



THE ENABLED ENVIRONMENT

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Understanding Bathrooms as Sensory Inclusive Public Spaces

THE PUBLIC BATHROOM ...

contains intersecting historical and social tensions regarding race, public health, socioeconomic status, body ability, gender, sexuality, and civil rights while also being entangled in basic and private human functions. As Hesse notes, the politics surrounding bathroom access have less to do with privacy and more to do with the “collision of those public spaces with cultural expectations at specific moments in time” (2016). Such interactions between the private individual user and designed public space highlight the complex ways that the built environment influences behaviour and cultural values. In situating the discussion of accessibility and inclusion within the public bathroom, we are able to understand what it might look or feel like facilitate greater equity and inclusion within critical public spaces. The public bathroom, while typically overlooked as a mundane and strictly utilitarian room, is one of these critical social spaces.

THIS RESEARCH RESPONDS TO ...

the recently passed federal legislation known as the **Accessible Canada Act** which proactively addresses the physical, social, and economic inequalities experienced by individuals with disabilities in Canada. With a focus on the social realities of underrepresented, less visible, and sensory impairments (such as but not limited to Autism Spectrum Disorder), this research looks at how **barriers** such as permanent fixtures, including lighting, automatic hand dryers, and self-flushing toilets, influence the **sensory accessibility** of public bathrooms.

This research is a community-based project with the Okanagan Regional Library (ORL) where collaboration and ongoing consultation were key in all aspects of research design, methodology, and the final, open-access outputs. As such, it is important to emphasize this is not a study or audit of the ORL but rather a partnership with the library. As a local and qualitative case-study, this research highlights how partnerships with community members can bridge gaps in both public policy and research applications.

IN ORDER TO ASK ...

- 1 Where and how do misinterpretations and misrepresentations of **sensory knowledges** and experiences exist in public spaces?
- 2 How do permanent fixtures and design features influence the general and **sensory accessibility** of public bathrooms?
- 3 How do people in the Okanagan approach and understand accessibility, especially when access is related to less visible disabilities?

Disability "is a fact of life at home and in the public sphere [...] that demands anthropological attention as an essential form of human nature."

FAYE GINSBURG & RAYNA RAPP (2013)

THE ACCESSIBLE CANADA ACT 2019 ...

is a new federal legislative framework designed to proactively identify, remove, and prevent discriminatory **barriers** experienced by individuals with disabilities across diverse environments. The Act establishes consistent and inclusive language regarding disability. Key language from the Act was used to gain insight into baseline understandings of accessibility and disability in public spaces in the Okanagan.

LANGUAGE OF THE ACT

Disability in Canada means "any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or **sensory impairment** — or a functional limitation whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a **barrier**, hinders a person's full and equal participation in society."

Barrier means anything "physical, architectural, technological or attitudinal, anything that is based on information or communications or anything that is the result of a policy or a practice — that hinders the full and equal participation in society of persons with an impairment."

SENSORY ACCESSIBILITY ...

Sensory accessibility relates to when objects or experiences within an environment are a **barrier** to somebody experiencing sensitivity to either sound, touch, smell, or any other senses. Approaching and designing environments that are sensitized to the full spectrum of human ability shifts the onus of accessibility from individuals with disabilities to larger social systems. When paired with community-based approaches, such initiatives contribute to collaborative inclusivity and collective responsibility within public spaces.

APPLIED SENSORY ETHNOGRAPHY

In conducting a Sensory Ethnography, the research methods and instruments were directed towards garnering an understanding of the **sensory knowledge** in relation to the accessibility of public bathrooms at branches of the Okanagan Regional Library (Pink 2015). By focusing on community-based methods and applied research outputs, Sensory Ethnography is uniquely situated and equipped to garner an understanding of accessibility in relation to less visible disabilities in Canada today.

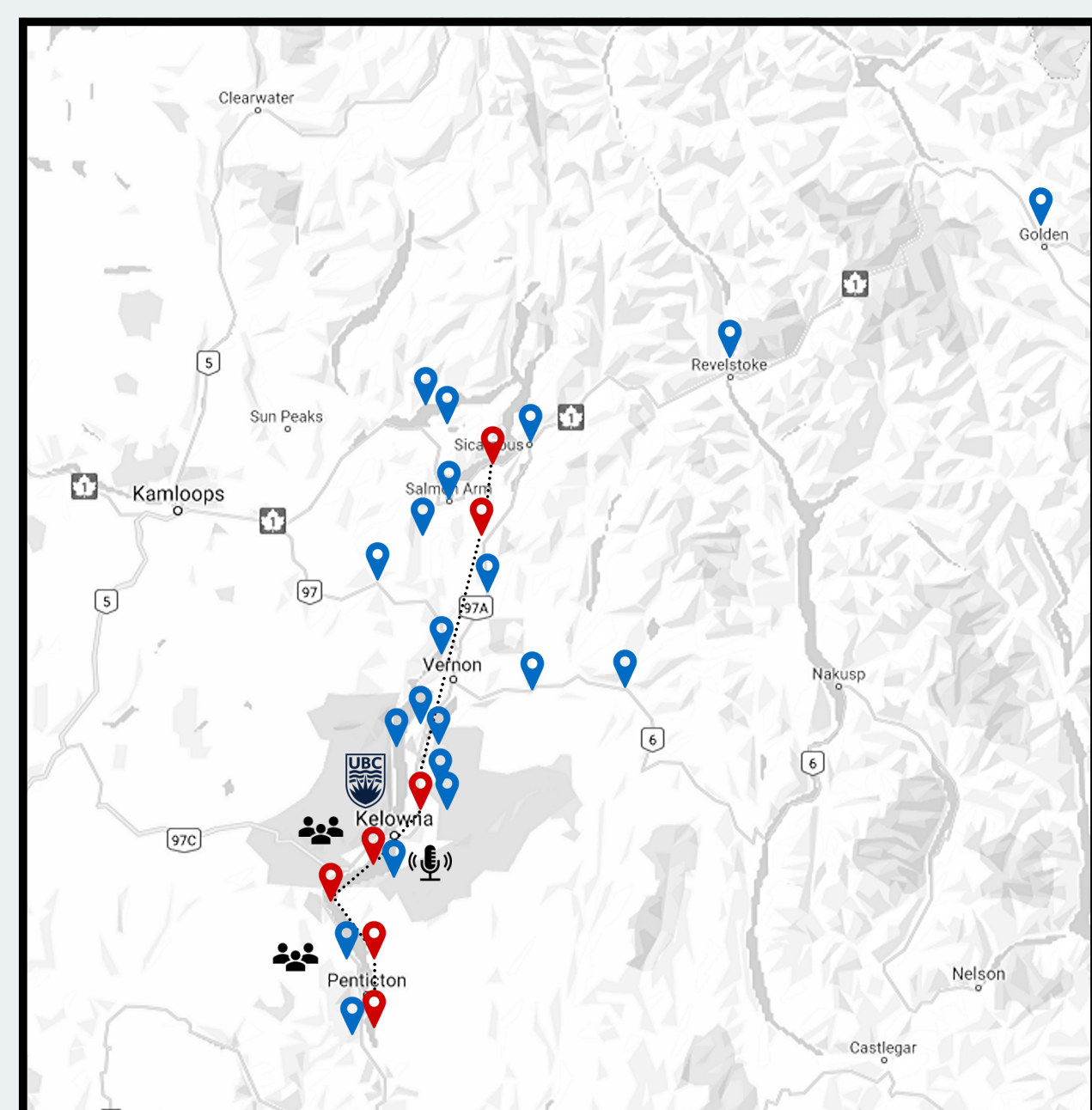


Image 1 Description: A black and white map of the Okanagan Valley with 20 blue dots for Questionnaires, 8 red dots for Surveys, a group of humans for Focus Groups, and a microphone for Interviews.

- Public Intercept Surveys** at 8 branches of the library established baseline understanding regarding accessibility and disability in public spaces (N=56).
- Online ORL Staff Questionnaires** distributed across the 33 branches of ORL to understand frontline library workers experience and needs (N=52).
- Community Focus Groups** produced in-depth perspectives and baseline understandings regarding general and **sensory accessibility** (N=2).
- Interviews** with upper management of ORL established an administrative perspective into how public institutions approach accessibility (N=1).

COMMUNITY-BASED APPLICATIONS

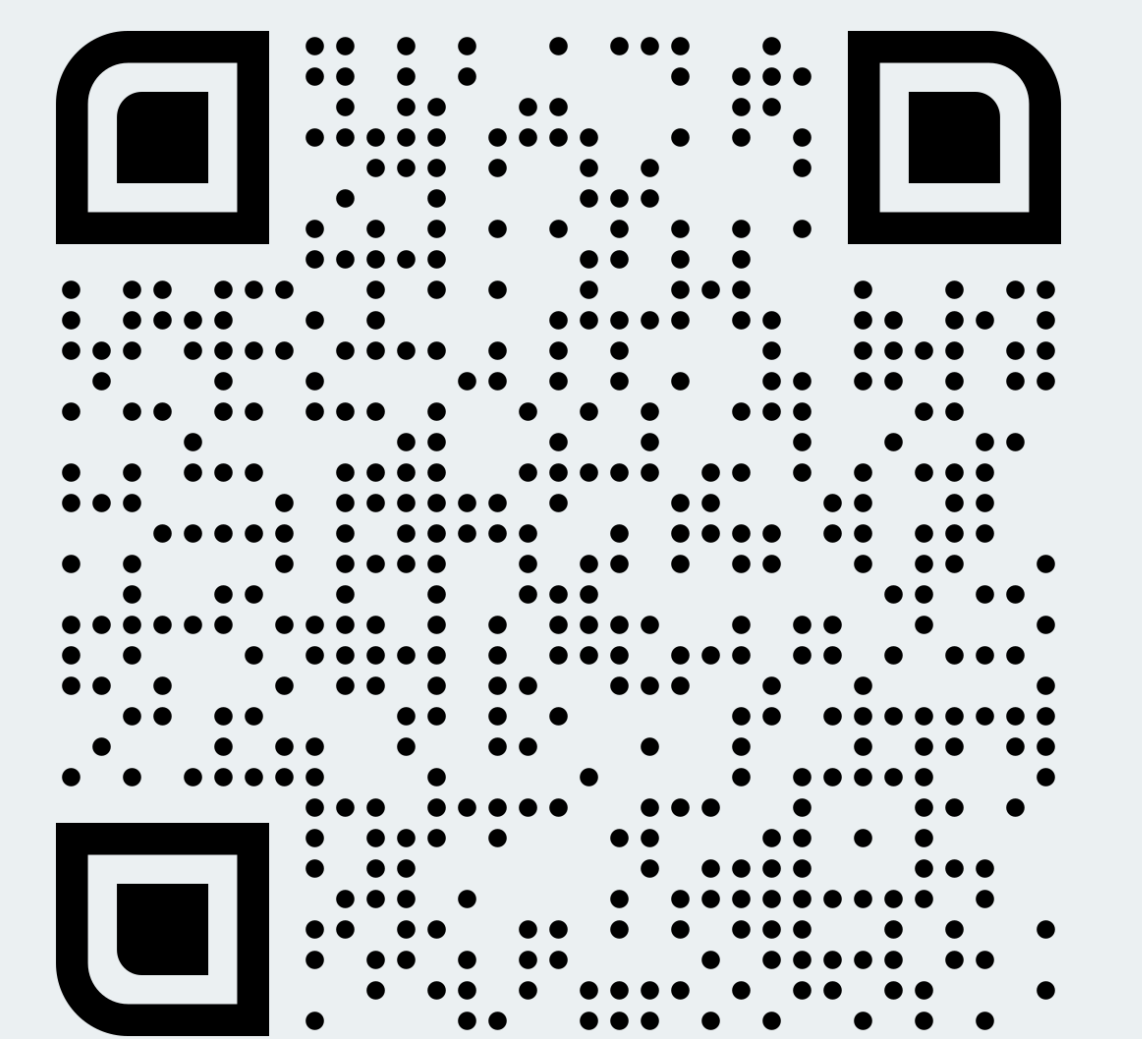
A comprehensive community report is one of the first steps in meeting what the data shows; an opportunity for frontline workers of public institutions to learn alongside their community. While the Accessible Canada Act is new and its applications are currently unknown, the Okanagan Regional Library, a crucial community partner and public institution, now has a resource to make future changes. This community report is one strategy to facilitate greater inclusion and bridge gaps in understandings of accessibility in Canada today.



Image 2 Description: (left) The yellow cover of the Enabled Environment, Community Partner Research Report 2019. (right) Picture of the Executive Summary located on page two of the Community Research Report 2019.



LEARN MORE HERE



REFERENCES

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