



THE URBAN EXPLORERS OF VANCOUVER'S CIVIC BUILDINGS

VoL.1

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DATE:

Sunday
October 15, 2017

INTRODUCTION

Vancouver Public Space Network (VPSN) is a non-profit organization focused on advocacy, education and outreach in support of Vancouver's public spaces.

In 2017, VPSN launched its newest portfolio, Civic Buildings, co-led by Beverley White and Ellen Molloy. The portfolio recognizes that both buildings *and* the spaces between them play an important role in the public space network.

In a bid to define the term 'civic building', and better understand the role of civic buildings in Vancouver we set about this research study, in collaboration with London-based arts collective, Elective.

Elective, created the explorers toolkit consisting of a map, activity pack and a 'publicness' scale. 11 volunteers from VPSN participated in the study, which was held on a Sunday afternoon in October.

The pilot study focused on downtown Vancouver. The findings were compiled by Beverley White, Ellen Molloy, Denise Fenton, Jordan Booth, Hema Ramnani and Hannah Lingren.

WHAT ARE CIVIC BUILDINGS AND WHY EXPLORE THEM?

What is a Civic Building

Traditionally, the term 'civic building' might bring to mind a publicly owned building such as a museum, library or city hall. Such buildings are often clustered together in civic centres, and frequently the architecture has landmark qualities, which create a focal point in a city.

VPSN have defined the term 'civic building' in a broader sense, to mean a building with a civic function. It could be a place where people gather to celebrate, learn or socialize, a place for democracy, governance or debate. In essence, and as defined by Cynthia Nikitin at Projects for Public Spaces (2009), it is a place that brings communities together both physically and symbolically by providing resources, gathering places and forums for open communication.

As noted by Nikitin, at their best, civic buildings:

- Nurture and define a community's identity
- Foster frequent and meaningful contact between citizens
- Provide comfort in their public space
- Encourage an increasingly diverse population to use them
- Are easily accessible by walking / public transit

We are exploring the function of a civic building on both a neighbourhood and a city scale, appreciating that sometimes the small informal spaces bring people together as much, if not more than the formal civic buildings. And further, that a building doesn't have to be publicly owned to have civic importance. It could be the place you do your laundry or meet friends for a coffee.

TOOLKIT

The Pilot Study

The research began very open, with a group of 11 explorers spending an afternoon seeking out civic buildings, both in a traditional and non-traditional sense. The pilot study focused downtown, although it was recognized that a number of civic hubs exist across the city, and that the methods tested could be used to inform a wider study.

About the Toolkit

The toolkit was designed to bring together a group of volunteers to map, observe and analyse a number of civic buildings in Vancouver. This study is complementary to another explorers day in London, and to additional research VPSN volunteers are conducting on civic buildings in Vancouver. Explorers were armed with a pack containing a map, a publicness continuum slider tool and their cameras.

'Publicness' Scale

VPSN recognize that a number of factors contribute to the public life of a building. By way of measuring this, we created a set of public space criteria through which to measure a buildings 'publicness'. This scale was partly inspired by a PhD thesis entitled 'Assessing the publicness of public places: towards a new model' by G. Varna (2011). A summary of our chosen publicness criteria is noted below:

- User Diversity (varieties of ages, gender, ethnicities etc. this space attracts)
- Accessibility (visual and physical accessibility - is it inviting?)
- Activities (programming / activities taking place)
- Governance (rules, surveillance, order etc.)
- Low cost (is it free to access or is there a cost associated?)

MAP:

1090 W. Georgia
Score: 8

CF Building
Score: 9

789 W. Pender
Score: 9

Sinclair Centre
Score: 19

Vancouver Art Gallery
Score: 16

Alexander College
Score: 9

BCIT
Score: 16

Cafe Artigiano
Score: 10

Pacific Centre
Score: 16

Robert Lee YMCA
Score: 14

UBC Robson Square
Score: 19

Vancouver Centre
Score: 14

Railway
Score: 14

Holy Ros
Score: 14

Orpheum
Score: 6

Telus Garden
Score: 13

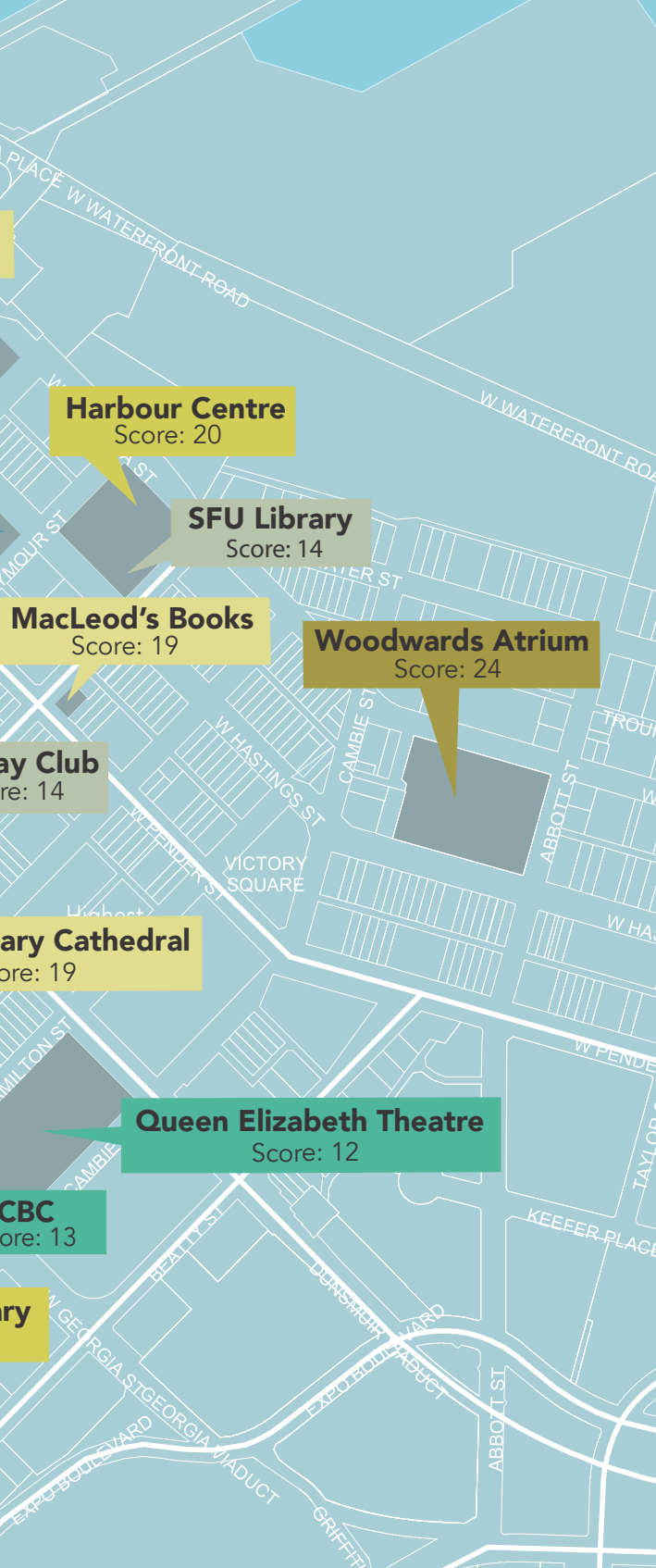
VSO School of Music
Score: 12

**Gathering Place
Community Centre**
Score: 22

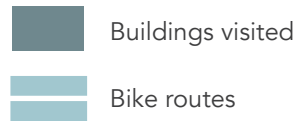
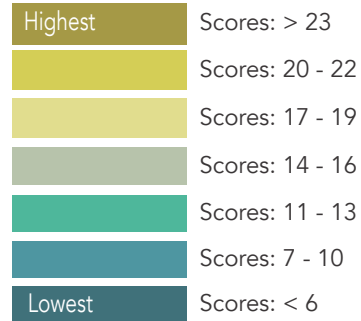
Social Corner
Score: 13

Vancouver Public Library
Score: 21

FDU
Score: 5



Publicness Score Scale:

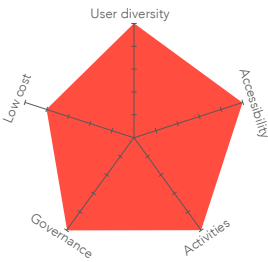


This map illustrates the buildings visited by our explorers on October 15, 2017 between 1pm and 4pm. The score is based on the publicness scale, out of a maximum 25 points. Some buildings were visited by multiple explorers, in which case average scores have been generated. The map is a snapshot in time, based on the activities, interactions, users and the atmosphere of the building. It includes the 'wild card' buildings, i.e. buildings that may not ordinarily be considered a civic building, but that our explorers found to have a civic function.

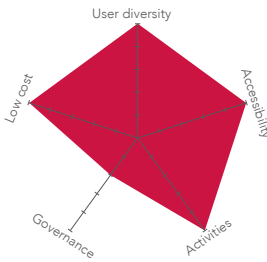
Overleaf, the diagrams illustrate how each building fared under each of the five categories. Results are ordered based on performance, and colours differentiate public and private buildings. See key on the next page for details.

'Publicness' Findings

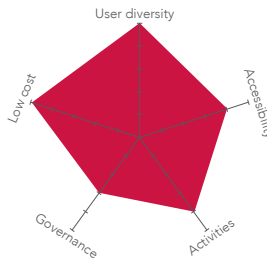
Woodwards Atrium



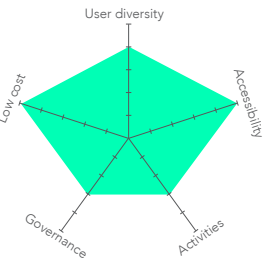
Gathering Place Community Centre



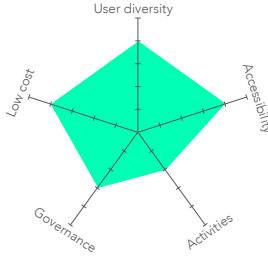
Vancouver Public Library



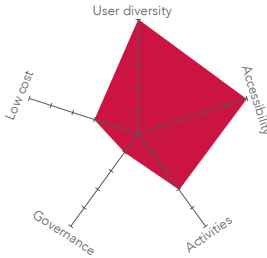
Harbour Centre



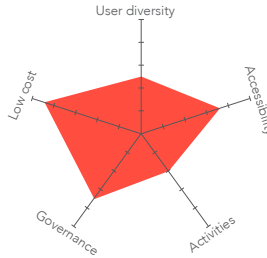
Pacific Centre



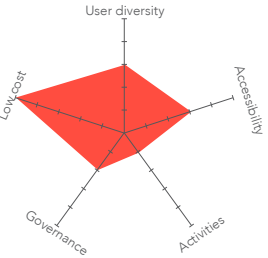
Vancouver Art Gallery



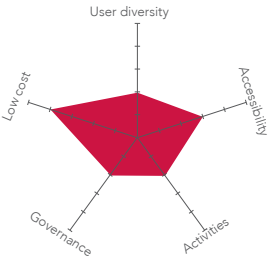
BCIT



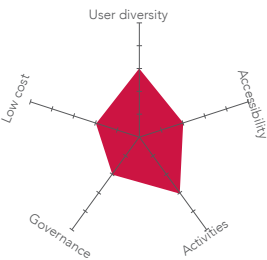
SFU Downtown Library



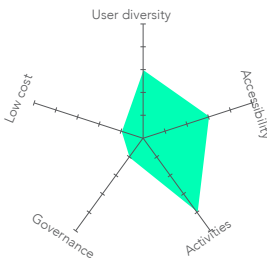
CBC



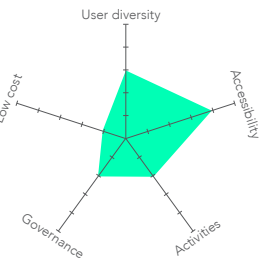
Queen Elizabeth Theatre



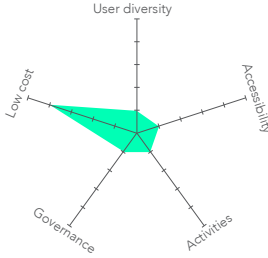
VSQ School of Music



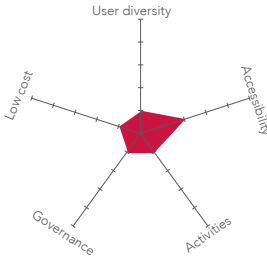
Social Corner (Cafe)



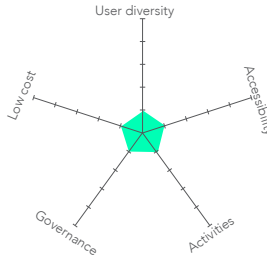
1090 W Georgia



Orpheum Theatre



FDU Vancouver

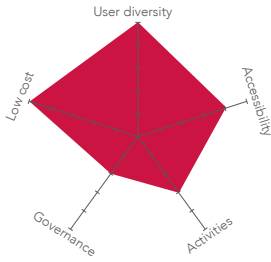


KEY

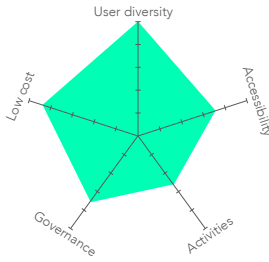
Ownership:

- Public
- Semi-public
- Private

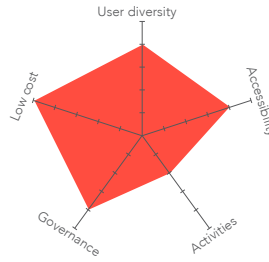
Sinclair Centre



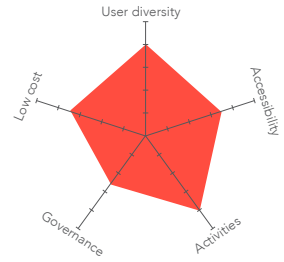
MacLeods Books



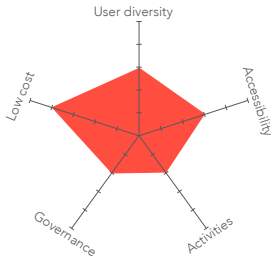
Holy Rosary Cathedral



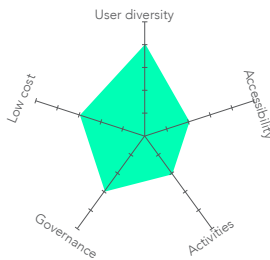
UBC (Robson Square)



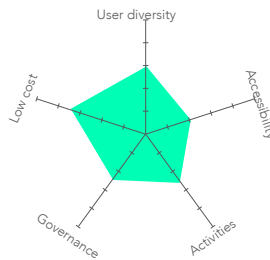
Robert Lee YMCA



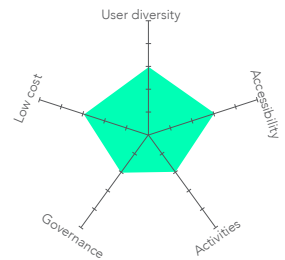
Railway Club



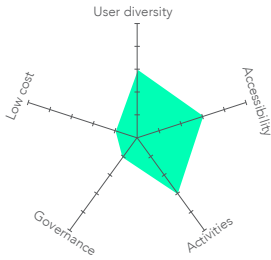
Vancouver Centre



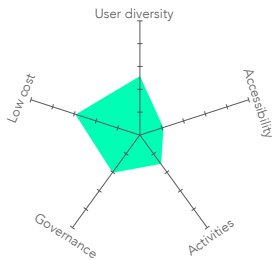
Telus Gardens Atrium



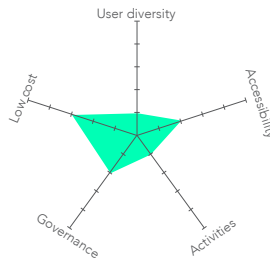
Cafe Artigiano



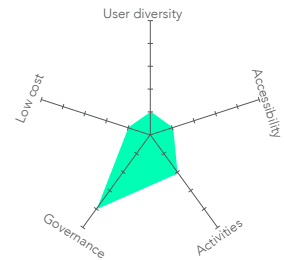
Alexander College



789 W Pender



CF Building



User diversity - variety of ages, genders, ethnicities etc.

1 = Homogeneous 5 = Extremely diverse

Accessibility - visually and physically accessible/inviting?

1 = Inaccessible 5 = Extremely accessible

Activities - different activities happening simultaneously?

1 = No activities 5 = Variety of activities

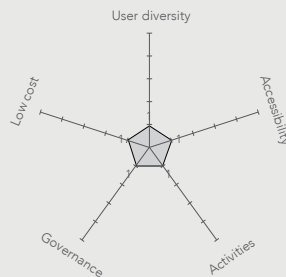
Governance - rules, surveillance, order etc.

1 = Highly governed 5 = Ungoverned

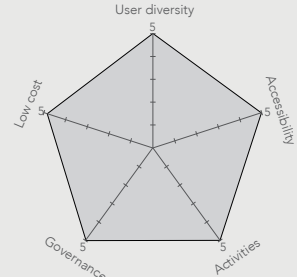
Low cost - is there a cost associated with going here?

1 = Expensive 5 = No charges

Minimum score



Maximum score



OBSERVATIONS

High-performing, public buildings

At the time of our study (a typical Sunday afternoon in October), the highest performing public buildings were the Gathering Space Community Centre, closely followed by Vancouver Public Library (VPL).

User diversity: The Gathering Space and VPL exhibited the most diverse range of users, with diversity noted in age, gender, ethnicity and ability.

Accessibility: Our observers commented on the feeling of openness at VPL created by the skylights and multiple entries. At the Gathering Space, a plaque outside explicitly deems it a "safe, social place for everyone in the community including seniors, people with disabilities, people on low income, youth and people who are homeless".

Activities: Both spaces offer a range of activities, those at the Gathering Space include legal advice clinics and health support to pottery classes and a TV room, while the Library offers

access to computers, books, and also offers a number of talks and classes.

Security: The Gathering place does not appear to have intrusive surveillance. Security was more noticeable at VPL, with security guards and cameras. It was noted this security may encourage some users while discouraging others from using the space.

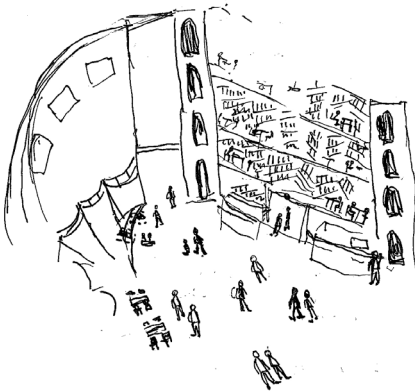
Cost: In both spaces facilities are free. The Gathering Place is a public community centre, so no onus to buy products or services. An annual membership with the Downtown South Gathering Place Community Centre Association is \$2.00. The library is free to use, while the seating outside appears to be for users of the shops, however upon further observation many people seem to be sitting without purchased items.

Selected Examples

VANCOUVER PUBLIC LIBRARY

Score: 21/25

No. of visits: 3



GATHERING SPACE COMMUNITY CENTRE

Score: 22/25

No. of visits: 2



Mid- low-performing, public buildings

Of the public buildings visited, Vancouver Art Gallery ranked third on our 'publicness' scale, followed by the CBC building. Our lowest performing public buildings were Queen Elizabeth Theatre and the Orpheum Theatre.

User diversity: A range of users were observed at Vancouver Art Gallery, whereas Queen Elizabeth Theatre appeared to be visited by people of similar social and economic backgrounds. CBC was very quiet.

Accessibility: In the case of the theatres, spaces were only welcoming to those that had paid to enter. One visitor to the Orpheum Theatre noted "The building itself is beautiful from the outside, and is an iconic Vancouver landmark, the inside was not available to explore", hinting at a lost opportunity.

Activities: One of the reasons the Orpheum may have scored lowest is because there were no events taking place at the time of the exploration. In the case of the Art Gallery it was noted that surrounding activities such as ice skating were complimentary, bringing more visitors to the gallery. At the time of the visit two performances were taking place at Queen Elizabeth Theatre.

Security: At Queen Elizabeth Theatre the space was highly governed with both security and attendants standing at the doors. They monitored who was entering the theatre.

Cost: There is a cost barrier associated with entering the theatre. The Art Gallery scored better in this category, enabling people to enter the foyer, gift shop and cafe without paying for admittance. CBC also allowed use of the foyer without charge.

These spaces had our explorers wondering what further potential there could be. From opening up the Orpheum to allow people to see the beautiful interior when performances are not taking place, to better utilizing the open space outside the Queen Elizabeth Theatre and elements of performance for non-paying customers.

VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

Score: 16/25

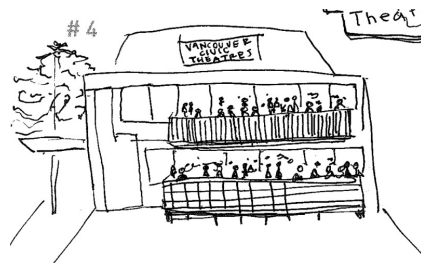
No. of visits: 1



QUEEN ELIZABETH THEATRE

Score: 12/25

No. of visits: 5



High performing, semi-public buildings

Woodwards Atrium scored the highest among all of the 27 buildings visited. Holy Rosary Cathedral and UBC (Robson Square) were the next highest scoring spaces in the semi-public building category.

User diversity: A diverse mix of users were noted at Woodward's, ranging in age, gender, ethnicity and ability. Somewhat unexpectedly, Holy Rosary Cathedral also had a diverse audience of differing ages and ethnicities. Unsurprisingly at UBC the majority of users were students or staff.

Accessibility: Woodward's atrium acts as a gathering space, linking a diverse mix of uses and organizations. It also connects the whole block, with multiple entrances and a free flowing ingress and egress of people. Conversely UBC Robson Square was noted for having a hidden entrance, difficult for a new user to locate, and suggestions were made to improve this.

Activities: Woodward's atrium is successfully programmed with a designated place to play basketball, dance, play piano, have a seat or meet friends. Providing a balance of active and

passive activities. The concrete stair structure offers a birds-eye view of the central space. At UBC, events were more structured and often required advance registration, e.g. public lectures. At the other end of the spectrum Holy Rosary Cathedral offered a quiet place for contemplation.

Governance: At the Cathedral there was no formal security however there is an unspoken rule to be respectful and quiet when entering the nave of the church. Security was more visible at UBC with cameras visible.

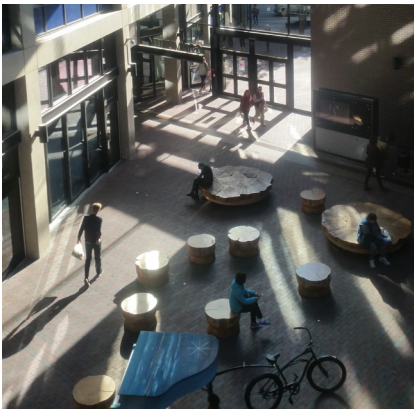
Cost: All three of these spaces invited people in without a charge. Woodward's performed particularly well, offering a range of free activities for passers-by to engage with. Tuition fees are associated with UBC to enter beyond the lobby area, unless attending a public event.

Selected Examples

WOODWARDS ATRIUM

Score: 24/25

No. of visits: 2



HOLY ROSARY CATHEDRAL

Score: 19/25

No. of visits: 2



Mid- low-performing, semi-public buildings

BCIT, SFU Downtown Library, Robert Lee YMCA were visited by our explorers. While these spaces might not be considered 'civic buildings' in the traditional sense, it is interesting to see that certain aspects of them did create a public feel.

User diversity: Observers noted the majority of users appeared to be students at BCIT and SFU Downtown library. Perhaps unsurprising, since first and foremost these are educational institutions that prioritize students.

Accessibility: At Robert Lee YMCA the main floor isn't at ground level, it is reached by elevators. It is a welcoming space once you are there, but isn't particularly inviting from the street. Both BCIT and SFU are accessible from street level and more visible as a result.

Activities: Unless you are a student or paying YMCA user then activities are limited. However observers did note that BCIT and YMCA had a lobby/cafe space where people could gather. SFU library also allows the public to access books.

Governance: There was a strong governance presence at the BCIT campus, with a security

post and two security guards located at the entrance to the building. SFU library is patrolled by Security, and is governed by traditional library rules about talking quietly, not answering phones, etc. The YMCA reception desk acts as the main surveillance, and turnstiles restrict access to the facilities.

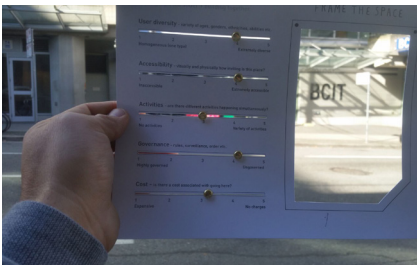
Cost: At SFU downtown library anyone is welcome to browse, but an 'external borrowers' card is \$100/year, or \$35/semester for those who wish to borrow materials but are not students or faculty. At the YMCA an adult single day pass is \$15 and there are a number of membership options.

These spaces perhaps all have potential to link up with groups and organizations to offer access at certain times.

BCIT

Score: 16/25

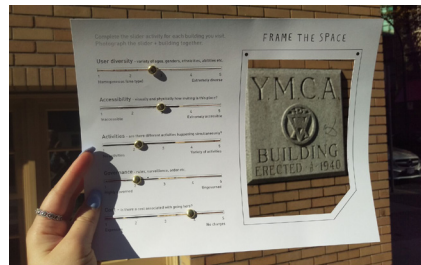
No. of visits: 3



Robert Lee YMCA

Score: 14/25

No. of visits: 1



High performing, privately-owned buildings

Our explorers were encouraged to not just visit public buildings, but also seek out those that are privately owned but function in a civic manner. Of these, the highest ranking were the Harbour Centre and MacLeods Books.

User diversity: The multi-purpose uses associated with the Harbour Centre encouraged a diversity of users, ranging from shoppers to students, to tourists. At MacLeods Books a good spread of users were also noted, and the space attracted people beyond just the downtown business district.

Accessibility: The Harbour Centre has been noted for being an open and inviting space, highlighted by its lobby which allows in plenty of natural light. The centre also contains public washrooms, accessible to all. MacLeods was noted for being cluttered and cramped, yet inviting in its own way.

Activities: The Harbour Centre was considered to have great potential to be better utilized after regular office/university/shopping hours, e.g. for a pop up performance space or a market for vending. At MacLeods there were no activities

taking place and none programmed, instead the main attraction came from a sense of informal discovery in the disorder. The shop did also advertise local events.

Governance: At the Harbour Centre, explorers noted that because the lobby is a gateway for such diverse groups, it lends itself to informal surveillance and is perhaps the reason for no formal security being present in the building; allowing many to relax without a sense of pressure to buy, whilst feeling safe in such an active area. At MacLeods surveillance was via staff, and during the visit a homeless individual loitering in the space was asked to leave.

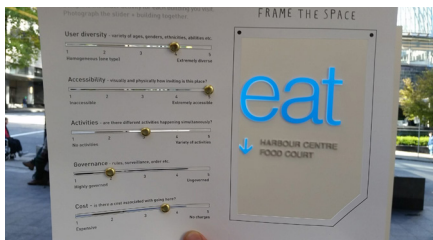
Cost: There is no cost associated with entering the Harbour Centre or MacLeods Books. Our explorers did not feel a pressure to buy in the bookstore.

Selected Examples

THE HARBOUR CENTRE

Score: 20/25

No. of visits: 4



MACLEODS BOOKS

Score: 19/25

No. of visits: 2



Mid- low-performing, privately-owned buildings

Shopping malls such as the Pacific Centre and Vancouver Centre scored moderately, while private educational buildings such as VSO School of Music, Alexander College and FDU Vancouver tended to score lower on the publicness scale.

User diversity: A diverse range of users of differing ages and ethnicities were noted at the two shopping centres. At Vancouver Centre user diversity was increased with skytrain users passing through to access the station. Access to the colleges was limited and therefore diversity was difficult to analyse. At Telus Gardens user diversity ranked fairly low, with one explorer noting they felt unsure if they were meant to be there.

Accessibility: Telus ranked better in this category than it did in user diversity. It was noted that the space was visually inviting with a calm atmosphere and lots of natural light. Pacific Centre was noted for being very porous with 13 entrances over three floors, 8 of which can be accessed through the two anchor stores. The Centre was noted for its warmth and openness, with inviting seating scattered throughout the building. The mall also has public washrooms and charging ports, something which interestingly is at a cost to the shop, and may also encourage users to sit for a moment before continuing to shop.

Activities: In comparison to the Harbour Centre, the Pacific Centre is noted for having much more of a single-use purpose, primarily retail shopping and its food court. The Railway Club scored well in this category, with activities ranging from reading, working, eating, conducting a job interview, training and drinking. There were three separate areas for games, billiards, live band performances, comedy nights and a dance floor. During the time of the study there was little activity at the Vancouver Centre. Most stores were closed, and so most users were simply sitting and reading, or eating. 789 West Pender scored the lowest with little activity noted and difficulty entering the building at the time of the study.

Governance: Due to the strict key access, governance was high at 789 West Pender. It would be interesting to visit the location on a week day, to see if accessibility is also limited.

At Telus Gardens the space had a high level of surveillance – there were multiple cameras in the space, as well as a security/reception desk. While there were no posted rules, participants felt there was a strict code of social norms that would have to be followed if you were using the space. At the Vancouver Centre there was no sign of visible security throughout the mall, allowing passive surveillance to act as an alternative security measure. In contrast security guards at the Pacific Centre were more prevalent, raising the question whether everyone was welcome here, and if there were restrictions on who uses the facilities.

Cost: While there is no cost associated with entering the two malls, it is expected most users are there to shop. The Telus Gardens atrium is an interesting space, while there is technically no cost to enter, it seems to be meant as a space to be used by patrons of the businesses or tourists, and not an indoor space that would accommodate more diverse kinds of public usage.

TELUS GARDENS

Score: 13/25

No. of visits: 6



Vancouver Art Gallery - North Plaza



UBC Robson Square



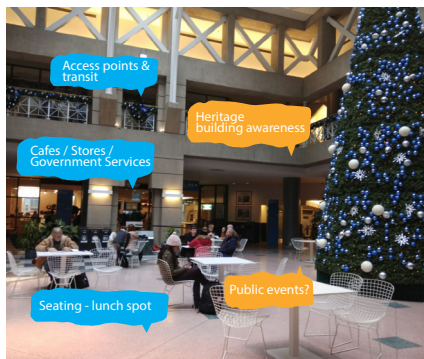
Woodwards Atrium



Vancouver Public Library



Sinclair Centre



CF Pacific Centre



One of our explorers, Hema Ramnani, mapped out key features and opportunities for civic building spaces (above). Strengths and key features are highlighted in blue, while weaknesses or opportunities are highlighted in orange.

KEY FINDINGS

User diversity

Civic buildings should reflect, or at the very least welcome the community around them. Vancouver Public Library is a great example of a space that sees a diverse range of users (age, gender, ethnicity, economic background etc.) come together harmoniously under one roof.

Accessibility

The term 'accessibility' can be interpreted broadly. 'Physical' accessibility may refer to proximity to transit, step free access etc. 'Visual' accessibility may consider whether the space can be easily seen or is visually enticing. 'Psychological' accessibility may relate to how welcome you feel. The Gathering Place Community Centre and the Harbour Centre are two examples of buildings our explorers ranked highly in this category.

Activities

Programming plays a key part in the public life of a building. One reason Woodward's Atrium scored so highly can be attributed to the complimentary mix of passive and active activities, whether playing or listening to the piano, dancing, playing basketball, meeting people or passing through the space. The Gathering Place also ranked highly and was noted for its more formal programs, such as health services and a pottery class.

Governance

Surveillance varied depending on the space. In certain buildings such as Telus Gardens, observers commented on a feeling of being monitored and needing to conform to social values, even though there were no written rules. Whereas in other buildings, such as the library, surveillance came more naturally from other users of the space. It was noted there were pros and cons with security, and a balance needed, whereby people feel safe but are also welcome / given agency.

Cost

Cost can be a barrier for many users. Our study highlighted the value in having open access to buildings, if not all the time, then at certain times of the day or week. For example Vancouver Art Gallery has a by donation evening on a Tuesday. McLeods Books was noted for being inviting with no obligation to purchase.

EMERGING THEMES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Third spaces

Many of the buildings visited by our explorers fall under the category of a 'third space'. This was a term coined by Ray Oldenburg to describe informal gathering places or anchors of community life. As part of the civic building portfolio, we would like to further explore this definition and the value of third spaces in Vancouver.

Connectivity

Is there a case to be made for clustering civic institutions and public spaces, and what potential can partnerships offer? We noted several buildings, particularly educational institutions, were closed on the day of our study. What potential exists to better utilize spaces throughout the day, week and year, by various user groups.

Permeability

The interplay between inside and outside public spaces is something we would like to further explore. It is interesting to consider the role civic buildings play throughout the seasons and the impact the weather may have on user patterns.

Flexibility

The highest performing spaces tended to have a flexible gathering space. Authorship was given to the user and there was a balance of formal and informal programming. A mix of uses was shown to bring life and diversity into the spaces.

Landmarks

Certain buildings act as markers in our city, whether at the streetscape or skyline view. This was not factored into our scale but was highlighted by one of our explorers. While the interior of a building might not be public, the architectural form may be part of the public psyche / a wayfinding device in the city.

Public / semi-public / private spaces

It was interesting to analyse how buildings ranked in on the publicness scale in relation to the ownership of the space. Our study highlighted that buildings don't have to be publicly owned to function like a public space. However governance tended to be higher in these instances and 'unwritten-rules' more prevalent.

NEXT STEPS

Next steps for the Vancouver Public Space Network Civic Buildings portfolio:

Dig deeper

Take a deeper dive into the emerging themes. Learn more about how spaces operate and what it is that makes them successful / not successful on the 'publicness' scale.

Build a civic buildings inventory

Create a civic buildings inventory. Keep track of future developments, and note opportunities or threats for new and existing buildings.

Exchange findings

Compare civic buildings in Vancouver with those elsewhere in Canada and international examples. Facilitate an exchange between cities on key findings and best practice.

Involve

Involve the community / practitioners in a wider discussion. Host a follow up event with a broader audience and explore key themes. Consider a larger survey, see next page for lessons learnt from the pilot study.

Advocate

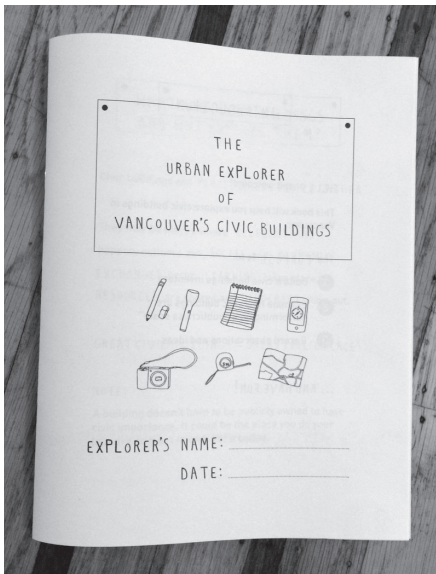
Share the results of the civic buildings study, shine a light on buildings that perform civic functions in Vancouver, and advocate for increased publicness.

APPENDIX

Takeaways from the pilot study:

Whilst we attempted to create a fair measure to analyse the 'publicness' of a building, the method is open to interpretation from the observer, and furthermore this study is just a snapshot in time. A more rigorous scale, a larger sample, multiple study times, and further structure would make the results more reliable.

That said, what was successful about the pilot study were the unique insights observed. 27 buildings were visited by the explorers. Observations and ideas have been documented in a table for future reference, forming the start of a civic buildings inventory. The publicness scale encouraged explorers to think about buildings in different ways. Participants commented on the activity being fun, interesting and insightful, encouraging exploration of the city and discovering spaces not previously visited.



Toolkit: Explorers pack and publicness continuum slider

Complete the slider activity for each building you visit.
Photograph the slider + building together.

User diversity - variety of ages, genders, ethnicities, abilities etc.

1 2 3 4 5
Homogeneous (one type) Extremely diverse

Accessibility - visually and physically how inviting is this place?

1 2 3 4 5
Inaccessible Extremely accessible

Activities - are there different activities happening simultaneously?

1 2 3 4 5
No activities Variety of activities

Governance - rules, surveillance, order etc.

1 2 3 4 5
Highly governed Ungoverned

Cost - is there a cost associated with going here?

1 2 3 4 5
Expensive No charges

EVALUATING THE METHODOLOGY

Recommendations for future explorations:

- During the briefing analyse one building as a group and emphasize what it means to score five points, versus one or two for example, to ensure everyone is familiar with the ranking system and to encourage consistency.
- Encourage more sketching, diagrams, notes, mapping and photography as a means to record observations.
- Revise the slider and photography tool to make it easier to use. Noting it was difficult for a phone-camera to focus on both the slider and the space simultaneously. Also, the slider sometimes moved of its own accord.
- If a building is closed, this should be noted. A publicness score should not be taken otherwise this may skew the results.
- For the pilot study, explorers were encouraged to create their own route and visit buildings they discovered en route. For a follow up study with more participants, a more structured approach could be beneficial to enable greater coverage.
- Another category to the publicness scale could be added, which addresses the landmark qualities of a building, e.g. how it sits in the urban context / contributes to the image of the city.
- Expand the study to other areas of the city, beyond downtown. Be intentional about the buildings studying.
- Diversify the participants, e.g. look for opportunities to engage with young people, seniors etc.
- Consider dividing participants into 'insiders' - those that know spaces well and have pre-explorer day perceptions about the buildings, and 'outsiders' - those visiting for the first time.
- Subject to volunteer capacity take readings at different times of day, week, year, and consider how buildings might function differently in relation to the weather.



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