

Article

Picture This: Exploring Photovoice as a Method to Understand Lived Experiences in Marginal Neighbourhoods

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Abstract

Scholars in the social sciences are increasingly turning to research questions that explore everyday lived experiences, using participatory visual methodologies to promote critical reflections on urban challenges. In contrast with traditional research approaches, participatory visual methods engage directly with community participants, foregrounding their daily realities, and working towards collaborative knowledge production of participants' situated experiences, potentially leading to transformative thinking and action. This participatory turn in research intersects with growing interests in community participation in collaborative planning and effective ways of engaging “unheard voices” in a planning context, particularly in marginalized neighbourhoods, using arts-based methods. This article critically examines the potential of participatory visual methodologies, exploring how the method of photovoice can reveal otherwise obscured perspectives from the viewpoint of communities in marginalised neighbourhoods. Based on a case study in the Downtown Eastside, Vancouver, the research considers whether and how creative participatory approaches can contribute to giving voice to communities and, if so, how these methods can impact a city's planning for urban futures. The research shows that, potentially, photovoice can provide a means of communicating community perspectives, reimagining place within the framework of participatory planning processes to those who make decisions on the neighbourhood's future. However, the research also demonstrates that there are limitations to the approach, bringing into sharp focus the ethical dimensions and challenges of participatory visual methodologies as a tool for engaging with communities, in an urban planning context.

Keywords

arts-based methods; consultation; participation; photovoice; Vancouver

Issue

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1. Introduction

Across Europe and North America, urban planning practice is facing a crisis of legitimacy. There is a mistrust of democratic institutions and scepticism in public participation, with residents feeling increasingly detached from the decision-making process. Inhabitants are experiencing a growing sense of powerlessness in the face of planning decisions that impact their neighbourhood (Brownill & Parker, 2010; Parvin, 2018). In the UK context, the Raynsford Review identifies the “continued disconnect between people and the planning process” (Raynsford, 2020, p. 10), and this sense of separation from local democratic institutions is echoed more

broadly elsewhere in research carried out internationally (OECD, 2020) as well as in other national contexts such as Canada (Gurstein & Hutton, 2019).

There is a significant body of scholarly research that highlights the limitations of current approaches to community engagement (e.g., Carpenter & Brownill, 2008; Parker et al., 2014) including a paucity of inclusive processes that reach out to engage “unheard voices,” despite efforts by local and national authorities to widen participation to address this democratic challenge. In parallel, there is a growing awareness in disciplines across the social sciences of the importance of broadening understandings of what constitutes “knowledge,” and the value of experiential and embodied ways

of knowing, that go beyond conventional practices of objective knowledge generation. Rather than drawing a binary distinction between rational planning methodologies (Fainstein, 2005), setting them in contrast to more affective and emotional perspectives on places that emerge through creative practice (Sandercock & Attili, 2010), this article acknowledges emotions as a new way of knowing, rather than being seen in opposition to reason (Bondi, 2009). However, while emotion through creative approaches can prompt thickened understandings of place and deeper community engagement in the planning process, they can also be co-opted by power-holders, with implications for imbalances of power in the decision-making process (Cinderby et al., 2021).

This article aims to address these issues, exploring how creative approaches to engagement, taking the example of the participatory visual method of photovoice, can contribute to understandings of locally-embedded lived experiences. While acknowledging the challenges and limitations of such approaches, the aim is to critically examine the potential for innovative engagement practices to give voice in the neighbourhood arena. The research is set within the wider context of a city's aspiration to build more socially-sustainable futures, by democratizing decision-making to include voices from marginalised communities in building community-driven policies.

In the light of the complexity of planning cities in the 21st century, Rydin et al. (2012, p. 2) have identified that there is a need to integrate different understandings into the planning process, including "the insights of tacit and experiential knowledge held by practitioners and the lay knowledge and experience of local communities," brought together into new knowledge and understanding. To these different understandings, we add the knowledge that materialises through the application of arts-based methods using creative practice, to co-create new knowledge about the neighbourhood, that can feed affective and embodied understandings of the city into the planning process (Horvath & Carpenter, 2020).

The geographic focus of the research is the Downtown Eastside district of Vancouver, seen as one of the most marginalised neighbourhoods in Canada (Linden et al., 2013). The Downtown Eastside has been the focus of waves of renewal and regeneration, beginning in earnest in the lead-up to the 1986 World Exposition (Expo 86) held in Vancouver, continuing with regeneration related to the Winter Olympic Games in 2010 (Vanwynsberghe et al., 2013), and further developed through subsequent regeneration plans, most recently in 2014 with the launch of the Downtown Eastside Plan (City of Vancouver, 2018; Edelson et al., 2019). While there have been moves within the city to engage with residents about the future of their neighbourhoods, for example with the current consultation for the Vancouver Plan (City of Vancouver, 2022), there is little experience in integrating arts-based methods

into city engagement, either in Vancouver or more widely elsewhere. This article, therefore, aims to contribute to current knowledge by critically examining a creative arts-based method—photovoice—as a means of engaging with inhabitants about their neighbourhood. The research explores the potential for the photovoice method to engage residents in novel and meaningful ways, and to draw out new understandings of place that have the potential to elucidate community insights into their neighbourhood and contribute to decision-making and urban futures.

The article starts by exploring the theoretical foundations for the research, before presenting the case study area of the Downtown Eastside, Vancouver, and the methodology. The findings of the photovoice community workshops are then presented, followed by the implications for the role of arts-based methods in urban planning and decision-making.

2. Participatory and Arts-Based Approaches in Planning

The interest in participatory approaches in urban planning can be traced back to the 1970s, and the epistemological shift that Friedmann (1973) characterised as a "crisis of knowing" in the discipline of planning. Although Friedmann acknowledged the important role of "expert knowledge" in urban planning, he advocated for a system of "mutual learning" or "transactive planning" in urban decision-making, combining expert knowledge with local and experiential understandings of place.

These ideas were developed in the broader social sciences in Fals-Borda's work on participatory action research (Fals-Borda, 1987), building on Freire's theory of critical consciousness in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Sherry Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of participation" became a reference point for urban planning scholars in the following decades, with others developing and critiquing the idea of "citizen control" within urban planning (e.g., Innes, 1995; Innes & Booher, 2004). In particular, Healey's (1996) work on communicative and collaborative planning (Healey, 1997, 2003) highlighted the need for different voices to be heard in a deliberative arena. Since then, there has been a growing recognition of the need to acknowledge and use the many other ways of knowing that exist: experiential knowledges, local knowledges, knowledges based on story-telling, talking and listening, and knowledges expressed in visual, symbolic, and other artistic ways, what Sandercock (1998) calls an "epistemology of multiplicity." As she notes on traditional approaches to producing plans: "Emotion has been rigorously purged as if there were no such things as joy, tranquillity, anger, resentment, fear, hope, memory, and forgetting, at stake in these analyses" (Sandercock, 2010, p. 29). Others, such as Didier and Roux (2019), have similarly demonstrated how storytelling, memory, narratives and photography are vital elements in the way that city space is appropriated and experienced.

Increasingly, artistic ways of knowing are being recognised as legitimate sources of knowledge in the social sciences and in human geography (Carpenter, 2020), focusing on the emotional and affective potentialities of creative practice in expanding understandings of the experiences of place (Leavy, 2020). Here, creative methods are defined as methods that use artistic modes of expression (using imagination to create objects, environments, or experiences that can be shared with others) to explore ideas, represent possibilities, and challenge current perspectives (Wang et al., 2017). The evocative power of the arts, and participatory visual methods in particular, can generate new insights and enhance understandings of complex social phenomena that aren't revealed through traditional approaches to knowledge generation (Mitchell et al., 2017). Applying artistic methods within a communicative planning paradigm provides a situated and affective way of understanding place that can transcend conventional practices of consultation, and address some of the limitations of collaborative planning. However, in the discipline of urban planning, the potential of creative methods has yet to be fully explored (Vasudevan, 2020). There have been some recent explorations of poetry and its connections with place and space (de Leeuw & Hawkins, 2017), experimentation with the use of theatre in urban planning research in Finland and the UK (Cowie, 2017; Rannila & Loivaranta, 2015), and applications of participatory video in urban planning (Manuel & Vigar, 2021). Others have also investigated the method of photovoice in planning research (Harris, 2018) but the key methodological challenge is to develop an appropriate approach that both draws on experiential understandings of neighbourhood and place including issues such as social connectedness, which are currently lacking in traditional consultation methods, while at the same time, providing a relevant method that can contribute to planners' understandings of local knowledge production. This involves developing alternative ways of representing planning issues, acknowledging imbalances of power that are inherent within the planning system, and working to address these power asymmetries to move towards more inclusive and socially-just outcomes.

Furthermore, the relationship between urban planning and creativity in the city is an inherently complex one. In urban studies, there is a long-noted relationship between creative practice, artistic mobilisation and processes of gentrification and displacement (Ley, 2003). When urban planning intermeshes with creative practice, these diverse agendas become intertwined. A collaboration between urban planners and developers can sit uneasily with the motivations of artists and creative practitioners, particularly concerning land use, urban space, and place. Taking a more positive perspective, some have argued that community-based artistic practice can be perceived as an opportunity for resident empowerment within socially-just urban policies (Sharp et al., 2005). For others, it is associated with the pro-

cess of "art-washing" (Sheldon, 2015), where developers mobilise artists, often in collaboration with city councils, to push ahead with and support their development agendas, which can be marketed as more "palatable" due to artists' involvement. Bishop (2012) scrutinises the emancipatory claims of community art, drawing attention to the instrumentalization of participatory art processes in reaching political goals. However, others suggest that in certain circumstances, artists can work collaboratively with place-makers in regeneration projects, engaging critically with policies and making space for "radical social praxis" (Kwon, 2004), questioning hegemonic relationships in the city and allowing for engaged and radical community mobilisation (McLean, 2014, p. 2157).

Cognisant of the tensions between urban planning and artistic practice, and the critiques of artistic engagement in place-making, we aim here to explore the potential of creative practice in planning through one such method, that of photovoice. In doing so, we suggest that these creative methods have the potential to capture affective "experiences of neighbourhood" that are otherwise missed, and can therefore generate new reflections and knowledge that have the potential to contribute to city planning discourses around urban futures.

3. The Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood

The geographical focus of the article is the City of Vancouver on the west coast of Canada, a mid-sized gateway city with a population of around 630,000, set within a wider Metropolitan area made up of 21 municipalities and with a total population of 2.46 million. In socio-economic terms, it has been shaped by sustained links with the economies and societies of the Asia-Pacific region and is characterised by considerable population diversity. Some 40% of Metro Vancouver's population speak a mother tongue other than English or French (Canada's official languages), bringing a multi-culturalism and diversity that contribute to the dynamism of the city.

However, it is also a city of extremes, in particular wealth and poverty. The luxury condominiums of the wealthy waterfront residential downtown districts are just a short walk from one of Canada's most marginalised neighbourhoods, the Downtown Eastside (Figure 1). The historic heart of the city, the Downtown Eastside is distinctive in its low and medium-rise buildings and smaller-scale architecture, with a number of public green spaces including Oppenheimer Park, Crab Park, and the Sun Yat-Sen Gardens. The area has strong historic connections with Indigenous communities, being located on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, and Squamish First Nations, and also has long-standing links with the Chinese community among many other ethnic minority groups.

Media portrayals provide a predominately negative portrait of the area, serving to further stigmatise an already marginalised neighbourhood (Liu & Blomley, 2013). However, a more detailed reading shows that

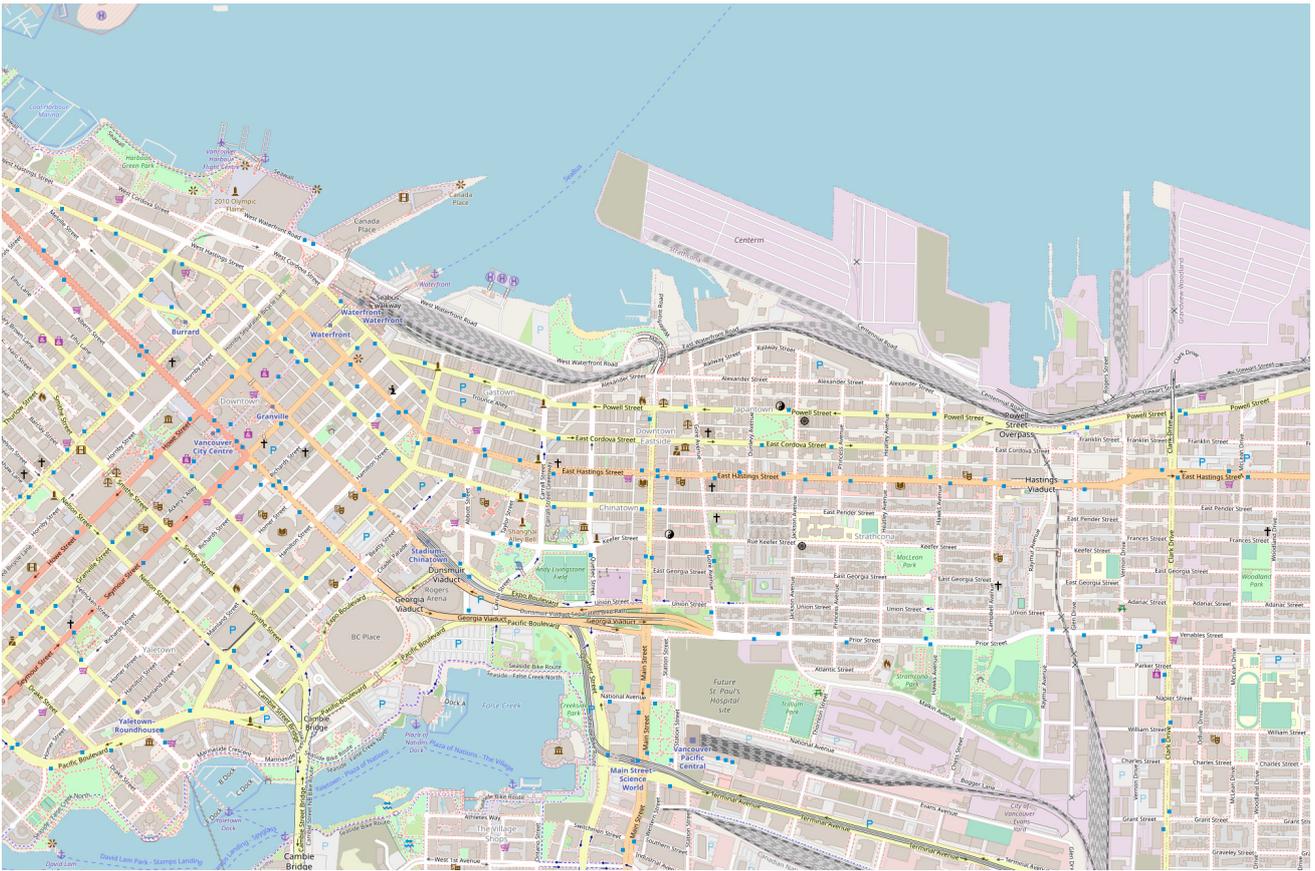


Figure 1. The location of the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver. Source: © OpenStreetMap contributors, CC-BY-SA.

there is considerable and growing socio-economic diversity within the population of the Downtown Eastside. More than half of the residents are on low incomes, income assistance, or dependent on social services (City of Vancouver, 2019). However, other families are on middle incomes, and are being joined by a growing affluent population, new to this historically marginalised neighbourhood, and located particularly in the rapidly gentrifying district of Strathcona (Burnett, 2014). However, those at the margins of society in the neighbourhood face complex challenges, including extreme poverty, homelessness or inadequate housing (such as the precarious Single Room Occupancy housing, often substandard, and privately rented on a weekly or monthly basis), unemployment, substance use, and physical and mental health issues. The neighbourhood has a long history of social activism and there are numerous non-profit organisations, government agencies, and voluntary sector groups that offer services and support to those in the community with particular needs.

As a unique but precarious neighbourhood, city planners have long intervened in the area (Smith, 2003), most recently drawing up a long-term plan for the area to preserve the character of the neighbourhood and improve living conditions without displacing residents. The Downtown Eastside Plan (City of Vancouver, 2018) was approved in 2014, with a 30-year vision for the neighbourhood. It was prepared through a collaborative

process that drew on inputs from community groups, residents and First Nations groups, as well as local businesses, non-profit housing associations, and social service organisations. However, progress with the Plan has been patchy, and a recent consultation with the community suggested that over half of respondents considered that the plan was off-track (City of Vancouver, 2019). A key issue from the recent consultation was the continued and urgent need for more social housing in the area, with the support needed to address underlying structural issues that impact residents' housing security and wellbeing, including poverty, inequality, and marginality.

Given the area's history, the Downtown Eastside was therefore chosen as the focus for the photovoice project. The long-standing interest of urban planners in the neighbourhood and continued debates about issues of social justice and equity, in particular around the provision of affordable housing, provided the context for discussions on the future of the neighbourhood. The aim was to allow for a creative engagement with community members, to access their lived experiences, identify neighbourhood issues, and develop visions for the future of the area.

4. Photovoice: Concept and Method

Photovoice is "a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a

specific photographic technique” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369). The method involves community members taking photos of aspects of their neighbourhoods, which then act as prompts for group discussion. The technique has three main aims: firstly, to allow participants to capture images and narratives that they perceive as holding meaning, which reflect the community’s assets and concerns; secondly, to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about the neighbourhood, through group discussion of the photographs; and thirdly, to engage with policymakers on issues emerging through the photos and voices (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 370).

Wang and Burris (1997) situate photovoice within three distinct theoretical frameworks: empowerment education for critical consciousness, feminist theory, and documentary photography. Freire’s concept of empowerment education for critical consciousness encourages critical group dialogue to foster understanding and critical action (Freire, 1970). Feminist theory takes as its point of departure the understanding that knowledge is experiential, and seeks to engender political consciousness in the context of unequal gendered relations (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). The theoretical framework of documentary photography seeks to capture everyday scenes, people and places, as an emotional testimony of experience, narrating stories in the language of photography (Jing & Yun, 2007). As a development from documentary photography, photovoice seeks to explore both the photograph as well as the photographer, to mesh the image in the photograph with the story behind it, as told by the photovoice participant, the photographer. It is these three frameworks that were integrated by Wang and Burris into the photovoice methodology.

Photovoice is distinct from photo-elicitation as photovoice involves participants taking photos and bringing them back to the group for discussion. The participants then write a narrative or caption (adding “voice” to the photo) to accompany the image, which can be exhibited in a collective community exhibition. Photo-elicitation on the other hand takes place one-on-one between the participant and researcher. In some cases, the photos will have been taken by the participant for discussion with the researcher. In other cases, the researcher may bring along a series of photographs related to the research topic, for discussion with the participant. The researcher will interview the participants to elicit their response to the photos, through the feelings and memories they evoke (Rose, 2016). While both methods have value, this research was more suited to the method of photovoice, as a means of participants sharing their experiences through collective discussion.

The artistic dimension of the method is brought out in the participants’ exploration of their ideas, both through the photos and their accompanying narratives, engaging with the media of text and image to explore visions and represent possibilities for their neighbourhood. The participants’ agency and autonomy are enhanced through their own interpretation of the pho-

tos, giving them artistic expression through photography and narrative in the photovoice method. The collective discussion about the photos and their meaning within the group also contributes to dimensions that would not be present in a project based on “pure” photography as an art form. This collective approach contributes to lessening the researcher’s role in interpreting the creative outputs, therefore addressing issues of hierarchy and power that can dominate participatory and arts-based research methods. Interestingly, the method of photovoice does not foreground the aesthetic dimension of the photographs, rather the photos are seen as a medium through which the participants can communicate their narrative and express their response to the neighbourhood.

A series of photovoice workshops was planned to explore the potential of the method in elucidating the community’s lived experiences of the Downtown Eastside. As groundwork for the workshops, a series of 22 in-depth contextual interviews were undertaken with stakeholders in the city, including urban planning officers, community representatives, scholar-activists, and artists. These interviews provided important background for urban planning and creative practice narratives in the city and gave local context to the photovoice workshops.

The photovoice workshop series itself was carried out in partnership with the University of British Columbia’s Learning Exchange, an outreach community hub located in the Downtown Eastside that provides support and skills development for local residents. In order to build relations and trust with the local community before the workshops, the researcher spent time during spring 2019, meeting with local staff and volunteering at the Learning Exchange’s “drop-in sessions.” Participants were subsequently recruited through posters displayed at the Learning Exchange, with the researcher available on-hand to answer queries from potential participants.

A total of nine participants signed up for the workshops, with eight completing the full six-week series. Of those, a total of five were female and three were male. Concerning their ethnic origins, four were of Asian origin, two were Latin-American, and two were of European origin. Ages ranged from early 20s to mid-60s. Although a relatively small number of participants, this size allowed for an in-depth approach to the photovoice method and detailed discussions within the group.

The photovoice exercise involved a series of six workshops, one afternoon a week over six weeks during May and June 2019, where participants could engage with both the social as well as the physical fabric of the Downtown Eastside urban environment, through photography and discussions to share their perspectives on the neighbourhood. Participants were given single-use film cameras with 24 exposures, which were developed by the researcher for the subsequent discussion sessions, together with a log sheet to take notes of photo locations and emotions. During the discussions, individuals provided a narrative for their photos, contextualised

them, and responded to questions from the researcher and other participants. This was followed by a group discussion that included the participants drawing out themes and categories. The technique facilitated the Freireian notion of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), prompting a consciousness based on critical reflection through dialogue.

The participants' photography "mission" was defined deliberately loosely to allow for a broad spectrum of voices to emerge. As suggested by Wang and Burris (1997), participants were asked to consider two broad questions through their photography concerning (a) what they liked about the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood and saw as opportunities or possibilities there, and (b) what they would like to see changed in the future, what were the needs of the neighbourhood. Emphasising the potential of the neighbourhood, this approach also corresponded to the Learning Exchange's own "asset-based community development" approach (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) focusing on the strengths of the area and how these could be built upon through community development. In relation to subject-matter, due to issues of privacy, consent, and sensitivities, participants were advised to avoid taking photos of people, but to concentrate on non-human subjects, in particular the built and natural environments of the neighbourhood.

Embedded within the principles of community-based participatory action research is the notion of reciprocity, that is, "an ongoing process of exchange with the aim of establishing and maintaining equality between parties" (Maiter et al., 2008, p. 321). Rather than the researcher "extracting" knowledge from research participants for their own benefit, reciprocity involves

researchers attending to the issues of power and gain in the research relationship, with the aim of "giving back" to community participants to redress imbalances in power relations. In this case, rather than monetary compensation for their time, the researcher aimed to give back to the community through training opportunities within the workshop series, such as skills training in photography and a framing workshop leading up to the exhibition. Participants also gained experience in curation, being fully involved in organising and curating the community exhibition to show the photographs. The exhibition, entitled *Capturing the Spirit of the Neighbourhood*, was displayed in the public foyer of the Learning Exchange for several months during the summer of 2019 (Figure 2). The launch was combined with a Knowledge Exchange event where workshop participants, researchers, and policy-makers exchanged on diverse topics, ranging from the detail of the method to the broader structural inequalities affecting the Downtown Eastside community.

The individual story-telling and group discussions were recorded, transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), drawing out the common themes into a coding frame that was both inductive and deductive in nature (Hennink et al., 2010). The visual data from the photographs were also analysed using the common coding frame. A process of triangulation took place with cross-referencing between the participants' photographs, their written reflections to accompany the photos, and transcripts of group discussions. Participants also took part in a debriefing session to discuss the method, and evaluate the strengths and limitations of the photovoice process.



Figure 2. Community exhibition at the University of British Columbia Learning Exchange, Downtown Eastside.

5. Picturing the Downtown Eastside: Elucidating Meaning Through Photovoice

The photovoice workshops highlighted the importance of “beyond text” methods (Beebeejaun et al., 2014) in revealing participants’ understandings of the neighbourhood. In particular, they revealed how the combination of text and image prompted individual and collective story-telling that exposed participants’ affective responses to place. All named participants from this point forward are denoted using pseudonyms.

A recurrent theme from the workshops was the intense vibrancy of the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood, both “above and below the surface.” Residents talked about the web of friendships, acquaintances, support networks and services that exist in the area, some of them visible “above the surface,” while others were more implicit “below the surface,” less visible but no less strong for that. Some participants had lived in the neighbourhood for over twenty years, and had built up strong networks that they valued highly and which they were concerned not to lose as a result of recent changes in the neighbourhood. Others had less strong associations, going back less far, but felt the energy of the community in their daily interactions and observations, and referred to the unique and close-knit community in the Downtown Eastside.

Many cited the Carnegie Centre (Figure 3) as the “hub” of the neighbourhood, a community centre housed in the old public library building, and referred to by one participant as the “hub of action, where light and dark meet.” This imagery of light and dark was echoed by other participants when reflecting on the neighbour-

hood, pointing to the contrast between, on the one hand, the strength of the friendships and community networks, and on the other hand, the experiences of the troubled lives of many Downtown Eastside residents.

Poverty, unemployment, substance use, homelessness, and inadequate housing were all cited as challenges faced by many who live in the neighbourhood. Photos of the neighbourhood made visible the darker underside and provided spaces for participants to reflect, both individually and collectively, about their meaning. As one long-term resident expressed:

The Carnegie is witness to the timeline of Vancouver. It has seen the flow of changes both light and dark. A place of refuge, oppression, hope, anguish. (Mark)

Linked to this, there was widespread concern about social injustices in the city, manifestly evident throughout the neighbourhood. Participants’ documentation of inadequate housing such as Single Room Occupancy (SRO) blocks (Figure 4) prompted discussions around marginality, inequality and neglect, themes that are embedded in the history of the Downtown Eastside. This led to calls within the group for transformational change at a structural level, and a fundamental reset of systems to support more adequately those living in challenging conditions. These comments were also linked to participants’ awareness of the growing inequalities in the area, and more broadly within the city. All were aware of the significant regeneration and development taking place in the neighbourhood, with the recent arrival of high-end designer boutiques and hipster cafés sitting uneasily cheek by jowl with non-profit advice centres



Figure 3. The Carnegie Centre. Source: Photo credits are due to participant Mark.



Figure 4. SRO housing. Source: Photo credits, Juan.

and community meal programmes. One long-term resident expressed his concerns:

Downtown Eastside, a dart in the heart of gentrification, exploitation, incompetence, marginalization, where poverty, mental illness, and social injustice are rising up, without having a solution from those who are supposed to help to improve local residents' lives. (Juan)

The photos served as a catalyst to explore challenging issues and participants' reactions to them, including the links to issues around radical solutions for transformational change that address societal inequalities, such as wealth redistribution and property transfer taxes, together with urgent programmes for increased provision of affordable housing.

A further aim of the workshops was to critically examine photovoice as a method to understand neighbourhood connections more deeply, to explore meanings associated with place, and potentially to provide a creative mechanism for decision-makers to understand more meaningfully residents' perceptions of their neighbourhood. In discussion, participants conveyed their appreciation of the photovoice process as a means of visually capturing their experiences and sharing personal and individual knowledge about the neighbourhood, stimulated by visual photographic cues. As one participant expressed: "I like this. It's not just capturing the photo, it's capturing your mind and what it brings out, what it inspires in you."

It is interesting here to consider the role of aesthetics in the method of photovoice and how the aesthetic

value of photographs can be integrated into the process. Wang and Burris (1997) drew on the theoretical frame of documentary photography, but in their framing, they paid little attention to the role that the aesthetic dimension of photography plays in photovoice, and how it can help facilitate understanding and knowledge production. Photovoice broadens out the role of photography as a form of fine art, to include its role in socially and politically engaged commentary. However, aesthetically powerful images will necessarily have more impact, and thus communicate participants' message more effectively. Thus, images in photovoice can be read visually through signifiers such as the framing of the image in photographic space, the movement captured, the organisation of the image and its viewpoint. For example, Mark's photo of the Carnegie Centre (Figure 3) is taken from an unusual angle, from the roof of the building opposite, and so while the building itself was familiar to participants, the unusual viewpoint of the photo sparked discussion in the group and emphasised the Centre as a "beacon" in the neighbourhood. The aesthetic dimension has the potential to reinforce and amplify the voices of participants, both through discussion and in the curation of the exhibition through the choice of pictures to be displayed.

The photos also served as a catalyst for group discussion and kindled shared dialogue between participants about their own neighbourhood experiences and personal histories as members of the community. As a result of the discussion, participants brought forward ideas about possibilities for developing the neighbourhood in the future, including more affordable housing, upgrading poor-quality SRO buildings, and addressing

issues around women's safety. In the words of one participant: "It doesn't matter what the system does, it ought to provide housing for people with a low income. There's still a big trouble, right?"

However, without direct engagement within a formal policy-making process, the impact of such discussions can be limited. Despite efforts on the part of the researcher to embed the photovoice workshops within an ongoing planning process, this didn't prove possible due to incompatible timing between ongoing urban projects and the researcher's grant. Even engaging with policy-makers in dissemination was challenging due to officers' busy schedules and competing priorities. Engagement with policy-makers early in the process, making the case for alternative ways of hearing, seeing, and knowing, could contribute to greater engagement.

One of the outcomes of the workshop was a community exhibition curated by the participants themselves, who selected the photographs and accompanying text to be displayed, framed the photos, and were involved in the curation and hanging of the exhibition. The whole process, therefore, gave participants a voice, not only through the photos and subsequent discussions, but also through the deliberations about the selection of which photos to include in the exhibition. Again, the aesthetics of photography and the power of images were brought out in the curation of pictures to be displayed.

The exhibition launch coincided with the project's Knowledge Exchange event, where local stakeholders, policy-makers, and researchers were invited to join in discussions about the photovoice workshops, and engage about the future of the Downtown Eastside. One of the challenges recognised in the photovoice method is the difficulty of engaging with decision-makers to take part in the process. Although a range of urban policy-makers was invited to participate in the event, representation from urban planners on the day was low, with the discussion mainly led by workshop participants and researchers. While discussions were productive in and of themselves, the missing link with policy stakeholders meant that the lessons from the series, both concerning content and process, weren't relayed as effectively as they could have been. An infographic setting out the photovoice method for planners was subsequently produced, but engagement face-to-face during the Knowledge Exchange event would have been beneficial.

This points to some of the challenges of the method, in particular the ethical considerations of raising participants' expectations, without being able to deliver concrete change. The researcher was mindful of the unequal power positions that existed between the researcher and participants and was explicit at the beginning of the process in recognising these and acting to mitigate against them, for example through facilitation techniques that aimed to address the potential imbalances. This involved engaging participants in the "decoding" or descriptive interpretation of the images, in them selecting photos and curating the exhibition, and taking a role in organ-

ising and contributing to the Knowledge Exchange event. But it was also important to stress to participants the context of the project, which was not linked to a particular planning initiative in the Downtown Eastside, and therefore did not have the explicit remit to deliver any lasting change in the neighbourhood. Although this was made explicit, participants commented on how the process would have benefited from the engagement of urban decision-makers in discussions about potential future directions and policy initiatives.

The project came up against a range of challenges and limitations, some of which are inherent to the method. Firstly, the issue of power asymmetries between the researcher and the participants, already highlighted, is a challenge common to other participatory methods (Mitchell et al., 2017). Secondly, there was the issue of the politics of voice—who is speaking within the process and who is listening—which links to the engagement of policy-makers and the importance of participants being heard by those with decision-making power. And thirdly, the challenge of using arts in the city and the potential for co-option and instrumentalization of participatory art practices in an urban development setting (Bishop, 2012).

For creative methods to be employed in urban planning with positive outcomes, it is essential for projects to engage with policymakers early on, a process that wasn't possible in the photovoice case study due to issues of timing. Cinderby et al. (2021) illustrate how in their case, with sufficient time and resources to engage, the use of a range of complementary creative methods was successful in involving typically excluded or hard-to-reach groups. A further factor for success is the involvement of the research team working independently of the city planning department, which helps to generate a trusting environment. With receptive city policy-makers engaged at a distance, the use of creative methods can contribute through inclusive dialogue, to the identification of more equitable context-specific solutions for more just city planning.

6. Conclusion

Arts-based methods such as photovoice have the capacity to communicate complex and nuanced understandings of neighbourhood. By drawing on creative arts-based methods, the visual language of photography can stimulate deeper insights into the community and convey meaning in a richer, thickened format. The experience in the Downtown Eastside demonstrated the value of such an approach, to enhance participants' individual and collective understandings of place and to dig more deeply into stories, histories, and memories associated with space and place. These concepts are at the heart of a more affective understanding of place that, arguably, has an important role to play in an alternative approach to urban planning, that takes account of affect, emotion, and feeling as new ways of knowing.

Photovoice, as a participatory approach that borrows from creative practice, has the potential to bring new perspectives into the urban planning process, diversifying the profile of who engages with planning and how they get involved. However, the project in the Downtown Eastside has demonstrated the difficulty of engaging with policy-makers when applying these methods in the urban arena. The challenges lie not only in embedding these more affective processes into a live plan-making project in a meaningful way, but also engaging with policy-makers in discussions about the value of such methods in urban planning consultation processes, in order to break through the traditional approaches and embed such methods in the future.

The project also highlighted some of the challenges of this method, in particular the danger, as with all consultations, of raising expectations within the community that cannot be fulfilled. Other obstacles to engaging with photovoice include the critical need for trust, empathy, and the time needed to develop these, invest in the process, and fulfil its objectives. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, photovoice can be understood as a creative tool to feed future urban imaginaries, which as this project demonstrated, can spark critical and reflexive dialogue, and thickened understanding of neighbourhood and place. Whether it is feasible to translate photovoice into a viable participatory planning method, as a means of giving an alternative voice to the community, will depend on the urban planning system itself, and attitudes within to alternative modes of consultation. But this project has shown that there are benefits of integrating photovoice as part of a range of methods, that introduce new ways to capture lived experience, that have the potential to contribute to the development of planning policy that is more sensitive to diverse community voices.

An area that would benefit from further research, is the role of the aesthetic dimension of photography in photovoice. This aspect of photovoice has been less emphasised up to the present. Further work, potentially in collaboration with humanities scholars, would contribute to understanding what the images say about places and what the added value of visual representation is compared to narrative commentary. This analysis would address the affects that photos generate in participants and others, and help understand the “affective-symbolic-aesthetic” aspects that contribute to multi-dimensional knowledge generation. This closer collaboration between social sciences and humanities scholars would help to bring out the full potential and impact of photovoice and other arts-based methods, and move towards a deeper understanding of places and the experience of place.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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