the home, however, does carry beyond the control of private space; Duyvendak (2011) in particular explicitly defines "home" beyond the private. For Duyvendak, "home" consists not only of the dwelling, but of its surroundings, including its public setting. The public spaces we use and the people we share space with inevitably play a role in how comfortable we feel in the streets, parks, community centres, and other settings in and around our dwellings. Nationalist and anti-immigration movements, and xenophobia more broadly, according to Duyvendak, are often triggered by changes in the people sharing public space. Although the facets of home feelings that Duyvendak investigates significantly differ from my own research interests, he touches on a key element of home that is common in the DTES; "home" is not necessarily a specific place, but a specific feeling. Although this feeling is often associated with particular spaces, it can (and does) transcend place to apply to social, mental, and emotional environments, as well as physical. What Duyvendak does here that is so useful to me is to put perception above place; any place can be home, so long as it is seen that way.

According to Lijster, Volont, and Gielen, "Traditionally western societies have made a rather strict distinction between public spaces and private spaces, a distinction closely connected

to property: public space is owned and governed by the state or a local authority, private space is owned by a private person or company" (Lijster, Volont, & Gielen 2022, 21). However, this dichotomy easily breaks down in urban environments (Lijster, Volont, & Gielen 2022). Private ownership of apparently public space is one iteration of this, in the sense that many businesses are open (non-inclusively) to the public. Restaurants and shops are by necessity open to the public, and are likely to be experienced as "public space" as conceptualized by Lijster, Volont, and Gielen; however, several participants related stories of being asked to leave, or otherwise excluded from these spaces due to their inability to participate in commerce there. The other way that the public-private dichotomy is broken down in urban life is through the commons (Lijster, Volont, and Gielen 2022). Community gardens and collectively maintained playgrounds are examples of commons, spaces that are communally maintained by those who use them. All users of the space have an equal claim to it, according to the ethos of the urban commons. Although legal commons (ie. spaces that are collectively owned) are rare, there are numerous spaces that are operated in this way, making the commons a practice of urban life, if not a regular legal occurrence.

Plasticity and community are what characterize home in the DTES, for both housed and unhoused participants. Home transcends the built environment, and instead refers to a feeling associated with space. The fact that a public space can feel so personal is part of the blurring of the lines between public and private. In addition to their occupation of physical space, participants emphasized the importance of community support and social connections in the neighbourhood; in Rob's words, "everybody is connected. You never go hungry down here." A special form of commoning takes place in the DTES, as people live in and connect with public

space. Although the physical boundaries of the home become nebulous in this context, the definition itself becomes flexible and communal.

The Duality of Home: Participant Experiences

First Participant: J

As one of the very first interlocutors I connected with, J was clear in his emphasis on community as a form of home. Despite having been unhoused and insecurely housed in the past, describing himself as "nomadic," J is now settled in Port Coquitlam, a suburb of Vancouver with his wife. In the past, J had lived in and around the DTES in the summers, and spent his winters working in Banff and Whistler.

> It was easy to camp, it was easy to set up a tent, it was easy to couch surf. I mean, I've slept in vehicles, I've slept in back of vans, uhm, I've slept in tents, all to just save money and to say 'no, no I'm not going to pay these high rents!' . . . there's dumps you could get, like trash, trashy places, but, uhm, nothing in the terms of being home. And so, it just led me down this path of just being homeless, feeling like I would never, never afford my own home.

My interview with J took place in a coffee shop on West Hastings Street. We met early in the morning, before he began his shift with Mission Possible. The cafe, a Waves location sitting on an urban street corner, had floor to ceiling windows that allowed anyone inside to take in the entire intersection of Hastings and Cordova. People walked by on their way to work, school, and so on, but the coffee shop itself was nearly empty. J was already at a table, talking on the phone, when I arrived. He had clearly been up for several hours at that point, and was eager to begin his story and explain the significance of the coffee shop. J chose this place not as representative of

his current home, but as representative of his past: “it was either the coffee shop or the library, where I would spend a lot of my time. I had to be really creative with just having no money, no resources. So, you know, I would bounce between libraries, and coffee shops, and try and look for free events.” The library was not an option for interviewing, due to noise constraints, so the coffee shop provided the next logical choice.

For J, the assumption that a physical home was unattainable led him to search for a sense of home in his community, which he eventually found with his involvement in the Occupy movement of the early 2010s, which he described as an “incredible hub of community.” J found the communal nature of the occupy movement extremely refreshing after years of lonely, nomadic homelessness. J’s description of the community around Occupy was almost exactly opposite in tone to his description of his more independent transience, when he felt “invisible.” In contrast, the Occupy movement “a soundstage, speakers, entertainment,” asserting the presence of its residents outside the Vancouver Art Gallery, in the middle of the Downtown core.

Although J discussed feeling comfortable in his home now, he maintained that a large part of his sense of home was located in the DTES and Downtown core of Vancouver; he has been working with Mission Possible for eight years now, and has maintained strong community connections because of that. The aesthetic of this form of home is profoundly difficult to capture in an interview, because it is not static; people move, conversations change, and specific moments often cannot be recreated. However, J related an anecdote that summarized his experience, in aesthetic terms:

> One time, this, uh, this group by, and they gave everyone ghetto blasters, and it was all in sync to the same music. And there was hundreds of us, and we all danced, like, all around town. We all had these ghetto blasters, and it was like, [pause] it was just this impromptu, impromptu dance party! And I forget the group’s name but, man, that was fun! Like, I just loved the spontaneity and the, uh, the creativity. Like, reclaiming space . . . It was really, like, the type of music

> that everyone kind of knew the lyrics too, like you'd sing it. Kind of poppy, but they'd throw in some, some punk, or they'd throw in some rap. They'd throw in tunes, like anthem tunes, that everyone knows the lyrics to, like, you know, "We are the Champions" . . . So, the main guy, leading the pack, he was controlling the music, we all had the same music, same beat, and we just, we just danced! [laughs] We ended up at this pool, up here on Dunsmuir, we all jumped in the water, and we went to a subway station . . . no, uhm . . . yeah, we went to a train station, and, and people would just either, either laughed or we were in your way. It was, like, you loved us or you didn't. But yeah, it was so much fun, you know.

In this anecdote, community and its aesthetic experience are inextricably linked; the experience was made not just by listening to music, walking around the city, and dancing, but by doing these things in sync with other community members. The aesthetic enjoyment is not necessarily in the act itself (although these are all enjoyable acts on their own), but in the sense of belonging and group membership that is afforded to someone through their participation. In this anecdote, J emphasizes the role of community membership and shared experiences in his definition of home. Home, in this context, is not just a physical space, but a shared experience within space.

Rob

J was not the only participant who described a sense of social belonging in the DTES. Rob, another community member who now lived outside the neighbourhood, continued to spend his days in the area, particularly around the Carnegie Community Centre. Carnegie, standing right at the corner of Hastings and Main, is a local landmark, referred to on the City of Vancouver's website as "the living room of the Downtown Eastside" (City of Vancouver, 2022). Originally the Carnegie Public Library, the building was converted to a community centre in the 1980s. In its current iteration, it offers a number of much-needed services including mailboxes, public washrooms, and a low-cost cafeteria, as well as more long-term supports like educational

and recreational programs and classes. There are drop-in spaces, sitting areas, and a portion of the building that still operates as public library. There are various social services available as well, the most well-known of which is their housing support program, which attempts to match people struggling with housing with available affordable units.

I met up with Rob in one of the central seating areas of Carnegie. To enter the building, I walked up a broad set of steps, which raises the building above the street, giving it a somewhat imposing nature as it towers above the street. The entrance echoes the grand architecture outside; there is a large front desk area, with doorways branching off to different rooms. Directly across from the front door is a spiral staircase. To find Rob, however, I did not need to go very far into the building. Just to the left of the front desk, somewhat hidden from the main entrance but still in full view of the front desk, there is a room full of tables and chairs. People sit here to eat, read, socialize, or just to get out of the weather. The decor is generic and easy to clean, indicating its public usage; all the tables and chairs are made out of the same light yellow-toned wood, and the chairs all have the same muted vinyl backs and seats. The walls are white, with dark wood accents, and the floor is covered with white tile, speckled with black. It feels like a cross between community centre seating and a study area in a library, clearly communicating the exact function of the building itself.

Rob met me by the front desk and we sat down at one of the aforementioned tables, in the middle of the room. It was raining that day, so many of the tables were occupied by people passing time and avoiding the weather. The sounds of the street followed us inside; chairs and shoes squeaked on the tile floor, and people called to friends, chatted, and laughed in the background of our conversation, to the point that it was sometimes difficult to hear each other. Rob brought a binder with him, where he had chronicled his entire journey to sobriety, which

was closely intertwined with his housing history. After first moving to Vancouver from Batchewan First Nation in Ontario in 1994, he first lived on the Downtown Eastside. Upon achieving sobriety, he moved into a supportive housing complex in Vancouver's newly renovated Olympic Village, where he lives with his cat. Despite no longer living on the DTES, Rob still spends most of his time in the area; he goes to CRAB and Oppenheimer parks on nice days, and spend rainy days at Carnegie. Rob's social connections are complex and far reaching; he described numerous relationships with friends, family, and partners throughout the years, all located in the DTES. He has lost many of these people now, but maintains his sense of community membership more broadly through organizations in the DTES, like Carnegie.

For Rob, the Carnegie Community Centre was the obvious choice when I asked him to show me a place that felt like home; sitting right in the centre of the neighbourhood, it is a near-perfect encapsulation of the area, a place where, according to Rob, "around here, everybody basically knows everybody's face and all that. You can recognize a new person around here." Rob told me numerous stories of people, both friends and strangers, helping him on the streets over the years:

> There's the ladies on the street, you know? The hookers and that. When I was having my seizures, they would come over and they would hold me until I came to . . . I only got robbed like, one, two times, and all they did was take my bus pass. People on the streets and that, they're pretty good people. 'Cause I see them, always helping people in wheelchairs and that, opening doors and that.

For Rob, the aesthetic experience of the area was closely tied to the people there. He described the parks, greenspaces, and community hubs as some of his favourite parts of the neighbourhood; however, each description of a place came with a story about a person he had known there, or an interaction he had had. In this context, the sensation of the neighbourhood is a sensation of

mutual reliances, of being cared for, represented in the communal spaces in which community members build their connections.

Other Participants

Rob and J were not the only people who emphasized a social component to their sense of home; numerous others described physical spaces that were given meaning by those around them. Anne, for example, despite having had many different physical homes throughout the years, hesitated to describe private space when asked about where she considered home to be. Instead, she described a neighbourhood she would like to live in: a clean, walkable neighbourhood with lots of greenspace, and friendly neighbours. Unlike other community members I spoke to, Anne had not spent much time in the DTES, but had ended up in temporary housing there after being priced out of the Lougheed area of Burnaby. The noise, the crowding, and the dirt of the Downtown Area bothered her, and because her housing there was only temporary, she had not felt able to fully set up "home" for herself there. In each of her other apartments over the years, Anne had had a "photo wall" with pictures of her family, and a few of friends; no such wall existed in her temporary apartment, as she knew she would only be leaving for a new, more permanent apartment. Despite having a private space, Anne did not have a private *home*; the temporary nature of her apartment led her to consider merely a stop on the way to her imagined home, with its kind neighbours and open spaces. Anne focused on the public aspects of her imagined home over the private ones; beyond the photo wall, all of her descriptions of her imagined future home were outdoor, common spaces. For Anne, the shared spaces like parks, sidewalks, and public transit, were what made a home feel like home.

Carol described a similar interdependence, although hers was much more grounded in her current physical home. Carol's story of finding her permanent home was intertwined with stories of her relationships with other people: the friends who helped her repair the apartment after the fire, the friend who she had stayed with immediately before moving in, and her community with her 12-step program and the Mission Possible work program, both of which she had found shortly after moving in. Although her apartment itself was not shared, its meaning was co-constructed with numerous other people, all of whom contributed to home-making either through literal physical involvement, or by providing a less tangible, but still equally important, sense of community and safety. In this way, all the community members I spoke to understood their homes not only as private physical spaces, but as physical spaces given meaning by the sense of belonging that emerged around them. Thus, although the notion of the urban commons is rarely applied to the DTES, DTES community members embody the notion of the commons, both through necessary interdependence, and through their relationship to concepts of community and shared space.

Urban Commoning and the Social Home in the DTES

As previously discussed, the term "urban commoning" refers to communal living in urban spaces - not just having public space, but having a shared "home" that is communally used, operated, and maintained (Iaione 2016). Although commoning by the specific definition of communal ownership is rare in cities today, the spirit of the commons is alive and well in the DTES. The connection between physical space and community is evident in the social connections and interdependence that community members describe. Public spaces are key to

this; libraries, parks, and community centres are all publicly accessible gathering spaces, focused on providing resources to the local community. Libraries are a particularly unique common space, often identified as publicly funded refuge spaces for unhoused people (Mattern 2007). Libraries are consistently identified as safe spaces for people facing housing insecurity; they are warm, dry, and offer a number of free resources including internet access and bulletin boards featuring local community programs. The feature of libraries that Rob and J both identified as absolutely necessary to their comfort was the simple fact that the library is a free, public space, which does not require payment or specific negotiations in order to occupy. J also identified an aesthetic component to his reliance on libraries; while he was visibly othered in paying establishments like coffee shops, he was left alone in the library to charge his phone, use the computers, read a book, or otherwise pass the time. Despite this, libraries remain top-down spaces in terms of control and management (Mattern 2007). According to Shannon Mattern (2019): "libraries reinforce conventions of cultural production rooted in colonialist, white supremacist, and heteronormative values — including classification systems and models of intellectual property birthed centuries ago" (Mattern 2019). Even as they serve the community, libraries are staffed by (mostly white) educated professionals (Mattern 2019), and many have additional measures in place that demonstrate control, such as the presence of security guards. Older libraries, like Carnegie, often tower above the street, speaking to a historical sense of grandiosity that, although it has been tempered, remains a part of the library's history as a symbol of knowledge and higher education.

The streets thus remain the space most accessible for commoning. Although there are indoor community hubs like the Carnegie Community Centre, indoor spaces on the DTES typically have an organized management structure, by people who are not residents of the area.

There are security guards, front desk staff, and social workers present, operating many, if not most, of the community resources available. This includes residential buildings, such as SROs and shelters, which have large groups of residential staff on hand. The streets are the place in which community members have the most control, and the place where they are able to exercise control over their space. This sense of control can be emancipatory (Stavrides 2015) for people who are otherwise excluded, and who live with the stigma of being categorized as homeless; in a world in which one is afforded very few choices, the sense of a social safety net that emerges in a space under community control may be both freeing and comforting. As emphasized by both Tyler and Rob, there is a sense of order and interdependence in the DTES commons; in Rob's words, "people look out for each other."

This sense of order may be inscrutable to outsiders; however, to those directly involved in the community, the structure is clear and navigable. Community members also often describe being unable to count on external help for medical emergencies or legal assistance; due to system overwhelm in recent years, wait times for police and ambulances may be upwards of forty minutes anywhere in Vancouver, and in the DTES, they may not show up at all. This is an issue that is recognized by the social supports in the area, as well. In first aid training targeted to frontline workers, I was recommended to use my personal car to transport people to hospital whenever possible, as ambulances are unreliable in the area. This shortage of medical first responders, combined with widespread mistrust of police and medical systems[5], can lead community members to avoid calling for emergency services whenever possible. In the absence of a reliable official support system, a sense of community emerges built on reciprocity; although petty theft is a recognized risk, those on the inside generally trust that, so long as they are not

[5] This is a widespread tendency that I have observed in my work in the DTES. This topic calls for much more investigation; however, a specific investigation is outside the scope of this thesis.

disturbing or harming those around them, they may rely on others for protection. In the previous section, Rob specifically describes falling unconscious in the street, and being protected by those around him. As a result, the worst harm that came to him while unconscious was the loss of his bus pass, resulting in a communal space in which he felt relatively safe and was able to rely on the people around him to maintain the communal sense of safety in reciprocity. There are even some moves towards building a more physical representation of the commons in the DTES; for example, the lot next to the Astoria hotel has been turned into a community garden, teeming with life in the warm summer months when I was there.

Community Gardens are contentious spaces, evoking a variety of emotions surrounding gentrification, urban beautification (Kingsley, Foenander, & Bailey 2020), and the neoliberalization of social services (Ghose & Pettygrove 2014). Community gardens, under a veneer of progressive community engagement and mutual aid, (often unwittingly) contribute to the economic realities of gentrification, generating social capital (Kingsley, Foenander, & Bailey 2020). Ghose and Pettygrove (2020) argue that "in the context of neoliberalization, citizen participation is a component of collaborative governance used to reduce state responsibility for social service provision, and citizen volunteers are compelled to fill welfare deficiencies resulting from lapsed government spending" (Ghose & Pettygrove 2020, 1092), suggesting that community gardens can remove pressure from the government to provide food security. While there is no doubt this can be true, citizen participation is not unique to neoliberal policy; similar acts of citizen participation filling gaps in social services can be seen in practices of mutual aid in absence of a government-provided social safety net among self-identified socialists. Citizen participation often emerges as a necessity to fill gaps in the social safety net, as is often seen in the mutual interreliance people describe in the DTES. Despite obvious drawbacks within the

economic setting, community gardens are often, in their intent and early implementation, sites for community gathering and place-based identity building (Cumbers et. al 2018; Firth, Maye, & Pearson 2011). When I visited the community garden at the Astoria, I found it full of both residents of the Astoria and other DTES community members, gardening, eating, and some just standing in groups among the planters, chatting. Ranjeeva told me that the community garden was highly valued in the community, providing both food and a hobby for community members. In the DTES, greenspace outside of public parks is hard to come by, meaning that many, if not most, residents do not have a space to engage in gardening as a hobby if not for the community garden. The Astoria thus provides a space for community members to engage in new, community-oriented activities, therefore creating a space for community connection and identity. In the particular context of the Astoria Hotel, the community garden seems to provide a space for community gathering and food security; despite the broader economic context of gentrification within the DTES, this remains a space of so-called "neighbourhood improvement" which has so far remained serving current residents.

Lijster, Volont, and Gielen (2022) discuss the centrality of creativity in building the commons, emphasizing its importance in their very definition of the urban commons. Much of the existing conversation around commoning is focused around communities of artists who share studio space, homes, etc. Along with this, commoning has been proposed as a solution to housing shortages and homelessness, although this has happened largely through attempts to extract and recontextualize the principles of the artist commune. Volont (2021) has applied this lens to a specific example of urban commoning, the Pension Almonde in the Netherlands, which billed itself as being a home for "homeless youngsters, asylum seekers, people that are homeless after a divorce, but indeed, also graduated, promising people. *They bring stability*" (City in the

Making, in Volont 2021, 144; emphasis mine). This statement is fundamentally flawed. Although it may be true that "asylum seekers," taken to mean people new to the country/community, who have not yet had the chance to set down social roots, may struggle to find a sense of community in an unfamiliar place, it also assumes that the "homeless youngsters," who are presumably more local, are also lacking this same stability (which is subsequently explained to refer to community stability and social ties, rather than economic or other forms of stability). Community stability, then, is something to be given to marginalized people by "graduated, promising people," as though the aforementioned marginalized groups do not already have their own social connections. Put simply, it assumes that the thing lacking is social in nature, rather than resource-based.

Pension Alomonde took an experimental approach to social housing, allowing "urban nomads," including "those that are nomadic for ideological reasons (choosing not to spend a considerate amount of their income to permanent housing), for practical reasons (expats, artists) or out of necessity (the homeless, *sans papiers*, seasonal workers)" (Volont 2021, 144) to apply. At Pension Almonde, residents were expected to live and contribute communally, and to share all space, including the indoor spaces of their homes (although this was later adjusted to give residents some private areas). Although the concept grew out of an orientation towards social housing, much of the discussion of Pension Almonde has focused on its relationship to the "creative class." Volont points this out in his discussion of Pension almonde's public reception (Volont 2021, 148), but also emphasizes the ways in which Pension Almonde was modeled off of artist communes (Volont 2021, 144). Due to its emphasis on a specific form of creativity, Pension Almonde, despite its initial intention, maintained an element of exclusion in its implementation (Volont 2021).

The process of urban commoning has been explicitly connected to Richard Florida's "creative class," (2004) and creativity itself is repeatedly emphasized in understandings of commoning (Volont, Lijster, and Gielen 2022). Urban commoning is a "creative" way of living, insofar as it involves readjusting social boundaries and sense of responsibility, thus moving away from ingrained divisions between public and private. The issue that arises here, however, is how we define "creativity." Lijster, Volont, and Gielen critique the connection often drawn between creativity and monetization, arguing that to link creativity to one's career or other marketable personal traits flattens the complexity of the term (Lijster, Volont & Gielen 2022). People in the DTES share space and rely on one another in the same way that the artist communities frequently referenced in discussions of urban commoning; they just do it with fewer resources. Up to this point, homelessness and insecure housing have not been sufficiently examined in terms of their relationship to the commons, beyond their inclusion in the extremely broad category of "urban nomads." I argue that, if we take creativity to mean flexibility and movement away from norms (of public and private, of individual and collective, and so on), this is often enacted in the DTES as a common adaptation to the environment. Ingold and Hallam (2007) argue that there is an inherent creativity in the almost universal act of improvisation; nowhere have I seen more clear improvisation than in cases of necessity, like among unhoused individuals building shelters and meeting their own needs in whatever ways they must. It does not involve a deliberate move towards the commons, requiring funding and planning; instead, it emerges organically as community members form relationships and rely on one another for safety, community, and resource access.

Conclusion

The social home, as expressed by community members, relates closely to the concept of urban commoning, and the two seem to have a base understanding of community and interdependence in common. However, although urban commoning has been proposed as a solution to housing shortages in urban areas, the ways in which housing insecure people are already enacting the values of commoning has gone largely ignored. Urban commoning is not a practice to be imported to these areas, but one to be nurtured in its preexisting, location-specific form. In the next chapter, I intend to draw together the existing social home and the role of the private home in the DTES. The community members I spoke to who were happiest with their situation were those who had both community engagement through the DTES social home, and a private space to personalize and retreat to. Belonging is the common thread in these ideas; a social space where one feels part of a larger home, and a private space which feels as though the space belongs to them. "Belonging" is the term that characterizes my conclusion, as it speaks to both a broad sense of acceptance and an assertion of ownership over a place, regardless of legal designation.

Conclusion: Building Spaces for Community

To sum up my observations in the previous chapters, I want to return to the Thirdspace thinking I addressed in Chapter 2. According to Soja, the concept of Thirdspace rejects hard divisions, instead viewing space and meaning as flexible and layered. Triallectic thought hinges on expanding dichotomies, not by turning them into spectrums, but by proposing solutions that are neither part of an existing category, or a combination thereof. Although I would not say that the DTES is viewed particularly dichotomously, there is an element of reductionism in common conversations surrounding homelessness and, in particular, the residents of the neighbourhood. The DTES is so often viewed through a moralistic lens, and residents report feeling judged, disregarded, and generally excluded from the rest of the city.[6] Removing the moralistic lens often applied to the aesthetics of improvised living (eg. objections to the sight of tents in city parks or on sidewalks), there is an immense amount of creativity involved in those adaptations[7]. Seeing

[6] For more explanation of these ideas, see Chapter 2
[7] For more on creativity and improvisation, see Ingold and Hallam (2007)

the DTES beyond moralistic terms means seeing it as a layered space with many different meanings for different people. Even community members themselves don't always agree on its meaning; what makes some feel safe makes others uncomfortable. Anne, for example, objected to large crowds of people on the sidewalk, while Rob felt that they provided safety in numbers. Based on the wide variety of responses and descriptions given by DTES community members, I cannot describe here what the Downtown Eastside is. Beyond espousing its flexibility and adaptability, which were both widely agreed upon, it is not my place to put forward any overarching definition of what the space means to its residents. Instead, I want to propose an alternative way of viewing the use of space and sense of home in the neighbourhood, beyond stereotypical narratives of homelessness.

Memory and Home-Making in the DTES

Several community members, when asked about their associations with the term "home," spoke of past relationships, friendships, and family; their experiences of home were tied not only to the people around them in that moment, but those who had made up their social home in the past. Rob, for example, discussed numerous people he had known over the years, both friends he met in the DTES and family members from his home community of Batchewan, Ontario. Living in the DTES, many of these people had passed or moved away, or fallen into active addiction and lost contact with friends and family; despite this, Rob still closely associated his feelings of comfort in the area with these relationships, and associated many places in the neighbourhood with his own memories of people who were no longer there. Carol had similar stories of recovery. After becoming sober, she lost contact with a number of friends she used to drink with.

These friends were still important to her; they were people who had helped her when she needed it, providing housing and emotional support, and who she had helped reciprocally in the past. These past relationships coloured both Carol's and Rob's descriptions of life in the DTES. Their lives in the area were affected by not only their current relationships and community ties, but by memories of past relationships tied to place.

Much of the conversation around life in the DTES centres around death; Angela May (2021) explores the pitfalls of research that relies on community members recounting pain narratives. This form of dark anthropology (Ortner 2016), often derisively referred to as "tragedy porn," puts pain and loss on display in a way that is of no benefit to those experiencing it. First and foremost, literal death did not come up as a focus in my conversations with community members. Past relationships were discussed in similar terms, whether they ended through death, circumstance, or simple interpersonal drifting. In attempting to hold self-awareness in this project, I deliberately focused on the positive experiences that participants described. In doing so, I found that negative descriptions were not the norm; instead, positive and negative emotional experiences existed in tandem, connected to space through memory. Experiences of home in the Downtown Eastside are not only personally determined, but simultaneously mediated by the past. As many participants recounted specific memories, experiences, and people they associated with their homes, they defined their homes, at least in part, by their pasts. This is a common way of defining space through personal experience, and it is at the heart of De Certeau's understanding of haunting. For De Certeau, the city is full of ghosts; not only the ghosts of people, but of experiences, memories of how things once were. In this way, all homes are haunted, in that they are occupied and defined by memories. In this sense, the DTES, like so many other places, is haunted by ghosts that are kept animate by living residents. Residents

remember the friends who have died or left the area, and they remember events like fires, demolitions, and the shuttering of local businesses or community hubs. They tell stories about things and people that are no longer there, holding knowledge of a place that would be otherwise invisible. I wish to emphasize again that, although this is true of the DTES, it is a common characteristic of urban life in general; living in places that change rapidly means that long-time residents will have a perception of their home that is characterized by invisible histories. These invisible histories become tied up with the living aspects of the place, and, counterintuitively, contribute to its continued life.

Urban Commoning in the DTES

Blomley (2004) attributes much of the conflict surrounding the DTES to differing definitions of property, owing to fundamental mismatch between official definitions of real estate ownership, and the sense of belonging that develops from spending time in a place, which exists independent of official documentation. Blomley tells stories of buildings and spaces in the DTES area, which residents have historically asserted their right to. The closing of the Woodward's Department in 1993 store is one example; local activists came together to paint political slogans, rainbows, and flowers on the windows, and to clean the street outside, asserting their right not only to be in the space, but to care for it (Blomley 2004, 39). According to Blomley:

> The acts of cleaning and painting are domestic acts. I clean my house. I decorate its walls. They are, of course, dependent upon an entitlement and an obligation. If it's my house, I *can* and *should* maintain and improve it. Similarly, in cleaning and painting Woodward's, activists were enacting a claim of ownership. For one of the organizers: 'Woodward's belongs to the neighborhood.' (Blomley 2004, 39)

This sense of belonging in public space maps directly onto the nature of the social home, as a place-specific, grounded enactment of community[8]. When people assert communal rights to space, the implicit value is for community, especially place-based community. The social home may not be immediately apparent to outsiders, who first notice the smells, sounds, and sights of a seemingly chaotic and busy street; however, as I argued in Chapter 2, this is an example of mismatched aesthetic languages. People who have not had to adapt to homelessness may not see the commoning of the street as commoning or home-making; instead, they view it as an invasion of space that is meant for them. This mismatch results in intercommunity tensions, seen in the vicious responses I observed to affordable housing proposals in Vancouver's (much wealthier) Kitsilano neighbourhood. There is a fundamental disagreement between these communities regarding what communal space is *for*; is it for living, sleeping, and eating in absence of other spaces to do so, or is it for smaller time blocks of socialization, sitting in the park before returning to one's private home? In the disagreements surrounding this question, a collage of various understandings of belonging in public space emerges throughout the city, what Blomley refers to as a "creative bricolage" (Blomley 2004, 2022).

Gentrification provides an important backdrop to the DTES, in the sense that home-making there takes place in an embattled space. The DTES has historically been associated with poverty and immorality, with SROs springing up for a "dollar-a-day" as homes of last resort for seasonal workers, people with no fixed address, or those who simply did not have the money for more stable accommodations. Before this, the DTES had been the centre of Vancouver's light industry economy, before the development of the city's service economy saw the city centre shift west; this left the DTES as an industrial zone close to the downtown core, making it optimal for

[8] I use the term "belonging" instead of "ownership" in this context, as, although this argument links closely to Blomley's discussion of property, my focus is on how people engage with space, regardless of its legal designation.

inexpensive housing for workers and others who could not afford to live either in the downtown core itself, nor in the wealthier suburbs that later emerged. In recent years, the city centre has expanded East; the popular tourist district of Gastown now directly borders the DTES, to the point that tourists often accidentally wander down Hastings Street and find themselves in a seemingly different world. Earl's home, the Avalon hotel (which actually sits within view of the former Woodward's building) is now kitty-corner to several upscale coffee shops, in a transitional zone exemplifying the ongoing power struggle of newer economic interests and claims to space by the existing community. In this sense, the social home in the DTES can be seen as a form of resistance. People rely on one another for staying power in the area, staking a public claim to the streets and parks.

Concluding Thoughts

Community members in the DTES often come together to assert their belonging in the space, through direct political demonstrations (Blomley 2004), to day-to-day interactions with their homes and neighbourhood. People demonstrate their attachment to a place by modifying it, leaving their own physical mark; this applies as much to the tents, stalls, and shopping carts on the sidewalk, as it does to the process of decorating and personalizing a private space. By modifying the physical space to make it more amenable to everyday life, people assert their right not only to be in the space, but to have a space that fits their needs. The Astoria Hotel is one of these places which has been modified over the years for the community, and one that I was able to explore in great detail, thanks to Ranjeeva Samaranayake, who invited me to see the space, where he has worked for the past 22 years (likely nearing 23, as of my writing this). The Astoria

is one of the most well-known SROs in Vancouver. The building itself is over a hundred years old, having first started out at the Toronto House Apartments. It became the Astoria in 1950, and has been a community gathering place throughout its history. Although the Astoria is owned by the Sahota family, who also owned the condemned Balmoral and Regent Hotels, the place itself is associated more with its community use than its ownership. The hotel sits at the corner of East Hastings and Hawks Avenue, on the Eastern border of the DTES. To the West is the central intersection of Hastings and Main, which I have described previously, and to the East is industrial spaces and smaller residential streets. The Astoria is hard to miss; it stands several stories higher than its surroundings, and boasts a massive neon sign, preserved since its opening in 1950.

On the main floor is a bar, which is where I first sat down with Ranjeeva. The bar at the Astoria used to host a thriving subcultural music scene, and was a well-known venue for live emo, metal, and punk music, as well as hosting DJs for dance nights. The bar has been closed since early 2020, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, with no plans to reopen. The space has not changed at all since closing its doors; the black and white checkered floor, ornate red lamps, pool tables, and stage all sit undisturbed. Everything is a little bit sticky and dusty, likely owing to both its history as a dive bar and the fact that the space has not been used in over two years. The most notable thing, to me, was the silence. The bar feels haunted by the obvious absence of crowds and music. This is a place brimming with history.

The silence of the bar also sticks out in contrast to the rest of the building. The liquor store on the other side of the lobby, the rooms upstairs, and even the empty lot next door (which is no longer empty, a fact I will return to later), are all extremely active. The residential halls and rooms are standard-issue for an SRO. Many people were not home when I was there, given that

it was the middle of the day, but Ranjeeva greeted and introduced me to all the people we did see. Most were in motion, either leaving or coming home, and I'm sure many more sat behind the closed doors in their private homes. Evidence of the life in the Astoria filled the hallways, evidenced by bikes leaning against walls and windows open to let in the summer breeze. Even the empty rooms remained lived in. Ranjeeva opened the door to show me one, and we were immediately confronted by a panicked pigeon that had gotten itself stuck. Even after we guided the bird out the open window, there were still a few items left behind by the last tenant. A jar of pickles and ashtray on the table demonstrated that the room had been occupied recently (by a human!). The rooms come furnished with the necessities, including a single bed, a table, and a closet, but residents of course bring other things with them, such as blankets, food, and clothing to fill the room. Various flags, tapestries, and blankets are hung in the windows, all visible from outside. Most of the rooms come with a view of the neighbourhood, either looking out over Hasting street itself, or onto one of the side alleys (which are often just as active as the main street).

The upstairs rooms, however, are private. To reach them, a person has to go to the reception desk and be let in, meaning they must live there, work there, or be otherwise invited in. There are other spaces which are much more open to the commons. There is a boxing ring in the basement, where classes and matches open to the public are held; there is the aforementioned liquor store, where people come and go, and, most central to my experience of the Astoria, there is the lot next door, which has been turned into a community garden. To reach the community garden, Ranjeeva and I stepped out the back door from the empty bar, into bright daylight in the alleyway next to the building. From the alleyway, there is an entrance to the community garden, which was full of people. Some were gardening, but most were socializing; there were small

clusters of people in every corner, and, towards the centre of the garden, a larger crowd gathered to take home some of the ripe fruits and vegetables they had been growing. Everybody seemed to know everyone else by name; I was introduced to so many people in such quick succession that I would not have been able to remember their names had I not been recording. In a true act of commoning, the garden has taken over a previously empty gravel lot, and turned it into a welcoming gathering space.

I choose to end with a description of the Astoria, as the broadly focused tour I received addressed both forms of home discussed in the rest of this thesis; the private rooms, which are customized for personal use, are upstairs, while the community garden, boxing ring, and, formerly, the bar provide public gathering spaces where community members care for and enact their belonging in space. Although ownership of the Astoria is private, its use is public, and community members continue to enact that public use regardless of paper titles.

There are a number of specific recommendations I could make regarding housing and home on the Downtown Eastside; the need for more affordable housing, more subsidies, more mental health support, and more harm reduction all came up in interviews. These are not new suggestions, however. They are suggestions that have been made, time and time again, while organizations and people struggle with implementation due to budgetary and practical constraints. I cannot solve these problems by discussing what the city needs, as residents have already been clear and public about what they need. What I can say, however, is what the DTES does *not* need: what non-profits, governments, and other organizations do not have to do, is create a sense of home. Community members already have a sense of home; there is already an existing sense of belonging and reciprocal support. What is missing is the space that allows that sense of home to be articulated without fighting for its own existence. The example of the

community garden at the Astoria speaks to the power of providing people with space to legitimize social connection. The sense of home in the DTES already exists as a place-based social network, but it needs attention and resources to thrive in the way commoning implies. In contrast to the stigma people face for occupying sidewalks, places like Carnegie, CRAB Park, and community gardens are beloved, because they provide a space where the preexisting community is encouraged and enabled to assert itself. These spaces do not create community, but they legitimize it by providing a designated space for socialization and connection, thus fostering the sense of a social home.

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