

The Spit Represented: Imagined Natures of the Leslie Street Spit and Emerging Aesthetic Ideals on Instagram

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Abstract

From a wasteland to an urban wilderness, Tommy Thompson Park (commonly referred to as “the Spit”) is the culmination of various landscape narratives and visions of nature. Built from the rubble of Toronto’s early city-building initiatives, the 5km long peninsula is a product of shifting environmental values and socio-political processes. As a landscape in flux, there is a need to understand aesthetic preferences and the landscape character of the Spit. Publicly available photographs on social media have increasingly been used as a proxy for recreational values, preferences and to gauge visitor behaviour (Hamstead et al., 2018; Jim & Chen, 2006; X. P. Song et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2013). This method supports the shift away from technocratic, expert-based approaches to understanding landscape preferences, towards a more place-based understanding of the everyday situated experience, while enabling more collaborative local landscape planning processes. In this research, landscape preferences are identified through the coding of frequently occurring image attributes and the rate of occurrence serves as an indicator of aesthetic appreciation. Key findings demonstrate a balanced appreciation for so-called natural and urban features. The photos of Lake Ontario and Toronto’s skyline resemble a relatively homogenous photographic composition that constitutes the bulk of visual representation. Images of Toronto’s skyline portrays an idealized waterfront city. In looking out towards the urban centre, it positions the Spit outside of the city, engendering particular affective responses and perceptions that limit understandings of the urban, economic, and socio-ecological entanglements that have created it. This is problematic for post-industrial natures that are deeply enmeshed within urban processes, which require contextually attuned responses, and for promoting narratives that exclude the negative and unscentic impacts of the “urban engine” (Coelho, 2018). The prevalence of images that depict water either as the focal point or in the background, suggests access to Lake Ontario is highly valued and contributes to the Spit’s imageability. Other viewpoints that are oriented toward the urban skyline and those with unimpeded views of the lake are highly appreciated and could inform future park management plans. The prevalence of wildlife imagery affirms the Spit’s important role in habitat creation. It also alludes to the power of nonhuman actors (especially birds) in shaping the relationship between humans and the environment, in both attracting people to the Spit and inspiring its protection. The results confirm the landscape is multivalent and offers insight into aesthetic preferences of the Spit. This research complements existing work by the Rubble to Refuge Project, a joint endeavor with the Toronto Region and Conservation Authority (TRCA) and York University that responds to the pressing need to understand human uses with the Spit.

Foreword

15 years ago, I was on a canoe trip in the backcountry of Algonquin Provincial Park. I was a few days in and deeply immersed into what I believed was a very remote wilderness experience. I don't recall having seen a trace of anyone beyond our immediate group, and I revelled in the feeling of remote ruggedness. In my mind, Algonquin Provincial Park was the epitome of pristine and wild nature. I held tightly to this perception, until a particular portage brought us across a logging road and quickly dismembered the imagined landscape that I found myself in. My father recounts my reaction with a good laugh, but I was genuinely heartbroken to realize that the pristine, protected wilderness I thought I knew so deeply, was in fact a curated landscape designed to hide and obscure existing realities of ongoing resource extraction and a rich Indigenous history.

From that point on, my academic and professional pursuits have been coloured by a fascination for human relationships with the land. How we shape, manage and plan for it, but also how our *connection* to the places we inhabit manifest as feelings and actions which have direct implications for the physical and non-human world. This has inspired my area of concentration, which is focused on understanding how planning processes can shape and are shaped by place-based dynamics. The Leslie Street Spit provides a meaningful case study to investigate how we shape the land, and how it in turn, shapes us.

This Major Paper fulfills the requirements of the MES planning degree through enhancing understanding of my three learning components: 1) the Construction and Representation of Place; 2) Place-Based Approaches to Planning; and 3) Community, Urban and Regional Planning. I used this research to explore complementary underpinnings of political ecology, landscape theory and environmental aesthetics. I developed a more robust understanding of how “politics is inevitably ecological, and ecology is inevitably political” (Robbins, 2011, p. 3) in grappling with the ways in which politics of urban development processes are deeply enmeshed within socio-ecological networks. This research provided the grounds to critically engage with theories of place that consider how humans relate to, engage with, and perceive landscapes by using one of contemporary culture's most prominent platforms: Instagram. The goal of this research was to create both a theoretical and practical Major Paper that contributed to robust understandings of human-environmental relations, extended through the case study of the Leslie Street Spit.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Foreword.....	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction.....	1
Methodology	3
Key Findings	4
Part 1	4
Chapter 1: Overview of Human-Environment Relations	4
Theorizing Landscape	6
Insights From Political Ecology	11
Chapter 2: Representations of Nature	15
Chapter 3: Aesthetics, Environment & Planning.....	24
Aesthetics in Planning	24
Social Image-Making	27
Part 2	30
Chapter 5: The Leslie Street Spit	30
The Rubble to Refuge Project	40
Chapter 6: Instagram Analysis	40
Data Collection.....	43
Coding	43
Content Analysis	45
Data & Research Findings.....	46
Analysis & Discussion	49
Notes for Future Research.....	57
Limits of Sight.....	59
Limits of the Data.....	59
Conclusions	60
Works Cited.....	62

“Looking at the land in ecological and geological, as well as human-cultural terms, we must surely see it as the product of multiple, mixed agencies [...] this means that the outcome of any given landscape is at a minimum biocultural, a collaborative product that its multiple species and creative elements must be credited for.”

- Val Plumwood (2006, p. 125)

Introduction

Today, the Spit is understood as a unique urban wilderness. Located just outside of downtown Toronto, it is a popular location for outdoor recreation and nature enthusiasts seeking to escape the bustle of city life. For many, the Spit may be perceived akin to other green spaces along the city's waterfront marked by distant industrial activities. The landscape is currently a complex mosaic of habitats, with rich biodiversity and spontaneously naturalized plant species such as wildflowers and cottonwoods (Yokohari & Amati, 2005; TRCA, n.d.). A closer look, however, unveils a more nuanced story with a rich social history. Morsels of construction and demolition debris dramatically jut out of the shoreline comprised of decaying bricks and rebar, contributing to “an untamed, sublime and feral aesthetic” (Schopf & Foster, 2014, p. 1087). In exploring the archaeology of the Spit, Schopf & Foster (2014) emphasize the power of nature in reclaiming industrial remnants as “romanticised ruins” and effectively obscuring its social history rooted in the “creative destruction of the city” (p. 1086), characterized by large scale urban renewal and slum clearing practices. From this view, the landscape of the Spit is a culmination of deeply entangled social and natural processes. As a landscape in flux, there is an increasing need to understand how people interact with the site, including emergent aesthetic preferences as the Spit attracts new visitors and faces increased pressures from surrounding urban development processes.

Prompted by the opening of the Great Lakes Seaway in 1959 and the growth in container shipping operations, the Spit was initially planned as a headland for port operations by the Toronto Harbour Commission (“THC”). The landscape was entirely constructed through lakefilling, consisting of dumping construction and demolition debris from Toronto's city-building processes, and dredged material from the lakebed. By the 1970s however, freight traffic significantly reduced by nearly half and its original purpose for port operations was never fully served. This coincided with a critical time in municipal planning politics, as Toronto's city planning regime was increasingly critiqued for reflecting high modernist visions through top-

down technocratic processes. Citizens grew increasingly vocal and wary of their political representatives, inspiring the creation of coalition groups such as ForWard 9 and the Friends of the Spit. Society was changing, and so was the Spit. Gradually, the spontaneous colonization of flora and fauna heralded new opportunities and discussions for its future. Many different visions for the Spit were proposed that reflected various priorities and shifting perspectives on public interests, waterfront planning, and human-environment relations more generally.

Today, through the views of wildflower meadows and maturing trees, it is easy to distance the Spit from its industrial, human-made heritage. As the product of spontaneous natural succession, the diverse ecology of the Spit is a testament to nature's strength and resilience in the face of disturbance. As an important site for biodiversity, it is a focal point for research pertaining to urban wildlife and ecological restoration. Ongoing restoration work is focused on enhancing aquatic and terrestrial habitat, preserving significant species, and protecting environmentally significant areas. Visitors flock to the Spit for outdoor recreation opportunities, to interact with wildlife or simply for the feeling of being immersed in a unique, rugged urban wilderness off the shoreline of downtown Toronto. Increasing human-induced pressures through rising visitation rates and evolving recreational demands, along with uncertain ecological futures calls for a robust understanding of existing people-place dynamics.

This paper is guided by three related research questions:

- (1) What are the sociocultural and ideological underpinnings that have produced the Spit?
- (2) What are the aesthetic preferences of the Spit that are revealed through Instagram?
- (3) Is Instagram an effective tool to encourage situated understandings of landscape aesthetics, and enable more collaborative planning processes?

The first portion of the paper is dedicated to answering the first research question, by grounding in various relevant concepts and themes that underpin the Spit's existence. Much of it is inspired by landscape research studies that seek to understand human-environment relations. Political ecology is used as a theoretical lens as it provides a "powerful focus on the production of soci-environments and their co-constitution by many kinds of human and non-human actors" (Robbins, 2011, p. 5). Leaning on complementary fields of urban political ecology also helps frame the Spit as a form of 'socio-nature'—the product of various socio-cultural, political and environmental processes. From there, various environmental imaginaries and visions of nature that uphold dominant ideologies and drive environmental planning processes

are discussed and problematized with the intent of illuminating the Spit's diverse (and sometimes competing) identities. This is followed by an examination of aesthetics in planning, connecting the role of visual representation in narrative building, place identity, and explores the implications of visual representation in outdoor recreation. Part 2 of this paper turns to the case study (Chapter 5), to provide a historical overview of the Spit and situate the research within the existing planning context. The Instagram analysis (Chapter 6) begins with a discussion on collaborative planning to identify the potential of and limitations to social media research. The precise methodologies used for the content analysis are also presented here, followed by the content analysis, results and discussion.

Methodology

This research uses a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative information to understand the Spit through both visual and theoretical frames of analysis. As a landscape that often evokes wonder and awe, it prompts questions of “how” and “why”, whereby a case study approach is frequently used and effective (Crowe et al., 2011). As a landscape that symbolizes many different visions of nature and underpinning ideologies of human-environment relations, a synthesis of relevant discourse and theories is provided in Part One of this paper. This involved an extensive review of academic literature to provide a rich explanatory narrative of relevant concepts and processes. This approach has frequently been used by urban political ecology scholars, as a means to better trace power relations that produce certain environments or interactions (Ernstson & Sörlin, 2019).

In order to avoid drawing biased conclusions, Zasina's (2018) study comparing a city's online Instagram image to its offline reality emphasized the need to begin by understanding the local context first. This is how my research journey began. I learned of the Spit through word of mouth but was inspired to go after looking it up on Instagram. My first casual visits turned into more intentional site visits. During this field work, I observed existing visitor use patterns and behaviours, noted evidence of use and popular areas through informal pathways or well-trodden earth. This helped inform a general understanding of human dynamics at the Spit. Over the course of 11 months, 9 site visits were conducted which involved casual observation, taking photographs and field notes. Photos and field notes were recorded into a smartphone and later used for references. Site visits lasted between 45 minutes and 3 hours and were conducted primarily on a bicycle. On my first few visits, I recall being drawn to certain vistas and elements of the park and noticing patterns in other's behaviours and preferred areas. These site visits informed an understanding of the Spit's unique rhythm and flow for the analysis, helped identify

popular viewpoints and photos that were not associated with the Spit. Part Two of this research includes the content analysis, and outlines the methods used for visual analysis, as well as considerations for conducting social media research more broadly.

Key Findings

As a form of socio-nature, the Spit exemplifies the entanglements between nature, culture, and society. The landscape tells a story of evolving visions of nature: as something “out there”, something pristine and untouched, something to be used, destroyed, transformed, and something to be cared for and protected. Varying ideologies of urban nature and the conceptual position of humans within (or outside) of landscapes have each played a significant role in shaping the Spit. Visual representations of the Spit on Instagram portray a relatively balanced division between appreciation for so-called natural features and so-called urban features. Recurrent points of view and attribute representation uncover prevailing aesthetic preferences that focus on the picturesque and iconic. As examples of “unscenic nature”, wetlands, active port operations, meadows, and industrial remnants are less represented by the imagery (Saito, 1998). Telling the story of unfamiliar ecological assemblages may however, help enhance aesthetic valuations, positioning interpretation at the Spit as critical in enabling emergent aesthetic ideals that move beyond myopic valuations (Saito, 1998; Raad, 2021). Views of the lake and Toronto’s skyline, unique landforms and ecosystems, and historical traces each contribute to the Spit’s landscape character and overall imageability (Ode et al., 2008). Instagram provided unprompted insight into the aesthetic preferences of the Spit, that complements other methods like surveys and in-person interviews. This approach “minimises the expert-led steer” which has come to characterize landscape assessments and institutionalized planning processes (Scott et al., 2009, p. 416). These findings inspire recommendations that could help inform future plans for park planning, design, and education, and paint a picture of the existing landscape character and human-nature dynamics at the Spit.

Part 1

Chapter 1: Overview of Human-Environment Relations

Across the globe humans are challenged by the task to realize our collective (dis)connection to the natural world (Albracht, 2019). The role of urban nature has increasingly gained prominence across geographical scales and is supported by an abundance of different ways of seeing, valuing, and understanding the environment. This alludes to the point that “place and time matter” in understanding urban environments (Ernstson & Sörlin, 2019). As the ecological crisis

petitions for swift and effective responses, urban boundaries grow and landscapes transform, how we view the natural world and our place within it is continuously evolving and can have profound implications across societal, spatial, and political plains.

Over the last two centuries, understandings of human-environment relations have undergone unprecedented transformations (N. Smith, 2008). Kaika & Swyngedouw (2012) demonstrate a critical need to “re-center the political” and “respect the idiosyncrasies” (p. 26), while continuously engaging with new and emerging realities of urban environments. As urban landscapes produce novel ecologies that challenge traditional conceptions of nature (including what species, form or function is valued and which is neglected), a need to expand traditional theories and practice is required. As noted by Brenner et al. (2011), “urban theory today must embrace and even celebrate a certain degree of eclecticism” (p. 227), and the case of the Leslie Street Spit exemplifies this.

Ultimately, there are many ways to view the relationship between cities and nature. The very concept of nature has long been a source of debate across disciplines (Braun, 2005), and varies across both time and space. Research related to cities is equally fragmented, similarly influenced by shifting social and political goals (A. J. Scott & Storper, 2015). As such, scholars emphasize the need to situate knowledge and theory to allow for the inclusion of more place-based understandings and everyday interactions (Lawhon et al., 2014; Tzaninis et al., 2021), and there is growing recognition of the need for collaborative planning processes. This aligns with planning efforts aimed at enhancing public participation and amplifying voices of those with existing attachments, practices or interests associated with the place in question. Similarly, Ernstson & Sörlin's (2019) approach to urban environments emphasizes the role of “*grounding*” and “*worlding*” to engage with place specific realities while acknowledging the ways in which “urban natures carry many other places within them” (p. 4), instilling the notion of nature as an abstraction. Collard et al. (2015) further add that the practice of worlding “bring worlds into being; different stories enact different worlds that may be comergent, partially connected, or in conflict” (p. 328). If landscapes are “the mutual shaping of people and place” (Spirn, 2005, p. 397), it is critical to critique the power balance. Settler colonialism has produced particular landscapes of violence, through assimilation and erasure of both social and ecological systems. All attempts to understand a landscape must be foregrounded by this. Political ecology offers a lens to better highlight and understand these relations of power. Common strands of inquiry are “analyses of social ecological transformations, investigations into the contested meanings of nature, and interrogations of colonial narratives” (Neumann, 2011, p. 844). Culture, power and

the politics of representation and property, play a large role in transforming urban landscapes and inspire perceptions of urban natures. As such, a critical analysis of the formations of landscapes and the production of accompanying urban natures will be explored here.

Considering the slant of this research towards aesthetics and the human-nature interaction with landscapes, the definition of landscape deployed by Gobster et al. (2007) will be observed. Gobster's research (2007) examines the role of aesthetics and ecology and contends that the most meaningful scale to study the human experience of landscapes is within the "perceptible realm", which is the scale through which we immediately connect with and respond to environmental phenomena. This serves as the scale through which "humans intentionally change landscapes" (Gobster, 2007, p. 960). For the purpose of this paper, landscape is considered as "the physical patterns we perceive as making up our surroundings" (Gobster et al., 2007, p. 960). To foreground understanding of the Spit, the next section will elucidate how landscapes are produced by exploring relevant theories in landscape studies and urban political ecology. It will then turn to explore the role of aesthetics in planning, with a particular focus on landscape assessments and the role of visual representations before the case study investigation.

Theorizing Landscape

As a notoriously interdisciplinary term, the concept of landscape permits the encapsulation of various disciplines, ways of thinking and considerations which lends itself as a useful framework of analysis. Howard et al. (2013), note this as a benefit to landscape studies as it provides a framework to engage with different perspectives from different disciplines. As noted by Charles Waldheim, "for many, across a range of disciplines, landscape has become both the lens through which the contemporary city is represented and the medium through which it is constructed" (as cited in Thoren, 2007, p. 71). Across the disciplines of landscape ecology, landscape design, landscape architecture, landscape planning, landscape as both term and concept is widely used and applied to understand, shape, and manage human-nature relationships with the environment. Some suggest the term is increasingly considered synonymous to landscape ecology (Daniel, 2001). Jacobsen (2007) suggests, "a wide human-ecological approach might be advantageous to broad-spectrum landscape management and restoration research" (p. 237), emphasizing a need to better connect humans within ecological understandings. Research on visual representation of landscape is also abundant, and there is a growing call to move away from expert-based perception assessments to better account for everyday interactions, as "the poetics of the everyday" plays an important role in memory

making (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 44). This alludes to the opportunities presented by visual studies of user-generated social media data.

Landscape also provides a lens that marries notions of place and space. John Wylie describes how presence and absence play a role in conceptualizing place and space (as cited in Merriman et al., 2008). Landscape on the other hand, “works amidst and through both [...] joining and dividing” (p. 203), and sometimes intertwining. The same goes for other “creative tensions” including materiality and perception, self and the world or “interiority and exteriority” (Wylie, as cited in Merriman et al., 2008, p. 203). Landscape then encapsulates a more holistic understanding of space/place and our role within it. Other ideas of landscape consider it a ‘way of seeing’ (Cosgrove, 1985), positing the landscape as a symbol of culture and history. As noted by Angus (2018), “by presenting scenes as natural and given, landscape masks how labor binds human and nonhuman nature” (p.53). Regarding landscapes merely for their visual quality negates their multidimensionality. The visual aesthetic of landscapes has historically taken centre stage, with more recent emphasis on the role of embodied experience which “explores experiential and performative and embodied processes behind the understanding of landscapes” (A. Scott et al., 2009, p. 109). While this research focuses on visual representation alone, future research should consider the role of different mobilities (i.e., walking, running, biking) and the sensory experience¹ overall, which are addressed further in this paper.

Before moving forward, it is critical to further problematize landscapes across a few key points. The concept of landscape, “draws on colonial as well as androcentric model which frames the land as passive, visually captured, something to distance from, survey, subdue” (Plumwood, 2006, p. 123). Indigenous presence and connections to the land are frequently disregarded in the production of landscapes, emphasizing the role of the ‘colonial gaze’. The aestheticization of certain landscapes have driven settlement patterns and conservation efforts, as well as inspired the symbolic erasure of communities and cultures in favour of the picturesque.

In the Canadian context, Indigenous connections to the land are frequently mis- and under-represented. Referencing the sociocultural implications of landscape paintings by the Group of Seven, Cimellaro (2022) explains how “indigenous erasure and settler nationalism have been synonymous”, connecting aesthetic representation to “collective” understandings. These paintings, among other representations of uninhabited Canadian wilderness landscapes,

¹ The Spit is located adjacent to the Ashbridge’s Bay Treatment Plant, which can add a distinct odour on the visitor experience.

reinforce Western concepts of *terra nullius*, despite deeply rooted communities and cultures. “The collective vision”, writes Raad (2021), “confused with reality, [can exclude] alternative ways of understandings” and suppress other realities of a landscape (p. 105).

The production of landscapes is heavily entangled with circulating “collective visions” that lead to prioritizing certain histories, socionatural systems and spatial practices over others (Raad, 2021; Simpson & Bagelman, 2018). Historically, landscapes have been produced through “violent imposition of a spatial order on existing Indigenous socionatural systems” (Simpson & Bagelman, 2018, p. 559). This is echoed by Tomiak (2016) who states, “cities have been constructed as settler space through discursive and non-discursive practices intended to evict, displace, and invisibilize Indigenous peoples and place-making in urban areas” (p. 9). McCartney furthers this by stating how the discipline of land use planning “has been complicit in Canada’s imperialist objectives, facilitating both a constant expansion of territory and an imposition of Western values” (McCartney, 2016, p. 21).

In emphasizing a rational, technical approach to planning for landscapes, cities and their ecosystems, discourse has been shifted to emphasize certain narratives over others. Early planning approaches were centered on efficient functioning of society, “to serve an economic and social and political order” (Marcuse, 2011, p. 119). Social elements were only considered in the face of potential market interference (Marcuse, 2011), and were not initially considered as part of the planning process. As “applied rationality”, planning has frequently concerned itself with simply adhering to broad societal norms – negating more nuanced considerations related to gender, sex, (dis)ability, ethnicity, race, religion and spirituality (Wildavsky, 1973, p. 130). There are greater calls to unsettle planning theories, with insurgent radical planning practices emerging across the globe (Miraftab, 2009). Localized theories are needed to account for differences between the Global North and the Global South with practices that continue to challenge traditional neoliberal governance structures. In doing so, de facto organizations or other traditionally excluded groups can be better recognized (Miraftab, 2009), and more inclusive planning processes may come to be.

Indigenous knowledge and understandings broadly view the land as “a system of reciprocal social relations and ethical practices” (Wildcat et al., 2014, p. 2). Indigenous knowledge systems reflect an interconnectedness between ecosystems, communities, cultures, spirituality and beyond that is shaped by language and perspectives that push past the limits of traditional Western methodologies and planning regimes. Reconciling these differences is unfortunately

beyond the scope of this research, but this is a critical consideration that warrants deliberate reflection and dialogue.

This draws attention to the abundance of different ways in relating to the physical landscape. Denis Cosgrove (1985) considers landscape as a 'way of seeing', alluding to many alternatives ways of viewing the world around us. Conversely, Wylie considers landscape as "the materialities and sensibilities *with which* we see" (as cited in Merriman et al., 2008, p. 203). This allows for a more embodied understanding of landscape, establishing itself as both a "simultaneous gathering and unfurling, through which versions of self and world emerge as such". Landscape is entirely entangled with ourselves, and the world – drawing from an abundance of histories, cultures and social and political contours. Landscape is not merely representational of one thing – it is neither objective nor subjective, and one account can never represent the whole.

Western definitions of landscape depend on its application and various interpretations and translations of the word exist. Early references of the term are linked to the early 13th century Dutch and Germanic languages (Antrop, 2013, p. 1). Spirn (1998) finds that the root words of landscape allude to a mutual relationship between people and place, noting that:

"Danish *Landscab*, German *Landschaft*, Dutch *landshap*, and Old English *landscape* combined tow roots. 'Land' means both a place and the people living there. *Skabe* and *schaffen* mean 'to shape', suffixes – *skab* and – *schaft* as in the English '-ship' also mean association, partnership." (p. 411)

From the 15th to the 18th century, perspectives of landscape unfolded as both scenery and myth through its integration into the visual arts. Dutch paintings portrayed a romanticized vision of landscapes, through idyllic countryside to ornamental garden designs which formed the inspiration for many early municipal parks. This aestheticized view of landscapes is largely a Western phenomenon where it is seen as a territorial unit in addition to possessing certain qualities such as scenic beauty (Antrop, 2013). Landscape has always possessed a certain visual character, beginning with early pictorial representations during the Renaissance and the Age of Discovery. In this way, Antrop (2013) notes that landscape was used "as an expression of human ideas, thoughts, beliefs and feelings" (p. 6). Cartography and photography were used to illustrate different regions and document natural conditions. Aerial photography began after the First World War which allowed for new perspectives and broader scopes of analyses that added breadth to both landscape studies and scientific analyses.

By the 1920s in the United States, Carl Sauer popularized the German understanding of landscape in coining the term cultural landscape (Wu, 2010). The concept quickly emerged as a fundamental pillar with quick uptake in human geography, environmental management, and anthropology. In the 1990s the term cultural landscape reached global scales, with its adoption in the International Convention for the Protection of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Wu, 2010). In what is often cited as a “cultural turn” in geography, scholars began to tease out various conceptual definitions of landscape to match new global realities.

Denis Cosgrove affirmed the idea that landscape “was a particular way of spatially and visually organizing a view, which produced not only a landscape in front of a viewer but also the viewer as a subject position” (in Merriman et al., 2008, p. 200). Emphasizing the role of landscape as performance, landscape research regained focus on materiality which led to the “reconceptualization of landscapes as relational entities, entanglements of human and non-human elements, that co-constitute each other” (Duineveld et al., 2017, as cited in Atha et al., 2013). During this cultural wave, Lindström et al. (2013) state it “brought a heightened reflexivity toward the role of language, meaning, and representations in the constitution of “reality” and “knowledge of reality”, attention to economic and political aspects, identity and consumption, as well as to the impact of cultural constructions of race, gender and class on landscapes” (p. 78).

‘New’ cultural geographers sought to emphasize the connections between landscape, cultural politics and political economy (P. Walker & Fortmann, 2003). Neumann (2011) notes there was not a lot of direct engagement between landscape research and political ecology, but they followed similar lines of inquiry. Research engaged with the role of “competing visions of the landscape” whereby negotiation between various landscape ideologies, interests and preferences shape its production (P. Walker & Fortmann, 2003). P. Walker & Fortmann (2003) examine how rural migration resulted in conflict between different landscape ideals, namely preferences over ‘rural’ and ‘natural’ landscape qualities that resulted in tense social conflicts over land use. This resulted in a crisis “as the landscape qualities that attracted so many migrants became threatened by continuing migration and rural residential growth” (p. 482), effectively destroying what they intended to enjoy. This phenomenon is widely cited in research on gentrification, whereby urban renewal is accompanied by displacement and disruption (Hagerman, 2007; Wolch et al., 2014). Similarly, Raad (2021) explores how the American collective vision of mountains “homogenized the experience of nature” (p. 113). Raad (2021) adds that nostalgia for pre-industrial landscapes and the pastoral sublime can obscure realities

through reproducing dominant (exclusionary) landscape narratives that exclude Indigenous, immigrant or African American place attachments. This is apparent through the Canadian context as well. Foster (2009) explains how “histories of the escarpment, moraine and greenbelt are typically rendered with a celebratory emphasis on colonial encounters and achievements, prompting the removal of Others both materially and representationally” (p. 104). Certain aesthetic articulations are protected and reinforced through environmental and planning policies through provisions that seek to maintain “neighbourhood character” or allow only single land uses, ultimately encouraging the proliferation of monotonous landscapes. Foster (2009) critically adds that efforts related to ensuring landscape continuity frequently start from a biophysical standpoint, but are quickly engulfed by cultural considerations.

Landscapes are a “symbolic representation of a collective local history”, but require careful attention to discern hidden narratives (Greider & Garkovich, 1994, p. 4). It is no wonder that landscape has also been attributed as a ‘way of seeing’ and conversely, as an object to be read. As noted by Antrop (2013), “landscape not only refers to a complex phenomenon that can be described and analysed using objective scientific methods, but it also refers to subjective observation and experience and thus has a perceptive, aesthetic, artistic and existential meaning” (p. 2). The representation of landscapes through visual media is well researched and recognized for its ability to obscure and distort existing realities. Raad (2021) underscores how “visual media, or representations of landscapes, both produce and are produced by a collective vision” (p. 103), alluding to the circulatory feedbacks between aesthetics, culture, and the environment around us.

In this regard, it is important to also consider landscapes as “the sight of cultural conflict” (Rose, 2006, p. 540). To borrow from Neumann (2011), they should always be viewed “as contested nature, as struggles over meaning are simultaneously struggles over social identity, belonging and exclusion, and land rights and use” (p. 845). Who has access to certain spaces, who benefits and who pays, who is heard and who is neglected are all critical components to consider in understanding the socio-political processes at play in the production of landscapes and associated urban natures.

Insights From Political Ecology

This research has inspired from landscape studies and political ecology, as both disciplines have studied similar lines of inquiry. Connolly (2017) finds landscape as an analytical lens to be “highly compatible with the interests of urban political ecology” (p. 453), as both disciplines seek

to understand interrelations between nature and landscapes, and “their mutually co-constituted, socially constructed and contested nature” (Connolly, 2017, p. 423). They are “well suited for political ecological analysis because [landscapes] are simultaneously cultural and ‘natural’” (Batterby, as cited in Connolly, 2017, p. 424). When political ecology emerged in the 1970s, it was primarily applied to understand environmental hazards with focus on “flows of matter, energy and information” (P. A. Walker, 2005, p. 74). While such focus does prevail, new subfields have grown in response to emerging conceptual developments.

Urban political ecology (UPE) is concerned with metabolic processes that trace similar aspects with an added focus on the flows of material and power that continuously produce and reproduce (uneven) urban spaces (Keil, 2005; Quastel, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2009). More recent work in UPE has expanded beyond capitalist-centered Marxian thought in response to feminist, Indigenous and queer theory, expanding beyond the “early framing” of UPE to better consider “the everyday and the micro-politics” (Tzaninis et al., 2021, p. 233; Shillington & Murnaghan, 2016; Simpson & Bagelman, 2018). The incorporation of post-structuralist and post-humanist insights into UPE also account for the evolving hybridity of ‘socio-natures’, and strengthen the inclusion of non-human concerns (Gabriel, 2014; Heynen et al., 2006). Particularly for urban natures, expanding beyond the language that shaped traditional understandings of nature(s) is critical to foster a holistic and inclusive understanding of the realities of place.

UPE has been used to understand socio-environmental change and examine how labour and capital produce particular interactions and outcomes (Swyngedouw, 2009). Particularly in the context of Toronto’s waterfront, Desfor & Vesalon’s (2008) work lends considerable insight. Their research examines how intertwined economic, socio-political and natural processes enabled the production of a new industrial nature to support the accumulation of wealth (Desfor & Vesalon, 2008), referring to it as a spatio-temporal fix (Schoenberger, 2004). The notion of a spatial fix was first advocated by David Harvey (2001), and can be seen through urban improvements and enhancements, often accompanied by “creative destruction” – a lens which has been explored in the context of the Spit’s creation as well (e.g. Creba & Hutton, 2021; Desfor & Vesalon, 2008; Schopf & Foster, 2014), and will be further explored later. This point is further by echoed by Birge-Liberman (2010) who evaluates the emergence of American parks through a history of urban politics. They note how parks have shape-shifted through crises of production and consumption, evidenced by changing roles they have played in society during the 20th century (Birge-Liberman, 2010).

UPE has added critical insight supporting the view of cities as complex, socio-ecological systems (Ernstson & Sörlin, 2019). UPE deconstructs the traditional duality of nature/culture in recognizing the entanglement of 'socio-natures' (Gabriel, 2014) while operating against the "prevailing expectations that locate nature outside the city" (Keil, 2005, p. 640). Viewing the Spit as a socio-nature, a hybrid between nature and society, allows for more nuanced understanding of its production while acknowledging other hybrid geographies exist. David Harvey's (1996) widely cited statement claiming that there is nothing *unnatural* about New York City, alludes to the entanglement of nature/culture (as cited in Heynen et al., 2006). Similarly, Henri Lefebvre (1975) uses the concept of "Second Nature" to highlight how urban environments are socially produced through the consumption and destruction of nature (as cited in Heynen et al., 2006). The notion of first and second nature, or rather the existence of a hierarchical or chronological evolution of nature, serves as a fundamental framing for ecological restoration.

Traditional ecological restoration assumes there is an ideal state to which an ecosystem may be restored. Historically, this would be the state whereby it exhibits the most ecological integrity, or its "pre-human damaged state" (Birge-Liberman, 2010, p. 1400). This is complicated considering the reach of human impacts, particularly in urban environments where there is no reference point and disturbances may be both human- and nature-driven. In the context of urban green space, Gobster (2012) suggests that drawing less emphasis on 'native biodiversity' may increase appreciation for unique ecological assemblages. Considering the prevalence of post-industrial sites and the urgency to transform them into spaces for capital accumulation and expansion, underscores the need to explore how urban nature is managed. As noted by Evans (2020) "urban ecology has gone from sub disciplinary backwater to hot topic" (p. 304), as increasing global policy discourse connects ecosystem health with sustainability. The growing focus on green infrastructure, resilience and ecosystem services among other hot topic policy discourse, have drawn greater focus on the field (Evans, 2020). Restoration can occur through a variety of different rationales, including political and economic drivers and occurring across a variety of scales (Baker et al., 2014).

Eric Higgs' *Nature by Design* (2003) provides an enriching understanding of ecological restoration, with a few key points worth noting. Higgs (2003) highlights four keystone concepts of 'good' ecological restoration: ecological integrity and historical fidelity, which are the most traditional/common pillars. These involve restoring the site to a specific reference point or may include reintroducing native species or ecosystem functions that have since been lost (Higgs, 2003). Focal practices recognize the important contribution of participation and community

building through restoration efforts, and wild design emphasizes the role of intentionality in design, cognizant of natural unpredictability and rooted in a deep awareness for ecological functions (Higgs, 2003). Higgs (2003) emphasizes the importance of narrative continuity and proposes to “think of *restoration as conversation*” (emphasis in original, p. 286), underscoring the (often overlooked) role of reciprocity and “attunement to the specific needs of ecosystems” (Higgs, 2003, p. 286). This might achieve a more balanced approach to balancing human and nonhuman interests through restoration work. Ling et al. (2007) move beyond this in considering a multifunctional approach to restoration, “by working *with* the landscape” and conceptualizing landscape within its broader, multifunctioning context (emphasis added, p. 286). This may include functions that pay tribute to “historical, connecting with the past; ecological, sustaining natural processes; communitarian, engaging with local people; economic, translating liabilities into assets; and aesthetic, lifting the spirit” (Ling et al., 2007, p. 287). Underpinning these approaches are different perceptions and value judgements held about changes to an ecosystem. As posed by Richard Hobbs (2016), does ecosystem change necessarily entail degradation? Or, might change simply be regarded as different than what was there before?

Higgs’ (2003) view of restoration as conversation – as exchange and ongoing interaction, also complements Ahern’s (2010, 2013) emphasis on adaptive design. They argue that landscape ecologists have a lot to offer the field of urban planning, particularly in the pursuit for sustainability, requiring transdisciplinary collaboration in order to truly view cities as complex socio-ecological systems (Ahern, 2013). Paramount to this, is viewing restoration as a continuous process, rather than a single desired outcome. In producing urban nature, it is also useful to consider specific design approaches and intention behind restoration or development. This is affirmed by Heatherington, stating “it is necessary to question which version of nature is being selected” (2012, p. 175). In post-industrial contexts that bear significant industrial scars, complete erasure in favour of *tabula rasa* approaches has typically been the norm. As deindustrialization has characterized the last few decades, the romanticization of industrial ruins have undoubtedly played a role in gradually shifting away from complete erasure. Nostalgia plays an important role here. According to Huyssen (2006), “we are nostalgic for the ruins of modernity because they still seem to hold a promise that has vanished from our own age: the promise of an alternative future” (p. 8). In imagining new futures, it is necessary to consider which histories are being celebrated and at what cost. The traces that remain can produce new landscape narratives that in turn distort or erase other histories. To quote Higgs (2003), “restoration is about restorying place” (p. 285), emphasizing how narrative plays a significant role in changing industrial landscapes.

To add a final layer, it is important to frame urban natures in their own right. Discourse on sustainability has increasingly drawn emphasis on urban nature for its multitude of benefits. While superficially straightforward, Coelho (2018) emphasizes the need to distinguish urban ecologies apart from other productions of nature considering their frequent composition of idiosyncratic parts in response to thickened layers of urban pressures, disruptions, and valuations. Urban nature in downtown Toronto is not the same nature found in Northern Ontario. This notion was first put forward in the 1990s by German ecologists, and affirmed by the Rio Earth Conference in 1992 (Evans, 2020). Through the introduction of a “new ecological paradigm”, this advocated for a perspective that placed humans directly within ecosystems, rather than apart (Evans, 2020). This coincided with the shift away from viewing ecosystems as closed-looped and solely self-regulating, towards a perspective that views them as “multi-equilibria, open, dynamic, highly unpredictable and subject to frequent disturbance” (Alberti et al., 2003, p. 1170). This is confounded in urban spaces. Coelho (2018) uses 5 “rubrics” to help elucidate the complexities of urban natures, in analyzing them through their hybridity, shifting boundaries and “recategorizations” (p. 22), nuanced histories that may distort or erase, and ever changing valuations that shape “legacies of urbanization” (p. 24).

Coelho (2018) exemplifies “how flows and circulations of capital, nature, discourses, and social processes systematically work to differentially value places and people” (p. 25) by drawing on examples of cities in India, which echo processes here as well. Certain spaces are viewed as “as frontiers for accumulation” (p. 26), shifting valuations lead to new categories (using examples like water becomes land, land becomes waste), all while disrupting and displacing people and communities that rely on these spaces. While this phrase does not sit well, it does allude to the winners and losers of environmental decisions. To this extent, Coelho (2018) describes ecological restoration projects as “sites of enormous human tragedy, among the most exclusionary interventions in contemporary urban transformation” (p. 24), alluding to the power of elitist visions of landscape and top-down decision making. Understanding landscape change requires acknowledgement for the “intertwining of ecological and cultural processes” (Higgs, 2003, p. 180) that influence decision-making.

Chapter 2: Representations of Nature

The representation of nature across various points in history and locales emphasizes evolving perceptions and valuations of the natural world. Aesthetic preferences and representation of nature has long influenced the design, management, and valorization of the natural world. The notion of environmental imaginaries refers to how different societies over time have imagined

nature (P. Walker & Fortmann, 2003). They are useful to identify, in order to consider how overlapping and conflicting imaginaries have profound consequences. P. Walker & Fortmann (2003) demonstrate how these imaginaries “become prime sites of contestations between normative visions...including ideas of property rights and aesthetically acceptable land use” (p. 486). Western landscape aesthetics typically considers three categories: the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque, and each have played a significant role in shaping the world around us (Brook, 2013). The sublime, according to Nohl (2001), “expresses that certain aesthetics states, [including] nature, are too great, too huge, and too terrific to be perceived by the sense of man” (p. 231) – notions which played a significant role in Western conservation movements and broader relations between humans and the environment (Dunaway, 2005). Largely evidenced through 18th century landscape painting and photography, the picturesque arose from the notion that “nature was imperfect and needed to be organized” (Auerbach, 2004, p. 48). Photographic composition typically frames a neat foreground, middle ground and background, integrating elements of the sublime and the beautiful as well (Auerbach, 2004). This was critical in the 18th century, as regions and empires were portrayed as grandiose and all relatively similar – “the picturesque was about the creation of sameness”, and provided “a measure of coherence and control” despite opposite realities (Auerbach, 2004, p. 47). In contemporary landscapes, Nohl (2001) adds “the (new) sublime” and “the interesting”, as emergent aesthetic ideals that reflect modern socioecological realities².

Imagination plays a significant role in urban planning and design, as future redevelopment processes seek to achieve specific visions put forth by specific actors. Different images of nature have been researched in the context of nature conservation and landscape planning (Buijs, 2009; Buijs et al., 2009; De Groot & Van Den Born, 2003). In a Dutch study that examined lay people’s images of nature, 1999 respondents considered there to be ‘no nature’ within industrial lands (Buijs & Volker, 1997, as cited in Robinson, 2001). For industrial urban ecologies, this notion is highly problematic. Emergent discourse related to novel ecologies in post-industrial spaces is of particular importance here and exemplifies how circulating imaginaries and aesthetics preferences can have profound implications. As such, this chapter focuses on teasing out some of the primary ideological underpinnings associated with the Spit, as urban nature, wilderness, waste land and novel ecosystem.

² Nohl’s (2001) emergent aesthetics are further explored in Chapter 6.

As open water filled into a wasteland turned urban wilderness, the Spit is host to novel ecologies, which offer an interesting avenue to explore various historically underpinning environmental imaginaries. It is also symbolic of how urban nature is deeply entangled with social and political processes (Ernstson, 2013), evidenced since the conception of environmental planning. Early urban environmental planning can be traced to the 19th century, propelled by key figures such as Ebenezer Howard and Frederick Law Olmstead (Daniels, 2009). Alongside the rise of industrial capitalism and urbanization, the aesthetic qualities of nature gained newfound importance, and their designs strived to integrate cities into the landscape. Ernstson & Sörlin (2019), note that nature had a “central and defining role in the history of major city planning ideas”, as evidenced by the work of Howard as well as Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier (Ernstson & Sörlin, 2019, p. 6; Fishman, 1982). While nature served a primary role in the design and planning of “ideal cities”, the focus was largely symbolic and heavily influenced by prevailing ideologies of nature that maintained it as something to be controlled, contained, and managed (Fishman, 1982). Across most Western countries, “the loss of nature, and traditional rural landscapes initiated movements of protection of monuments, sites, nature and landscapes” (Antrop, 2013, p.6). Ecology was not, however, centered within these designs, and such landscapes maintained a highly anthropocentric view.

It was not until the 20th century that landscape architect Ian McHarg established the scaffolding for what is now be considered urban ecological design. New consideration for ecological systems were then gradually included through urban planning processes (Daniels, 2009), and the protection of greenspace reached beyond recreational and aesthetic goals. Fung & Conway (2007) describe how greenways, largely in response to fragmented landscapes, began to include a range of both ecological and social objectives in southern Ontario during the late 1990 to early 2000s. Particularly in the context of Toronto, urban greenways have played a significant role in providing access to urban nature, with the ravine system alone contributing 11,000 ha of protected land (City of Toronto, 2020). Yokohari & Amati (2005) also offer considerable insight for restoring nature in cities through a comparative analysis of the Spit and a bird sanctuary in Tokyo. They contend that it is just important to understand the city within nature as it is to understand nature within the city, alluding to the importance of deconstructing typical binaries that maintain nature as something “out there” (Yokohari & Amati, 2005), ultimately deterring consideration for what is happening “right here”. The following sections grapple with some of the primary ideologies that underpin the Spit’s creation and legacy as simultaneous wilderness, wasteland, and novel urban nature.

One of the fundamental ideologies that underpin Western understandings of nature can be traced to settler perceptions of wilderness. Western concepts of nature and wilderness that were influenced by settler colonial ideologies that placed nature distinctly separate from humans. Wilderness was characterized as an area “untrammelled by man” (Rolston, 1997, p. 39), or as “those rare places on earth where one had more chance than elsewhere to glimpse the face of God” (Cronon, 1995, p. 10). Anthropocentric views of wilderness gave rise to the consideration of areas deemed not fit for ‘productive use’ as wastelands with no intrinsic value (Jorgensen & Tylecote, 2007). From this perspective alone, lines can be drawn to illustrate the impact of socio-cultural values of nature across the landscape.

The rise of wilderness preservation was heavily influenced by the sublime and notions of an empty and disappearing frontier. This ‘myth of the wilderness’ necessitates an absence of human intervention, influence, and existence. Eichler & Baumeister (2021) underline how various ontological assumptions underpinning the myth of the wilderness are “apiece with the genocidal logic of settler colonialism” and played a role in establishing early conservation movements. Similarly, others note that wilderness has a tendency to “obscure certain identities” (Angus, 2018, p. 63) in favour of others, and that the very notion of the frontier depends on erasure (Safransky, 2014). The frontier in an urbanized environment has been used to describe landfill sites, post-industrial ruins (e.g. Safransky, 2014) and wetlands ripe for restoration (e.g. Robertson, 2000), that are now focal points for rediscovery and redevelopment.

This is particularly relevant for the Spit as a landscape initially reclaimed by natural succession processes and supplemented through careful ecological management. Located on the periphery of the downtown, the Port Lands surrounding the Spit are also subject to rediscovery through current redevelopment initiatives. The production and creation of the Spit, the various visions for readaptation and integration into city planning objectives all allude to evolving perceptions of nature in the urban context. Only in recent decades, has the idea of urban wilderness achieved a place in environmental discourse and policy, destructing earlier notions of wilderness as fixed only beyond urban spaces and untouched by human influence. New understandings of nature in the city are unfolding. An optimistic view would suggest this is the result of growing awareness of the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world – or at least, recognition that there is nowhere left that is without human imprint. Others suggest that the emphasis on ecological resiliency, and the celebration of urban greenspace can obscure the implications of human action (Foster, 2022). Despite nature’s remarkable ability to overcome layers of human insult and injury, Foster (2022) aptly asks, “why create habitat that attracts wildlife to harmful settings?

What are the ecological achievements in producing contaminated or dangerous habitat?" (p. 27). These questions emphasize the need to critically consider urban ecologies and urban greening efforts more generally, as they detract and hide otherwise socially or environmentally unethical decisions.

Particularly in the context of transformed landscapes whereby places take on new meanings and understandings, landscape planners seek to identify ways "to enhance the human experiences of landscape patterns and ecosystem processes, which influence how nature is defined by a society" (Musacchio, 2018, p. 848). A central practice of this is urban greening. As deployed by De Sousa (2014), it refers to "to the preservation and development of parks and green spaces in cities, whether [as a] primary mandate of a project or a complement to another use" (p. 1050). The impetus for urban greening efforts can be linked to the rapid shift to an urban industrial economy during the early 19th century (De Sousa, 2014). As cities intensified and expanded, alongside growing awareness of the connection between human and environmental health, the need for "urban greening" and access to green space was heightened. Greening efforts have increasingly been applied to industrial or brownfield sites, largely driven by the increased demand for 'usable' land in close proximity to city centres. As such, there is a significant body of research surrounding the greening of post-industrial landscapes (De Sousa, 2014; Ruelle et al., 2013; Safransky, 2014). Related literature on void urban space (Hwang & Lee, 2019), "interstitial landscapes" (Jorgensen & Tylecote, 2007) and *terrain vague* (Kamvasinou, 2006) elucidate the emerging ecological insight that surrounds these otherwise 'unproductive' urban spaces. Laforteza et al. (2008) apply landscape ecological principles and examine visual preferences within the context of brownfield remediation, stressing the need for "special attention to ecological and visual preference effects because these areas are often derelict, undervalued, or misunderstood" (p. 258).

In a study of best practices on greening of urban post-industrial landscapes, De Sousa (2014) notes they are "most feasible" when various interests are met, including aspects such as habitat restoration, aesthetic enhancement, green infrastructure or simply reconnecting the site to the rest of the city (p. 1064). The 'multiple objective greenway' was also proposed by Searns (1995) who suggested "greenways are now meeting many urban design and quality of life objectives" (Chon & Shafer, 2009, p. 84). While benefits may appear plentiful, unequitable access and distribution of green spaces is widely acknowledged as an environmental justice issue (Byrne & Wolch, 2009; Wolch et al., 2014), exacerbated by processes that prioritize select interests held by exclusive stakeholders, raising questions of the right to the city, to borrow from Lefebvre

(1996). Others note the role of urban environmental imaginaries in excluding (via what is visible or invisible) certain socio-natural relationships (e.g. Gabriel, 2014), including the impact of “lingering colonial geographical imaginaries” and call for greater work centered at “the intersection of racism, capitalism and colonial legacies” (Safransky, 2014, p. 239). As found by Brownlow (2006, p. 227), “urban ecological change is locally understood as more an issue of social control than one of environmental concern”, referring to how structural racism can produce dangerous spaces that have a direct impact on human-environmental relations.

Many scholars have studied the effects of ecological gentrification that results through a “rediscovery” of these neglected spaces (e.g. Foster & Sandberg, 2014; Patrick, 2014; Wolch et al., 2014). Particularly in seemingly vacant and abandoned post-industrial spaces, it is critical to unveil the less visible uses that may fall outside the scope of institutionalized planning processes. ‘Urban wildscapes’ have been studied through a compatible lens that seeks to illuminate the distinct social processes and dynamics that have produced them. As both “term and landscape condition” (Sheridan, 2012, p. 201), research on urban wildscapes raises important questions related to the management of transient activities within abandoned or neglected spaces and their inclusion in formal institutionalized planning processes. Sheridan states, “indeterminacy provides a space for the self-determination of the occupant and allows them a less mediated and more direct relationships with the specific qualities of a place” (2012, p. 202). These informal, less visible practices and attachments to place are a critical component to consider through planning processes but difficult to capture for a variety of reasons. Participatory approaches to planning seek to ensure greater incorporation of local actors and voices.

Furthermore, Sheridan (2012) characterizes urban wildscapes as in flux, possessing a “quality of incompleteness” with “performative properties” that often evolve through more participatory processes compared to *tabula rasa* approaches to planning and ecological restoration (2012, p. 207). Heatherington (2012) examines the role of narrative in urban wildscapes where the story can be highly contested and certain stories buried. Foster & Sandberg (2014) reference the “staging of greenspace” (p. 1044) whereby histories of displacement, health hazards and old industrial scars are strategically hidden or removed. Schopf & Foster (2014) echoes this in the context of the Spit, whereby histories of destruction and displacement are obscured through both natural and cultural forces, a point further elaborated in Chapter 5.

Emergent discourse related to novel ecologies adds considerable insight to the complicated history of imagining nature within city spaces. Sometimes characterized as wildscapes, novel

ecological assemblages are challenging traditional perceptions of otherwise frequently disregarded landscapes. Challenging the historical notion of “pristine” or “authentic” nature, novel wilderness frequently lacks any historical indicators of ecosystem functionality or assemblage. ‘Wild’ is understood as “a state of existing in relative freedom” (Cantrell et al., 2017, p. 156) – in other words, living and existing autonomously. Collard et al. (2015) offer exceptional insight toward what they refer to as an “alternative path for multispecies abundance” (abstract), drawing inspiration from decolonial and postcolonial work that recognizes the ongoing effects of settler colonial violence. Along this path, some advocate for a wildness whereby “other-than-humans have wild lives and live as “uncolonized others”” (Plumwood, 1993, in Collard et al., 2015, p. 328), disfiguring notions of European imperialism and anthropocentric perceptions more generally. Prevailing human exceptionalism and Western knowledge systems, have encouraged dualistic thinking that maintains narrow and restricted understanding of species interconnectedness (Houston et al., 2018).

Waste sites are frequently spaces that come to host spontaneous nature, which challenge traditional definitions of worthy nature, and the notion that green space only occurs outside of the urban fabric (Yokohari & Amati, 2005). Urban wilderness areas are defined by Kowarik (2018) as “places characterised by a high level of self-regulation in ecosystem processes, including population dynamics of native and non-native species with open-ended community assembly, where direct human impacts are negligible” (p. 339). Gandy (2013) notes they are often characterized by “a multiplicity of ‘aesthetic worlds’”, that counter traditional aesthetics of nature (p. 1209). Similarly, Prior & Brady (2017) explore how rewilding as form of restoration renders particular aesthetic features, such as the unscenic and the ugly. In a study by Junker & Buchecker (2008), public perception of restoration efforts was positively influenced by the perceived naturalness. The resulting perceived ‘designedness’ or ‘managedness’ of an ecosystem has also been shown to impact psychological benefits (Colley & Craig, 2019), with others linking physical activity and use to ‘attractive’ park renewal efforts (Veitch et al., 2012). Spontaneity in self-dynamic landscapes also plays a role in what Nohl (2001) refers to as “the (new) sublime” visible through confusing or mysterious aesthetic efforts (p. 231). From this point, leaving an ecosystem to self-regulate may have a positive impact on how the landscape is perceived. According to Nohl (2001), irregular patterns or surprising combinations of landscape elements forces an engagement with the landscape perhaps alluding to new landscape aesthetics.

Research linking aesthetic preferences and landscape assessments to decolonial perspectives is difficult to find, and much of the literature has emerged from the Netherlands or Western countries. Gobster (2001) studied Montrose Point, a former landfill turned urban park in Chicago. Results from stakeholder surveys indicated four main visions of nature: *nature as designed landscape; as habitat; as recreation; and as pre-European settlement landscape* (Gobster, 2001). A different study by De Groot & Van Den Born (2003) examined landscape preferences in the Netherlands using four broad landscape types: (1) man-made landscape; (2) park-like landscape; (3) untamed, interactive landscape and, (4) experience of greatness and forces (i.e. the sublime). Also in the Netherlands, Buijs (2009) describes five “ideal types of images of nature” as a wilderness image, autonomy image, inclusive image, aesthetic image, and a functional image (p. 424). Others explore perceived naturalness across different images of nature, including wild, arcadian and penetrative nature (Robinson, 2001). These allude to variations in valuing different types of nature which ultimately influence political decisions and can have direct social outcomes.

Most notably, Gobster’s (2001) study demonstrates how the success of the restoration depends on the integration of diverse values, and “protecting the icons that [stakeholders] value most highly” (Gobster, 2001, p. 50). The concept of icons is particularly compelling in the context of novel urban wilderness as a place that presents a multitude of different meanings to different people. Gobster’s (2001) research emphasizes the importance of perception and understanding aesthetic preferences in relation to certain landscape features. Nohl (2001) explores how modern land use management, characterized by the creation of monotonous landscapes that lack a distinct place identity, narrative, and variety, risks an “aesthetical insensitivity” (p. 224). Sustainable land use that achieves a balance between the built and the natural environment, Nohl (2001) argues, will enhance landscape aesthetics. Elaborating on this point, he states:

“sustainable landscapes will contain many areas and places where nature can develop freely and spontaneously. Such parts of landscape can be very informative, even if the beholder has to work hard at getting the aesthetically relevant information through his senses. That means areas close to spontaneous nature let the beholder participate in perceptual processes, which may lead to a particular aesthetic attractiveness” (Nohl, 2001, p. 227)

This alludes to landscape perception as a relational practice and suggests that more intriguing landscapes elicit greater engagement with place, prompted by a sense of curiosity. This is

promising to consider in the context of the Spit, as a hybrid landscape that presents a confusing and perhaps conflicting sense of place.

Valuing spontaneous nature requires greater consideration for the nonhuman world. Foster (2007) equates aesthetic decisions with ecological ones, yet “aesthetic valuations are rarely based on the “needs” of non-humans” (p. 121), and aesthetic goals do not always align with ecological ones (Gobster et al., 2007). In what Hinchliffe et al. (2005) consider “boundary questions”, they question how nonhuman agency can better be incorporated through restoration efforts. In response to this deficiency, Hinchliffe & Whatmore (2006) explore the possibilities for “re-working the city as a living environment” (p. 124), in order to put nonhuman considerations at the forefront of planning decisions. Reimagining urban environments as living cities, they argue, enables a “politics of conviviality” (p. 125) that repositions people and nature, humans and nonhumans, along the same plane (Hinchliffe & Whatmore, 2006). This is echoed by Yokohari & Amati (2005) who emphasize the need to consider cities in the context of local and global ecological processes, and contend that in order “to restore nature in cities it is important to understand that alternative models of greenspace planning can exist” (p. 54). In advocating for “abundant futures”, Colliard et al. (2015, p. 328) add considerable insight in rethinking our multispecies entanglement, emphasizing the role of unsettling the colonial systems, frameworks and concepts that have gotten us here. Western knowledge, with its tendency to separate everything into neat categories, limits possibilities for new socio-ecological relationships (Houston et al., 2018; Plumwood, 2006). This problem is confounded in considering where, who and how knowledge is produced, exacerbated by global divisions of labour and asymmetrical recognition toward different knowledge systems (Connell, 2014). In considering how the practice of urban planning can better incorporate non-human considerations, Houston et al. (2018) argues we must acknowledge our multispecies entanglement, through notions of ‘connectivity thinking’ that reinforces our world as reciprocal, interconnected web of living, decaying, breathing, beings, things, and all that is between. Donna Haraway’s (2008) concept of *becoming-with* also offers an avenue to disrupt normative perceptions the human/nonhuman binary, to enable a more-than-human understanding (Houston et al., 2018). Houston et al., (2018) adds to this by asking, “what kinds of relationships and forms of life are x interested in taking up and where and how can our actions as planners respect or even enable this?” (p. 201).

Chapter 3: Aesthetics, Environment & Planning

Aesthetics in Planning

Aesthetics have played a prominent role in shaping our environments. Each phase of urban planning and design held very different beliefs around the 'ideal' relationship between city and nature that was reflected through landscape design and architectural features. In the late 19th century, urban planning philosophies culminated through the City Beautiful and Garden City Movements, both of which embodied certain aesthetic ideals and ideologies of nature. Gandy (2006, in Heynen et al., 2006) states, "the rise of the modern industrial city necessitated a refashioning of relations between nature and culture" (p. 64). The City Beautiful movement began in the 1890s with the intent of improving the quality of urban life that was sought to be declining in response to industrialisation, urbanisation, and poor sanitary practices. As N. C. Heynen (2003) states, "the movement sought to integrate European romantic sentiments of pristine landscape into US cities as a means of recreating past aesthetic values" (p. 983). Through an attempt to bring nature back into the city (N. C. Heynen, 2003), it often involved "the displacement of marginalized urban communities" (ibid, p. 984). Gandy (as cited in Heynen et al., 2006) considers the primary legacy of these movements as "the linking of landscape design and city planning ideals with burgeoning middle-class aspirations" (p. 67). Adding to this notion, Mittala (2002) explains how urban theorists like David Harvey, "have focused on the tendency of modernist physical planning to regard the aesthetics of urban form as a means to achieve certain social and moral objectives" (p. 132). Indeed, spatial planning and design is frequently used as a tool to achieve specific outcomes and enable particular urban futures to the exclusion of others. The physical landscape and its aesthetic representation may then be understood to symbolize a particular vision in time and space, reflecting dominant voices and political interests that shape environmental policy and practice.

In North America, aesthetic values entered the realm of environmental and resource management in the 1960s (Dakin, 2003). The aestheticization of landscapes have driven leisure tourism and outdoor recreation industries, launching new considerations for balancing diverse environmental interests. Certain ecological ideals are expressed through aesthetic preferences. Aesthetics have also intersected with heritage conservation and urban planning processes that seek to assess the visual impact of development and protect certain aesthetic values.

Aesthetics in planning is therefore highly political, as specific values are deemed more desirable than others, reinforcing existing structural ideologies often upheld by middle classes, or reflect asymmetrical power relations (Bonakdar & Audirac, 2020). Mattila (2002) explains how

aesthetic issues are frequently seen as separate from moral and cognitive standpoints, due to the false belief in aesthetic autonomy that permeates planning and design decision-making. Planning processes need innovative ways to ensure “aesthetic justice” is built into the production of spaces, rather than just focusing on the equal distribution of “good urban form” (Mattila, 2002, p. 132). Collaborative planning efforts that seek to include more voices and valuations early in (re)development processes can help achieve this. This is echoed by Dakin (2003) who calls for more participatory methods in understanding landscape perspectives and experiences, and Heynen (2003) who emphasizes the need to consider spatial externalities such as displacement and neglecting existing social values through greening efforts.

Our perception of the world matters for a variety of reasons. How we view the natural and built environment has the powerful capacity to shape attitudes, influence behaviour and satisfaction (Bosselmann, 2018; Lewicka, 2011; Stedman, 2002), and can help determine the winners and losers of environmental decisions. Environmental aesthetics can influence whether we perceive a place to be enjoyable, awe-inspiring, or safe and can encourage or inhibit curiosity and wonder. Conversely, they can lead us to view a place as dangerous, uncomfortable, dirty, or exclusive. They can also impact our overall quality of life (Mattila, 2002) through access to safe or aesthetically pleasing spaces. Environmental aesthetics contribute to a sense of place through establishing a distinct place identity, sometimes referred to as a landscape character (Ode et al., 2008), and can lead to strong or weak place based attachments.

There are a wide range of methodologies to understand perception of landscapes. They typically fall under expert or public perception-based methods (Daniel, 2001). Expert-based assessments are typically conducted by professionals and represent a top-down approach. The aim may be to quantify certain landscape features to understand visually-sensitive areas, as was done first by the British Columbia Ministry of Forests in the late 1990s (Dakin, 2003). In perception-based assessments, “landscape is considered to be a perceptual stimulus or source of visual information to which humans respond” (Dakin, 2003, p. 3). This is supported by Gobster et al. (2007) who considers the concept of the ‘perceptible realm’ to be the most meaningful scale to study perception, as it is the space where we respond to and transform landscapes. There is growing emphasis in the literature that supports the experiential perception of places (Gobster et al., 2007; Heft, 2018; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015), and calls for more situated understandings of every day experiences (Bieling et al., 2014; Dakin, 2003).

Studies of place were informed by geographers such as Kevin Lynch (1960), Yi-Fu Tuan (1991, 1974) and Edward Relph (1997), who contributed to early understandings of cognitive

environmental design research. Lynch's (1960) *The Image of the City* contended that individuals read the environment through various physical cues, hence a reliance on landscape's early focus on materiality. Phenomenological approaches to landscape (e.g. Relph 1976 and Tuan 1974), emphasize the role of experiencing landscape through physical presence and the senses. More-than-representational theories of landscape recognize the importance of considering the seemingly insignificant. To quote Lorimer (2005), "the focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions" (p. 84). More-than-representational theories emphasize the importance of what has not yet been perceived, by individual agency or resulting from social, cultural, and political processes that either allow or restrict certain interactions with the landscape.

Many suggest that the focus on materiality of a landscape negates the relational function of environments. In other words, perception is not static, but is dynamic, evolving and shifting as we move about in the world, touch and turn towards sights and feel various emotions. It also neglects the concept of affordance in experiencing environments. Heft (2010) considers affordance as the "perceptible properties of the environment that have functional significance for an individual" (p.19), emphasizing the subjective nature of aesthetics. Aesthetics and their visual representation, however, still play a fundamental role yet should be considered just one element or mode of analysis among many.

Aesthetic perception varies across individuals and can be influenced by emotions, history or attachments with a specific feature or landscape, along with pre-existing knowledge and expectations. The aesthetic landscape depends on both narrative and poetic elements that in turn establish perceptions, feelings, and the construction of individual place meanings (Nohl, 2001). Childhood memories have also served as motivators for ecological citizenship (Foster, 2009), and the 'intensity' of childhood experiences with nature can influence the degree of biophilic attitudes later in life (Robinson, 2001), in turn perhaps leading to aesthetic preferences around perceived ruggedness or naturalization, for instance. Not all environments may elicit positive experiences, and greatly depend on age, abilities, socio-cultural disposition. For instance, a study by Buijs et al. (2009) found landscape preferences differed significantly between immigrants from Islamic countries and Dutch-born residents, emphasizing the importance of culture on preferences. From this stance, environmental perception is hugely relational in that it is a "dynamic, reciprocal relationship between perceiver and environment"

(Gibson, 1979; Heft, 2010). This emphasizes a need for landscape aesthetic preferences to be understood in the context of the place itself, to incorporate a broad range of participants, and to favour *in situ* methods for conducting research. While there is profound merit in non-representational theories, this paper is more concerned with its discursive representation through images on Instagram.

Social Image-Making

Aesthetics also play an important role in both place-making and meaning making. Cities have increasingly relied on their aesthetic representation to market themselves as compelling tourist destinations or to stimulate economic and population growth, particularly in a globalized world. In turn, urban development processes frequently transform landscapes into “conduits” for “economic and symbolic capital”, through which “value is produced through aesthetic experience” (Rothenberg & Lang, 2017, p. 1). Rothenberg & Lang (2017) argue that aesthetic experience plays an important role in “legitimizing and contesting power and politics in the modern and postmodern world” (p. 2), emphasizing the need to critique representations of place, and their symbolic meaning. The image-creating process is frequently problematized through the literature, for being exclusionary and reproducing existing class and social struggles (Madureira, 2013; Rothenberg & Lang, 2017), and for responding to global rather than local interests (Bonakdar & Audirac, 2020). Madureira (2013) examines how aestheticization of the built environment drives place-making and image creation. Others note a significant discrepancy between the projected image and the image perceived by visitors (Sun et al., 2021), alluding to the continuous distancing between the image and reality (Raad, 2021).

The “destination image” is an important concept for both tourism and recreation planning, which can have direct implications for environmental planning, ecological protection, conservation and in (re)producing discursive representations of nature. As considered by Sun et al. (2021), “destination image refers to the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination” (p. 1). Similarly, Raad (2021) refers to the “collective vision” in exploring the impact of visual imagery on landscapes, noting how it influences our experience of a place well before we even visit. The collective vision, Raad elaborates, “is separate from the real experiences of individuals. However, as time goes on, the collective vision ends up influencing people’s experiences and even altering memories” (2021, p. 103). In some ways, this caters to the critique of representational landscapes for being “entirely mimetic” in that they “activate prior knowledge about the represented place” (Nesbit & Adesope, 2006, p. 418). Drawing on a study by Albers and James (1998) that examine the role of picture postcards and sight-seeing, Mike

Crang (1997) states that “a structure of expectation is created, where the pictures circulating around sights are more important than the sites themselves” (p. 361). There is also a prevailing tendency to appreciate certain scenes over others, in favour of the picturesque or the “instagrammable” (Arts et al., 2021). The legacy of different environmental imaginaries³ and visions of nature, is also particularly useful here in considering visual representations of places within their originating historical and cultural context. One can also consider how nostalgia for certain ideals has led to the exclusion of alternative representations of landscape (Raad, 2021), often leaving little room for new aesthetic possibilities.

In the digital age, technology increasingly mediates how we interact with the world around us. Digital photography alone has played a significant role in how landscapes are seen, and conversely reproduce particular relations through what is visible. Social media continues to pervade contemporary life, and photographs on social media are deeply embedded within social, cultural, and ideological contexts. Studies have used photographs on social media, often referred to as user-generated-content, to understand cultural ecosystem services (Oteros-Rozas et al., 2018; Richards & Friess, 2015), recreational patterns (X. P. Song et al., 2020), aesthetic quality (Havinga et al., 2021), affective attachments to parks (Sim & Miller, 2019; Y. Song & Zhang, 2020) and destination image building (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020; Zasina, 2018). Crang (1997) explores how popular photography is more than mere representation, rather is a *practice* that moves beyond just ‘gazing’ at a particular sight or landscape. The notion of photography as an embodied practice is also echoed by Larsen & Urry (2011), who add “gazing is not merely seeing, but involves physical movement through landscapes, cities and sights, aesthetic sensibility, connecting signs and their referents, daydreaming and mind travelling, and embodied practices capturing places and social relations photographically but also touching, smelling, and hearing objectives of the gaze” (p. 1115). Godfrey (2020c) also examines how the process of photography is “a process of making values, knowledge and histories” (p. 36).

Photographs then, as a form of visual discourse, involve a degree of aestheticization of the landscape and its features. For Instagram in particular, research examining the motivation behind posting photos contends they are frequently done for intrinsic or extrinsic factors (Sim & Miller, 2019). According to S. P. Smith (2021), “Instagram incarnates the tourism industry’s visual imperative” (p. 605), and their research examines the proliferation of the promontory

³ See Chapter 2

witness motif on Instagram. In describing their findings, S. P. Smith states, “[i]n its contemporary enactment, latent ideologies of possession foster the commodification of the landscape, enabling it to be brandished on social media in the pursuit of social and material capital” (p. 620). Through the aestheticization of certain landscape features or scenes, Instagram affords users the social incentive of accumulating “likes” and receiving additional social engagement. Popular imagery that is aesthetically pleasing or awe-inspiring evolves into normative aesthetic preferences, expressed through hegemonic visual preferences. Considering the promontory witness S. P. Smith (2021), also helps understand digital photography as a performance. The typical scene involves a single person, positioned atop a mountain peak peering out towards an empty wilderness, towards a landscape entirely void of other human influence or activity. In doing so, it evokes a certain visions of nature enabling both human and ecological erasure, a sense of emptiness and separateness from or domination over the natural world. Conversely, mediated forms of nature, including visual representations have a profound impact on how we interact with the natural world (T. E. Adams, 2005). Arts et al. (2021) add another layer in considering how technologies themselves shape our experience. They consider Bruno Latour’s notion of ‘scripts’ to explore “how technologies as artefacts *‘invite particular actions while discouraging others or even rendering them impossible’*”, adding that “by design, technologies are ‘inscribed’ with particular purposes or affordances” (p. 1246).

Despard (2015) inquires whether Instagram might disrupt “processes of visual homogenization and produce alternative points of view” (p. 2). Despard (2015) focuses on the unintentional narrative that Instagram photographs can afford, asking: “what might we see differently – of that content, or the landscape that afforded it – if we refuse access to the photographer’s intentions, or recourse to a single “use” or genre of photography?” (p. 5). In other words, what can we see when we look beyond what is obviously represented, or is hidden between the lines?

Complementary to this line of thought is the notion that “so much ordinary action gives no advance notice of what it will become” (Lorimer, 2005, p. 84). Superficially, a photograph may be a simple capture of a moment in time – but over time, through reproductions of certain scenes and imagery, they leave lasting effects. While photographs convey a great deal of social and cultural insight, it is critical to consider what is not represented. Anne Godfrey (2020a) explores how meaning is made through the process of photography, and emphasizes how landscape photographs are interpretations of place, “not visual copies” (p. 63), emphasizing a distance between the real and what is photographed.

The potential risks, however, extend beyond limiting understandings of a place. The literature also problematizes the negative role technology plays on the field of conservation as well. W. M. Adams (2019) explores the role of digital technologies on non-human lives, critiquing the role of technology in enabling surveillance, spectacle, and commodification of non-human lives. Live-streams of wild animals for instance, “erode authentic experiences of non-human nature” (p. 342) in favour of insincere displays. Curated images and videos distort realities while furthering a distancing between humans and non-humans, by positioning certain beings as subjects, and others as “neutral” observers. Especially given the social nature of social media, images can be reproduced across broader scales with further reach, rendering any implications more consequential (Arts et. al, 2021).

Part 2

Chapter 5: The Leslie Street Spit

Toronto, also known as *Tkaranto/Aterón:to/Tsi Tkarón:to* roughly translates from Mohawk to *over there is the place of the submerged tree, or trees in the water* (Bolduc et al., 2021). It once housed one of the largest freshwater marshes on Lake Ontario, described in 1794 by Elizabeth Simcoe as “low lands covered with rushes, abounding with wild ducks and swamp birds” (Waterfront Toronto, n.d.). Toronto is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples. Indigenous peoples have lived in Toronto for over 11,000 years – artefacts found around the Leslie Street Spit specifically date to 7,000 years ago (Freeman, 2010; Evergreen, 2020). In the early 1600s, Toronto was a frequent stop along trade routes, with more larger settler occupations beginning in the mid 1900s. The growth of Toronto, then the Town of York, was largely enabled through the Toronto Purchase Treaty, No. 13 in the late 1700s. It was forged between the Mississauga’s of the New Credit First Nation which, in the eyes of the Crown, surrendered 250, 830 acres of land from the Mississauga’s (Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, 2017). There were many concerns pertaining to the validity of the agreement and a century later, the Government of Canada provided monetary compensation for the claim. Despite the fact that Toronto is located on Treaty No. 13 lands, there is a broad denial of Toronto’s settler colonial history and troubling narrative that from this point forward, Indigenous people “vanished” from the area (Freeman, 2010). Toronto is however home to a large, marginalized, and resilient urban Indigenous population despite the following emphasis on European settler history.

For most of the 1900s, “the city and lake were as one; the harbour was an integral part of the city’s fabric” (Jolliffe, 1988, p. 341) and the early marshes provided a rich environment for sustenance and settlement. A variety of important developments took place that enabled the eventual separation of city from the water, and the continuous transformation of the Lake Ontario shoreline. Both planned and accidental circumstances have led to its current state, as is exceptionally the case for the Spit. The following section will provide a brief historical overview of the Spit’s construction in order to understand its spontaneous evolution, tracing its progression from lakefill to urban wilderness.

What was once a marshy landscape was gradually transformed through industrial activities. The Port Lands were once “experienced and imagined as a diseased landscape” (Bonnell 2014, p. 25), as sewage and pollution were dumped into the lake and the Lower Don River. Fears of “lake fever” and malaria prompted negative perceptions of the landscape, and ultimately planted the seed which would inform land use decisions for the next century (Bonnell 2014, p. 24). Intensifying use of waterfront lands and concerns over a lack of available space, led to the first lake-filling processes in the 1850s (Waterfront Toronto). This marked the beginning of the lake-filling era, a practice that extended well into the late 20th century. While not an exclusive practice to Toronto, the eventual use of construction and demolition material for lakefilling projects became a defining attribute of its contemporary shoreline (Creba & Hutton, 2021). Equated frequently to a ‘spatio-temporal fix’, Desfor & Vesalon (2008) illustrate how “labour and capital literally transformed an earlier form of socio-nature into a new and different fixed form”, requiring “large-scale and radical forms of nature-society interactions” (para. 12). This form of ‘industrial nature’ (Desfor & Vesalon, 2008) was crucial in the creation of Toronto’s waterfront. Lakefilling was used to provide more land for industrial uses, enabled the extension of port operations, and supported new industrial economies while physically altering the natural landscape.

The urban landscape of the late 19th to early 20th century underwent innumerable transformations. Rapid growth, industrial expansion and the emergence of rail were accompanied by new opportunities and pressures. The introduction of the Grand Trunk Railway in 1856 posed considerable implications on landscape connectivity, with lasting effects. Particularly for the waterfront, it visually and physically separated it from the central urban area (Jolliffe, 1988). This was exacerbated further with the construction of new highways, including Lakeshore Boulevard and the Gardiner Expressway (Jolliffe, 1988). These barriers separated the water from the rest of the city (Jolliffe, 1988), furthering the focus on the inner urban core while relatively disregarding the peripheral. The late 19th century waterfront was faced with a

number of emerging concerns. Sewage and demolition waste continued to be dumped into Lake Ontario, and the nearby feeder tributary, the Don River, which led to increasing awareness over hygiene and urban sanitation practices (Stinson, 1996). Eventually, connections were made between Lake Ontario and the city's drinking water, which would later prompt changes to acceptable composition of lakefill material and waste dumping, but pressures for more 'usable' land and a focus on making the harbourfront economically viable largely trumped other concerns at the time (Desfor & Vesalon, 2008).

The Spit's landform is entirely created from lakefilling practices, a legacy of the Toronto Harbour Commission (the "THC"), later known as the Toronto Port Authority. The THC was established in 1911, with the intent of creating an organization focused on the harbour and waterfront development, primarily through attracting new industries. Its predecessor, referred to as the harbour Trust, predated confederation and after growing dissent with its ability to maintain and foster an economically viable industrial port, the THC took its place (Eidelman 2013). The board was comprised of representatives from the City and the Board of Trade. As noted by Desfor & Vesalon (2008), the THC wound up at the "centre of contested processes of shaping and reshaping Toronto's waterfront since its establishment" (n, p.). THC was given the power "to acquire, expropriate, hold, sell, lease and otherwise dispose of such real estate... as it may deem necessary or desirable for the development, improvement, maintenance and protection of the harbour" (Government of Canada, 1911, as cited in Sanderson and Fillion, 2013, p. 113). Many harbour commissions across Canada were enveloped under federal jurisdiction by the 1930s, with THC being one of the few remaining without complete federal control (Merrens, 1988; Sanderson & Fillion, 2013). As opposed to other harbour agencies, the THC avoided federal control until the 1980s. Over the THC's lifetime, it created over 800 hectares of new land formations through lakefilling (Desfor & Laidley, 2011), and acted largely as a development agency, managing waterfront lots (Merrens, 1988). Harbour commissions across Canada were "instrumental in shaping both the physical form and the land-use functions of urban waterfronts" (Merrens, 1988, p. 92), with many port cities still undergoing revitalization work, with efforts to reconnect and re-integrate industrial waterfronts back into the urban fabric and public realm.

The shape of Toronto's contemporary shoreline is largely the legacy of THC's Waterfront Development Plan of 1912. The entirety of the Port Lands district was constructed under the guidance of this plan – converting more than 1,300 acres of marsh into new land formations (Eidelman, 2013). The plan proposed multiple uses, and was "designed to create shipping facilities, industrial and commercial lands, and parks and recreational amenities, all served by

improved transportation and transit services” (Merrens, 1988, p. 95). Efforts to amend the plan were made in the late 1920s with the intent of substituting parkland for additional industrial and port use. The rationale here was simply in favour of profit, with the lead engineer acknowledging the initial inclusion of parkland was merely to “enlist public support for the costly program” (Merrens, 1988, p. 96). This emphasizes the values and intent of the THC, as it was primarily driven by economic interests. Misguided anticipation of growth in the shipping industry fuelled the THC’s unwavering belief in the need to expand port operations. The lead engineer, Edward Cousins, was a key advocate for expansion through constructing a new headland that would protect the outer harbour (Merrens, 1988). This headland would become the Leslie Street Spit.

Despite initial negative responses to the idea, construction on the Spit, began on an ad-hoc basis in 1965 (Merrens, 1988), and was created as a barrier to protect the inner harbour, while also meeting the needs for an expanded shoreline disposal program. The Eastern headland was formed first, followed by the peninsulas on the north side of the main spine (now referred to as Spine Road) in 1973-74 (TRCA, n.d.). Debris from construction sites across Toronto were shipped to the Spit, as well as dredged material from the lakebed of the Lower Don and Keaton Channel (TRCA, n.d.). In its peak construction, approximately 6,500,000 cubic metres of sand and silt were dredged and dumped, with the sand establishing various lagoons and future holding cells (TRCA, 1989). Excavated material from subway tunnels and demolition debris from slum clearing within the downtown also contributed to the new landform (Schopf & Foster, 2014).

Lakefilling was loosely regulated until the 1970s, and a broad array of material was considered suitable at the time. As noted by Creba & Hutton (2021), the evolution of what was considered acceptable lakefilling practices “expresses changing ideas *about* the landscape” (p. 356), and a growing awareness of the impacts of human activity on ecosystems. In the 1970s, the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement was enacted and effectively put an end to dumping contaminated dredgeate directly into the lake—which was a daily practice until this point. Dredging occurred to maintain shipping channels and prevent possible flooding around the harbour. Due to its close proximity, material from the mouth of the Don River and the Keaton Channel was routinely deposited at the Spit. The harbour required creative solutions to continue the lake disposal program while acting in accordance with the new agreement. Containment cells, three of them in total, were constructed at the Spit which now permanently house various toxins and heavy metals. Today, 2 out of 3 containment cells have been capped with clean-fill to accommodate wetland habitat creation and public use. With a restored wetland at the surface, it

is near impossible to discern the historical environmental choices that resulted in confined toxic waste below. Wetlands on containment ponds symbolize new environmental imaginaries⁴ unfolding at the Spit: a nature that leaches on nature's resiliency to morph the material outputs of industry and urban development processes. The ethical concerns for creating habitat in contaminated spaces has been called into question, though not loudly enough (Foster, 2022). There is a rising undercurrent of thought that expects nature to solve all of our problems, but at what cost? The lasting effects of contamination and prolonged exposure on the ecologies of the Spit is still unfolding. In 2000, the Leslie Street Spit had the highest concentration of brominated diphenyl ether (Penta-BDE) in the Great Lakes (Foster, 2022). Studies found high concentrations in non-migratory Herring gulls (de Solla et al., 2016; Norstrom et al., 2002), and other anthropogenic debris in cormorant populations (Damian & Fraser, 2020), raising ethical concerns for encouraging wildlife to occupy post-industrial spaces. The emergence of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement certainly shifted practice toward the lesser of two evils, but waste dumping at the Spit continues to this day.

The TRCA refined the lakefilling practices at the Spit, including outlining appropriate sources and added critical considerations for shoreline construction. This was evidenced by Schopf & Foster (2014) whose archaeological study of the Spit confirmed differences in material structure across zones that were constructed within different time periods. They discovered household remnants at the Spit that were traced to slum clearing practices within the city (Schopf & Foster, 2014). The construction of a new urban form resulting from the destruction of another is frequently cited in critical histories of urban development processes. This example of "creative destruction", popularized by David Harvey (2001), posits demolition as "an inevitable process for new development within a capitalist system" (Creba & Hutton, 2021, p. 350), in order to create space for the accumulation of wealth. The concept of urban metabolism is evidenced here, in considering how the flow of material moved from the urban center out to the Spit, transforming "fill material" into something new – in this case, initially just a means to generate profit – and then providing new functions and spaces for consumption. This cycle of simultaneous destruction and creation reverberates across the urban fabric, demonstrating how the flows of material and power continuously produce and reproduce urban spaces (Keil, 2005; Quastel, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2009). The Spit symbolizes frequently hidden narratives related to urban

⁴ The notion of environmental imaginaries refers to the different ways in which society has imagined nature over time (P. Walker & Fortmann, 2003).

renewal strategies, evidenced by the remnants that lay bare the uneven impacts and untold histories associated with early city building processes (Foster, 2022).

Eidelman (2013) identifies three distinct eras in Toronto's waterfront planning, each marked by notable comprehensive plans and (largely failed) implementation strategies. This is complemented by Bélanger (2009) who suggests understanding contemporary infrastructure is "best revealed through a series of failures and accidents" (p. 80). It is precisely these failures and accidents that led to the creation of the Spit, followed up by more intentional ecosystem and place-based management. The following paragraphs will provide an overview of the main events which shaped the Spit, with a view to emphasize the implications of shifting social and political perspectives and environmental values.

The 1967 Waterfront Plan for the Metropolitan Toronto Planning Area (the Metro Plan), and the 1968 Bold Concept defined the first era of waterfront planning, both largely pre-occupied with changing today's central harbourfront and justifying the need to create a new headland. The Metro Plan (1967) was proposed by the City after four years of consultation across various agencies and levels of government. Interestingly, it stressed the need for flexibility to account for unpredictable factors. It supported the creation of the new Outer Harbour, through the "constructive" use of waste material including solid industrial and demolition wastes, dredged materials, garbage and incinerator residues (Metro Plan, 1967). The plan emphasized the 'good sense' economic opportunity in using excavated "material from the downtown building boom" (Metro Plan, 1967, p. 30) and maintained industrial uses across the Port Lands. Shortly after the release of the Metro Plan, the THC published *A Bold Concept for the Development of the Central Waterfront* (1968), a report that endorsed the Metro Plan and added details for a "Harbour City", a large-scale development within the central harbourfront. For the first time, THC's plans for the waterfront were challenged as land ownership complexities came to light. The province owned the land that the Bold Concept had proposed to develop and was more interested in finding a suitable location for an airport.

The Spit was noted as a potential area for the airport, which raised significant citizen opposition. It fuelled the creation of advocacy groups, such as ForWard 9 that would lead to Toronto's urban reform movement (Hopkins, 2016). The planning system at the time was influenced by modernist principles that favoured expert-based, top-down approaches to development. As noted by Brushett (1999), "Toronto was also caught up in the widespread belief that post-war prosperity lay in the powers of scientific and centralized planning" (p. 46). The public was, on principle, excluded from planning practice and decision-making at the time. ForWard 9's

success was infiltrating the otherwise top-down, expert-based, elitist planning process and securing a spot for a representative at the planning committee meeting for the proposed airport (Hopkins, 2016). As stated by Tom Hopkins (2016), it was “a move that set a precedent and would cement the integration of citizen participation in Toronto urban planning decisions for generations to come” (n.p.). This symbolized the burgeoning role of public advocacy for the Spit, particularly as its contribution for the shipping industry was increasingly skepticized. Indeed, a 1969 report by the Department of Public Works evaluated shipping trends and conditions and affirmed there was no need for new facilities (Merrens, 1988). In 1969, Toronto’s freight shipping traffic had peaked, and the industry slowed due to technological shifts and changes in how and where things were produced. Despite decreased shipping activity, the lure of industry expansion and profits preserved THC’s commitment to the headland and the Spine Road, the primary landform of the Spit, continued to extend south into Lake Ontario through the 1960s.

From 1970s onward, a few important milestones occurred. At the time, there was still relatively low levels of vegetation appearing between the construction detritus and dredged silt. As the Spit’s future was no longer tied specifically to port operations, new futures could be imagined. In 1973, the province granted authority to the TRCA to develop a parks master plan for 160 hectares of the Spit. The rest would remain for filling operations, until the lease between the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry and the Port Authority expired. During this time, a variety of proposals were explored, with most resembling what Burley (2020) notes as “the standard package of perspectives for its “improvement”” (p. 158). Potential uses for the Spit included an amusement and aquatic park, a housing development, a casino, a marina, and a factory complex (Kehm, 2020). Meanwhile, the Port Authority began to permit organized bus groups on Sundays sanctioning public access to the Spit for the first time (Foster, 2022). A total of 2300 people visited the Spit through these events, prompting increased public access the following year for cyclists and pedestrian access (Foster, 2022). There was growing public attachment to the Spit, as visitors grew akin to the “feral aesthetic” (Foster, 2007, p. 122). In 1975, there were 152 different plant species on record (Yokohari & Amati, 2005), all the while the Spit saw roughly 500 dump trucks a day (Higgins et al., 1992).

With more vegetation, various bird species began to flock to the Spit, and the 1980s marked a notable transformation in the eyes of the public. The spontaneous arrival of migratory birds and novel ecological assemblages have been cited for enabling new interpretations of the landscape (Rodríguez-Giralt et al., 2014), and prompting greater public engagement (Leino et al., 2017). This was certainly the case for the Spit, whereby attachments to burgeoning flora and fauna

inspired political action and engagement with planning processes. The Friends of the Spit spearheaded movements to “let the Spit be” to protect the emerging ecologies. In 1982, it received its first means of protection as a provincially designated Environmentally Significant Area (“ESA”) due to the growing presence of birds. The arrival of nesting gulls, terns and night-herons helped earn the ESA designation that now extends to the entirety of the Spit (TRCA, 2021). Thankfully, due to the abundance of vocal and committed interest groups and challenges faced by fragmented management of the Spit, planning processes were slow and allowed for emergent ecologies to flourish (Higgins et al., 1992).

As nature thrived, TRCA’s initial plans for potential park uses did not. A coalition group was formed to advocate for nature at the Spit and protect it against proposed detrimental uses. The plans envisioned extended marina uses, sailing clubs and an educational centre, all of which were finally rejected in 1989. Largely inspired by broader waterfront planning failures, the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront provided recommendations for the Spit which helped shape its future. The Royal Commission recommended that “the Leslie Street Spit be recognized and protected as an urban wilderness park” (Government of Canada, 1989, p. 160) and, ultimately, this is was the course taken.

The TRCA released a revised Master Plan and Environmental Assessment for Tommy Thompson Park shortly thereafter, that would prioritize the principles of natural ecological succession (MTRCA, 1989). By the 1990s, the Spit had evolved into an important habitat for nearly 400 species – some of which were regionally quite rare, spread across a range of habitats, including “meadows with a mix of grasses and wildflowers; forests, woodlands and thickets characterized by a mix of trees and shrubs; beaches, sand barrens and dunes formed by concrete slabs; wetlands; and aquatic habitats of submerged and floating vegetation” (Foster, 2022, p. 9). Through the 1989 Master Plan, further controls were placed on visitors, restricting visitation from late May to early July – with no additional controls placed on lakefilling and dumping activities. It also protected the ongoing presence of the Aquatic Park Sailing Club, a private recreational marina situated within the inner harbour of the Spit. Members of the club also enjoy unrestricted access to the Spit as it functions as the only entry point to marina. Apart from the dump trucks and park staff, members of the sailing club are the only other vehicles permitted in the park. These differentiated levels of access reflect ongoing, perhaps ironic priorities of the Spit, that are less acknowledged and problematized. It also symbolizes one of the core challenges in contemporary environmental planning which navigates between political

pressure, constantly evolving demands, users and (often conflicting) interests, alongside rising uncertainty related to socio-political and ecological processes.

Today the Spit is widely acknowledged as a refuge for both humans and wildlife alike, in part due to natural succession and intentional habitat restoration by the TRCA. The promontory nature of the Spit, as it extends 5 kilometres into the lake, contributes to the sense of detachment from urban life. From the shore, the only two access points are located at the baselands, making the Spit a prime site for unsanctioned activities. There are no dogs or swimming permitted the Spit, despite some photographs which suggest otherwise. Vehicular access is also restricted to authorities, and members of the Aquatic Park Sailing Club. The fragmented ownership and management of the Spit, enables behaviour that operates in the grey area between clear land uses. Certain spaces are more designed in the traditional public realm sense, with built infrastructure and signage, while other accessible areas are less visible and managed. It is easy to find an off-beaten path that is already well trodden. If the entirety of the Spit were a wilderness preserve, perhaps there would be greater awareness and respect for the ecological values of the landscape. TRCA manages and owns Tommy Thompson Park that is 247 hectares in size. The Outer Harbour East Headland and Endikement are owned by the Ministry of Natural resources and Forestry, managed by the Toronto Port Authority and the baselands that connect the Spit to the Port Lands are owned and managed by the City of Toronto. The multi-jurisdictional nature of the Spit is not unlike the rest of the waterfront, which has been challenged by overlapping municipal, provincial and federal powers and priorities.

The Spit extends southward into the lake from the Port Lands District, an area considered to be one of the largest urban renewal projects in the city. The Port Lands Flood Protection project will effectively bring the marshes back to Ashbridge's Bay and will be raising most of the land out of the flood plain. The project includes constructing new landforms, naturalizing existing and introducing new flood control measures to transform the landscape from previously industrial to mixed use residential uses, with parks and new public infrastructure. Plans to develop the area project a net-new residential population between 16,500 and 30,000 along with 75,000 new jobs (Toronto, 2021), signalling forthcoming pressures to the Spit.

In the last few years alone, the Spit has been gaining popularity and attention – through films and documentaries, the public press and published books, to using the Spit as scenes on movie sets. The COVID-19 global pandemic reaffirmed the important role as urban green space for residents. In 2020, trail counters were installed at the park and recorded approximately 286,500 visitors (Toronto, 2021). Recent enhancements through naturalization works, an improved trail

network and new park infrastructure have all helped build the Spit's appeal. People experience the spit on foot or by bike, to explore the trails, exercise and spend time in nature. Birders and cyclists constitute a large proportion of visitors to the Spit, with other groups joining educational programs or running events that make use of the wide, flat Spine Road. Tensions do exist between visitors that expect all other uses to align with individual preferences—perhaps out of the desire to protect their own attachments to the Spit. Other conflicts arise where uses pose threat to wildlife and their habitats. Speed bumps were installed along the Spine Road to deter cyclists from speeding too quickly to notice basking snakes and other wildlife scurrying across the road. In opposition to the bumps, the cyclists attracted the attention of a local councillor claiming the speed bumps “are throwing cyclists off their ride” (Nickle, 2022, para. 1). In many directions, the confrontation between humans and nature at the Spit is palpable. The conflict also calls to question which way the scale is tipped for humans and wildlife at the Spit—to prioritize recreational desires or habitat promotion and protection.

It is difficult to speak of the balance between humans and nature at the Spit without also touching on the cormorants—a particular bird species that frequently makes local headlines. As they nest in the trees, their guano creates a near-apocalyptic, barren scene through extensive damage to the physical structure and soil chemistry of surrounding areas (Dorr & Gelder, 2017). They began nesting at the Spit in the 1990s and have since developed into the largest colony of double-crested cormorants in the Great Lakes region. The TRCA has since played an active role in trying to strike the delicate balance between their presence, other species needs and human perceptions. Managing abundant wildlife has long been a point of contention for resource managers, particularly as problems intersect with human values and issues become more politicized. The aesthetic effect of cormorant nesting has brought their existence into the political eye, reflecting the ways in which aesthetics matter for non-human lives and how “non-human actor's situational power” can facilitate greater human engagement (Leino et al., 2017).

Cormorants have traditionally been viewed as quite beautiful, appreciated for their wildness, but as one journalist notes, they “are less beautiful on land” (Scrivener, 2009, para. 1). Public concerns over the loss of forest habitat led to the creation of the Tommy Thompson Park Double-crested Cormorant Management Strategy (TRCA, 2015). Its development included the creation of a Cormorant Advisory Group, comprised of experts, academics, and other interest groups. The Strategy aimed to “achieve a balance between the continued existence of a healthy, thriving cormorant colony and the other ecological, education, scientific and recreational values of Tommy Thompson Park” (TRCA 2015, p. 4). The response to cormorants

symbolizes how non-human actors “play an active role in mobilising the socio-natural circulation” (Syngedouw, 2006, as cited in Leino et al., 2017, p. 134).

The role of the public and their attachments to the Spit have played an undeniable role in its evolution. The coalition groups that formed to advocate to “let the Spit be” in the 1970s planted the seed for greater stakeholder engagement and public consultation. Many formal processes have since evolved, including the Natural Area Advisory Committee (1998-1992 and beyond, informally), the Tommy Thompson Park Advisory Committee (2002-2011), and the Tommy Thompson Park User Group (2011-2020). More recent public engagement efforts have been to understand human uses at the Spit and to enhance the overall visitor experience.

The Rubble to Refuge Project

The Rubble to Refuge project was established to bring clarity and focus to historic and contemporary research on the Leslie Street Spit, and to inform park planning strategies that contends with evolving ecological and social circumstances. It is a joint partnership between York University’s Faculty of Urban and Environmental Change and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, to carry out multidisciplinary research methods that have so far included *in situ* interviews, data from motion cameras, site surveys and an online survey. A Pilot Study was conducted in 2018 which elucidated some key preliminary visitor analytics that affirmed the need to further investigate people-place dynamics at the Spit. With the demonstrated and anticipated growth in visitation rates, pressures arising from urban development and unpredictable weather events such as increased flooding and high winds/waves, the Spit’s future is not wholly certain. There is a critical need to understand how people interact with the landscape today, including where they go, what they do, how they visit and what they appreciate, in order to ensure a future that is both ecologically and socially sustainable. This research presents a novel way of studying the Spit, particularly as a form of unsolicited stakeholder engagement that operates outside of institutionalized planning processes.

Chapter 6: Instagram Analysis

In the context of rapid urban regional transformation and concern over the quality of environments we inhabit, there is a growing need to ensure more collaborative methods in urban planning and decision-making. Social media is increasingly recognized as an effective tool for crowdsourcing information and enabling participatory approaches to urban planning. As defined by Patsy Healey (1997, 2012), collaborative planning refers to planning processes that reflect more democratic forms of governance and prioritize local contexts and diverse values. In

the late 1960s it emerged in response to growing concerns of existing democratic paradigms that were overly technical and elitist (Healey, 2012). Rather than viewing planning as a means to an end, it posits planning practices as communicative action that involves “making sense together” and envisioning new possibilities with and for the public (Healey, 2012, p. 342). The degree to which the public is involved in planning processes has long been critiqued. Sherry Arnstein’s *Ladder of Citizen Participation* (1969) was foundational in delineating how various participation strategies elicit different relations of power, ranging from citizen control and delegated power to manipulation and nonparticipation. Who is involved, how and when public participation is conducted and through what means, remains a central topic for debate. Particularly in resource constrained communities or for projects that lack political interest or investment, effective community engagement is frequently lacking. Despite the political context, planning decisions have direct spatial and social implications that cannot be overlooked. Finding innovative ways to include community perspectives and values that are sensitive to local contexts, should therefore be paramount.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Flickr, Twitter and Facebook have been used as an interactive channel to engage with the public and facilitate more effective exchanges of information and input (Guerrero et al., 2016; Linders, 2012). Salmons (2017) describes how researchers may use existing data, elicit data through questions or observations, or generate new data through facilitating engagement events. The benefits of using social media data lie in its ability to expand beyond conventional demographics of participation methods, often requiring less human and financial capital (Chen et al., 2018; Yoshimura & Hiura, 2017). It is frequently used as a method to understand behaviour and sentiments connected to a certain time and space. In doing so, social media content can lend invaluable information to planning processes. It has been used across many contexts, including to enhance understandings of cultural heritage (Nummi, 2018), interactions with urban parks (X. P. Song et al., 2020), aesthetic qualities, mapping cultural ecosystem services (H. Lee et al., 2019), and is merited for its role in conservation planning (Minin et al., 2015).

As stated by Healey (1997), “any exercise in environmental planning requires an understanding of the diversity of the way people live in places” (p. 100), and this includes intangible values that are associated with specific spaces in time. Instagram has been cited as a repository for place-based memories and experiences (Nummi, 2018), and can be considered an invaluable source for unveiling every day, insider experiences of place. Flickr is more commonly used in the literature but is associated with higher quality photographs rather than everyday “phone grabs”

(Manikonda et al., 2014). Instagram is a mobile app that allows users to take, edit, upload photos and videos and add captions all within the platform. It allows users to interact with others through different engagement tools like sharing, liking, or commenting on photographs. It also deploys tools like “tags” where you can connect photographs to specific place names or geographical locations, through adding a mention (“@”) or a hashtag (“#”) to content. With roughly one billion monthly active users, it is one of the leading social network platforms in the world (Dixon, 2022).

Sheldon & Bryant (2016) found the four primary motives for using Instagram were learning about others, documenting experiences, self-representation and expressing creativity. Despite its widespread use, of course it appeals to certain demographics over others. They also confirm that “one’s social and psychological circumstances influence media use and effects” (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), underscoring a need to consider who is using Instagram, and how⁵. Narcissism is frequently cited alongside Instagram use (Ibrahim, 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). As explained by Ibrahim (2015), “self-representation in the era of [technological] convergence is complex and extends into the screen cultures where the economy of looking entails consuming oneself on-screen and constructing the self through the digital economy” (p. 51). Gender is shown to influence motivation for posting on Instagram (Huang & Su, 2018), and 58% of Instagram’s users are female (Nguyen 2016, as cited in Gray et al., 2018). Furthermore, 61% of Instagram users are between the ages of 18 and 24 (McLachlan, 2022). In Canada, Instagram is the second most used platform following Facebook (Global Statistics, 2022). Oteros-Rozas et al. (2018) also found that content varied between Panoramio and Flickr, indicating different uses and motivations are associated with different platforms.

As this research is inspired out of concern for a growing disconnection between humans and the environment, it is also important to recognize the impact social media has on experiencing place. As noted by Arts et al. (2021), visual technologies have a long history of mediating human behavior, where the focus becomes “on detachment and (visual) consumption, rather than an embodied ‘inhabiting’ of the landscape” (p. 1253). Increasingly, the impetus to visit certain places is split between a desire to truly experience nature with an urgency to share on social media channels (McNamara, 2021). The influence of social media on travel decision-making is widely shown, and Instagram in particular has a significant impact on destination creation branding (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020). S. P. Smith (2021) furthers this to link

⁵ An abundance of literature surrounds the psycho-social effects of Instagram, and may be referenced for additional context (e.g., Su & Huang (2018); Sheldon & Bryant (2016); Yu et al. (2013); Larose et al. (2001)).

Instagram with self-branding and demonstrates how the application perpetuates the commodification of landscapes. As a performative act to achieve a distinct public image, sharing content on social media offers meaningful insight for both the perception of place (X. P. Song et al., 2020), and broader relationships with nature (e.g. Falton, 2021; Smith, 2021) highlighting the potential contribution of this research approach.

This portion of the research was conducted in the following phases:

- 1) Data collection
- 2) Coding
- 3) Content Analysis
- 4) Interpretation of Results

Data Collection

The first phase involved collecting the data from Instagram's platform. The "Tommy Thompson Park" geo-tag was used to filter images, and a similar approach has been used in other studies across different social media platforms (Boy & Uitermark, 2016; D. Lee, 2020; Shelton et al., 2015; Yoshimura & Hiura, 2017). This geo-tag was chosen as it had the highest number of photographs tagged to it. Additional photos of the Spit certainly exist outside of this geo-tag, therefore this is not an exhaustive review of all content associated with Spit. Rather, it is a sample of photographs, generated by users who chose to link their publicly available photographs to the geographically linked location. Within Instagram's search function, photos are displayed in chronological order from newest to oldest posts, allowing for a generally contiguous sample of photographs. The data was retroactively retrieved on February 11, 2022 to August 11, 2022. This resulted in a total of 2,046 photographs that were screenshotted and saved into a Microsoft Excel database. Only the photographs were saved, with no personal or account information, text-based captions or tags recorded.

Coding

The literature on landscape aesthetics demonstrates an extremely wide array of techniques and approaches to coding visual material. In 2009, Sevenant & Antrop (2009) noted the absence of a comprehensive framework for photographic landscape assessment, and this remains true today. Some focus solely on biophysical features (Langemeyer et al., 2018) or broad categories of landscape features and structure (Tveit, 2009), while others use spatial predictors of aesthetic enjoyment, including hiking and cycling infrastructure or cultural attractions (Tieskens et al., 2018). Some excluded the presence of wildlife (Oteros-Rozas et al., 2018) or more place-

based considerations that do not speak to place specific character. As “icons” have proven to hold important symbolic value for people’s attachments to places (Gobster, 2001), more place-based considerations have been included here to account for the Spit’s unique landscape elements and ecological features. This also helps to achieve a fundamental concept of collaborative planning to incorporate a broad array of values, interests, and perspectives into planning processes, but specifically informed by place, for place.

Similar to Kaußen (2018), this research uses an open-coding method that was done in stages, and formed based on information about the phenomenon itself. As found by Lutz and Collins (1993), the quantification of photographs allow for the “discovery of patterns that are too subtle to be visible on a casual inspection and protection against an unconscious search [...] for only those which confirm one’s initial sense of what the photos say or do” (as cited in Rose, 2001, p. 55). Considering this, a reflexive process was undertaken to identify categories throughout the coding process. As image attributes were uncovered, they were grouped into similar categories used by Richards & Friess (2015), but adapted for this study. Table 1 provides a description of each category, along with their corresponding image attributes that were used for coding. Appendix A provides some examples photographs for each image attribute.

Table 1. Categories and Image Attributes used for coding photographs.

Category & Description	Image Attributes
Nature appreciation <i>Photographs that primarily depicted wildlife or plants or abiotic features</i>	Wildlife (mammals, reptiles, insects, etc.) Sunrise/Sunset Snow/Ice Macro Plants (up-close images)
Recreation <i>Photographs that primarily depicted people, bicycles, or boats</i>	People Bikes Boats Trails (formal and informal)
Infrastructure <i>photographs that primarily depicted park infrastructure</i>	Red Bridge Park Infrastructure (signs, buildings) Spine Road
Historical <i>Photographs that primarily depicted traces of the Spit's industrial past</i>	Remnants (bricks, rebar, sculptures and art) Lighthouse
Landscape <i>Photographs that primarily depicted a wider view and did not focus on a specific feature</i>	Urban Lakeview/Shoreline Meadow/Open Vegetation (trees, low-lying vegetation, flowers) Wetland

During the coding process, I discarded all photographs that were indiscernible (i.e. poor quality), were clearly duplicated or not accurately geo-referenced (i.e. it was clearly not a photograph of the Spit). Each photograph was manually coded based on the predominant attributes represented in the photograph. Up to 4 categories were associated with each photograph, cognizant that the “primary object” is not necessarily the centre or focal point of the image (Schlieder & Matyas, 2009). Some photographs resulted in only one attribute code. For instance, if the image is an up-close portrait of an owl, it would only be coded under *wildlife*. If the photo had bikes and people within the frame, only bikes were included so not to overly dilute the data. Photos coded as *people* include groups, individuals walking, running, posing, or sitting, leaving the rest of the landscape in greater focus, rather than their recreational activity.

Content Analysis

Once all data was coded, a full systematic review was conducted to ensure data was as accurate and consistent as possible. All raw data was moved to a separate spreadsheet for a full analysis and photographs were stored separately, but frequently referred to. Inspired by Tieskens et al. (2018), a fundamental assumption of this research is the potential correlation

between the quantity of photographs associated with a particular category and their aesthetic appreciation. Photographs frequently do capture something or someone that has caught the photographer's eye. No intention or evaluation of quality is conducted in this case, rather it is assumed that uploaded photographs represent features that are aesthetically pleasing. Other research has proven this to be a viable method (Langemeyer et al., 2018; Richards & Friess, 2015; Tieskens et al., 2018). This analysis attempts to identify some of the key contributing attributes of the Spit's landscape character and is intended to be descriptive rather than normative. Landscape character is understood as the "distinct, recognizable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape that makes on landscape different from another" (Swanick 2002 in Ode et al., 2008, p. 90).

As with all qualitative research studies, there are inherent limitations. Particularly in regard to the data collection, there is the potential that certain images were not taken at the Spit or incorrectly geo-referenced. This is more likely the case for photographs that exclusively include people or wildlife that I was not able to clearly identify as 'outside' the Spit. Many other studies also include a geographical layer of data to map individual photographs, however given the nature of the data accessible, no further geo-reference is available apart from the "Tommy Thompson Park" location tag. Instagram used to afford researchers the ability to download geographical data associated with the images, but due to API and privacy changes, this was no longer an option.

To respect privacy and confidentiality, this study did not capture any information related to individual Instagram users. Some studies of social media photographs have found their sample was overly saturated with content provided by individual users, effectively distorting a "collective" image (Schlieder & Matyas, 2009). Many also emphasize the role of photographs as merely brief, superficial representations of a sliver in time (Heft, 2010). Others note critically, how representation can "distance the image from reality" (Raad, 2021, abstract), and question how social media can be used as a method for unintentional surveillance of users interests and movement patterns (Despard, 2015). These limitations are critical to consider and attempt to be lessened through providing critical discourse around aesthetic representation and its obscurities.

Data & Research Findings

A total of 2,046 photographs were posted to the Tommy Thompson Park geotag between August 22, 2021 and February 11, 2022. This geotag was the most popular of all those

associated with the Spit. Of the 2,046 photographs, 119 were deemed inaccurately assigned the Tommy Thompson Park geo-tag, were indiscernible, or were not photographs and were removed from the analysis. This resulted in 1927 photographs that were used in this analysis. A total of 2,820 codes were assigned with an average of 1.46 codes per photograph, as some photographs were coded to multiple attributes (e.g. an image at sunset of the urban skyline would be coded as *Sunset* and *Urban*).

Table X. illustrates the distribution density of the image attributes. The five most frequent image attributes were *urban* (444 photos), *wildlife* (409 photos), *people* (343 photos), *lakeview/shoreline* (327 photos) and *sunrise/sunset* (307 photos). The least occurring attribute was the *lighthouse* (6 photos).

Table 2. Most popular image attributes in order of most to least occurrences.

Image Attribute	No. of Photos
Urban View	444
Wildlife	409
People	343
Lake/Shoreline View	327
Sunrise/Sunset	307
Snow/Ice	215
Remnants	142
Bikes	135
Meadow/Open Vegetation	112
Wetland	72
Macro Plants	65
Red Bridge	62
Park Infrastructure	49
Spine Road	47
Boats	46
Trails	46
Lighthouse	6

The *nature appreciation* category was associated with 996 photographs. Of these, photographs that included *wildlife* were the most frequent (409 photos) followed by *sunrise/sunset* (307 photos), *snow/ice* (215 photos) and *macro plants* – up-close images of vegetation (65 photos). Most of the time, photographs were exclusively of wildlife, with little else captured within the frame. Images of wildlife were most frequently associated with *snow/ice* (3%), *lakeview/shoreline* (2%) and *sunrise/sunset* (1%). Within the wildlife category, various bird species were photographed, including colonial waterbirds (i.e., cormorants and gulls), raptors (i.e. owls and hawks), waterfowl (i.e., swans and ducks), and other shorebirds and songbirds. Mammals such as coyotes, rabbits, foxes, and muskrats were also depicted, along with invertebrates (i.e., butterflies), reptiles and amphibians (i.e. turtles and snakes).

The *Recreation* category included a total of 640 photographs. Of these, photographs that included *people* were the most frequently shared (343 photos), followed by *bikes* (135 photos), *boats* and *trails* (46 photos, respectively). Photos of *people* were most frequently cross-coded with *snow/ice* (82 photos), *urban* (69 photos), and *lakeview/shoreline* (66 photos).

The *Infrastructure* category included a total of 158 photographs. This category included park operations and built infrastructure such as signs, the main road, visitor service buildings, and the Red Bridge. Of these, the most frequently cited attribute was the *red bridge* (62 photos) and was most commonly cross-coded with *people* (25 photos) and *bikes* (20 photos). *Park infrastructure* (49 photos) included buildings, signs and other aspects of the park's wayfinding. The *Spine Road* was the least coded attribute of the category (47 photos) and was most frequently cross-coded with people (28).

The *Historical* category included 148 photographs, coded when *remnants* of the Spit's industrial heritage (rebar, bricks) were prominently featured in the frame. *Remnants* were captured within 142 photos, and most closely cross-coded to *lakeview/shoreline* (28 photos), *people* (16 photos) and *snow/ice* (14 photos). The *lighthouse* was coded to 6 photos, that included *people* and *bikes* (4 photos) with the rest focused solely on the structure.

The final category, *landscape*, accounted for the second highest attribute density resulting in a total of 955 photographs. This accounts for images that do not focus on one specific thing, rather represent a broader view of the landscape and may include *recreation*, *infrastructure* or *nature appreciation* attributes as well. In sum there were 444 photos coded as *urban views*, 327 photos coded as *lakeview/shoreline views*, 112 photos coded as *meadows/open vegetation*, 72 photos that primarily included *wetlands*. Photographs with *Urban views* and *lakeview/shoreline*

were most frequently cross-coded with *sunrise/sunset* and *people*.

Table 3. Relative proportion of photographs assigned to each category.

Category	Attributes	Proportion	
Nature appreciation	Wildlife	14%	35%
	Sunrise/Sunset	11%	
	Snow/Ice	8%	
	Macro Plants	2%	
Recreation	People	12%	20%
	Bikes	5%	
	Boats	2%	
	Trails	2%	
Infrastructure	Red Bridge	2%	6%
	Park Infrastructure	2%	
	Spine Road	2%	
Historical	Remnants	5%	5%
	Lighthouse	0%	
Landscape	Urban View	16%	34%
	Lake/Shoreline View	12%	
	Meadow/Open Vegetation	4%	
	Wetland	3%	

Analysis & Discussion

Photographs of the Spit reveal some important considerations for aesthetic representation, preference, and general landscape character. The overall assumption is that the occurrence of certain image attributes is a proxy for appreciation. As recurring elements and patterns in the landscape, these attributes are integral to the Spit's landscape character. The primary results of this study demonstrate that views of the urban skyline and of wildlife are the two most frequently shared images of the Spit, emphasizing the Spit's multivalent appeal and hybrid character.

Photographs of the skyline portray an iconic urban landscape. The fascination with the city skyline may be caused by the tendency to appreciate familiar scenes (Chen et al., 2018), or because Instagram is "used first and foremost by urbanites", it has a greater representation of urban environments (Zasina, 2018, p. 214). Photos are frequently taken during sunrise or sunset, with dramatic light and cloud formations that portray Toronto's skyline in a very celebratory way. The juxtaposition of Lake Ontario against the dense swath of buildings is

reminiscent of the picturesque aesthetic ideal, with a very clear fore, middle, and background. The CN tower, a symbol of urban competitiveness, is frequently positioned at the center of the frame and portrays a sense of ambivalent grandiosity, towering above the lake and surroundings. From this common vantage point, limited to the outlines of the urban form, there is little trace of what the city is really like. It portrays a distanced, simplified view of an idealized city that is in harmony with its surroundings—a balance between city and nature. Considering many visitors appreciate the Spit for the feeling of being immersed in nature, it is ironic that the city then becomes the focal point, even if just for a moment in time. Perhaps some feel comforted by the obvious distance between them and the urban centre, adding to the feeling of remoteness at the Spit. However, by looking out and across the water to downtown, it positions the Spit as outside of the city, engendering particular affective responses and perceptions of the Spit's ecology. If the city is "out there", and nature is "here" (at the Spit), it is easier to avoid acknowledging and confronting the urban, social and economic forces which continue to shape the landscape. This is problematic for the Spit and other forms of post-industrial nature that are entangled within urban processes and require contextually attuned responses. For visitors, however, focusing on the city may offer some relief from the cognitive dissonance that the Spit elicits as a form of socionature. Other studies also demonstrate the presence of buildings and other built infrastructure alongside natural elements actually enhance landscape aesthetics and appreciation (Langemeyer et al., 2018), alluding to the potential for greater internal appreciation of the Spit despite the focus on the buildings beyond. The popularity of sharing the skyline also reaffirms Toronto's idealized image as a waterfront city and demonstrates Instagram's potential in producing its "destination image", emphasizing the platform's contribution to place making.

The prevalence of wildlife photographs confirms the importance of the Spit as an urban wilderness habitat, and as a space to appreciate many different species of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and invertebrates. Most of the wildlife photographs primarily depicted birds, confirming the Spit's role as an important destination for birders. This is important considering tensions between visitor uses, as different users seek different experiences and uphold different expectations both for visitor use and behaviour, as well as park management. While there was no tracking of bird-specific photographs, the quantity was significant, denoting a large user-group. The prevalence of wildlife photographs also emphasizes its potential contribution to wildlife education.

The prevalence of wildlife photographs also emphasizes its potential contribution to wildlife education, while also raising concerns from the perspective of habitat and species protection.

While interest in different species is certainly positive, interacting with wildlife without prior knowledge of behaviour, needs, or habitat sensitivities can pose a risk to their protection. The quest for “instagrammable” photographs can also drive visitors to ignore concerns related to safety, ethics, or etiquette. Given the social nature of Instagram, sharing rare species exacerbates risks even further through publishing locations of otherwise hard-to-spot species to a very wide audience, encouraging visitation.

The prevalence of wildlife photographs also critically illustrates the role wildlife play in attracting people to the Spit. The nonhuman actors of the Spit shape the relationship between people and the environment through fostering greater attachments, different land uses, and adding new pressures to the landscape. As was found by Foster & Sandberg (2014) and Leino et al. (2017), non-human actors play a significant role in shaping post-industrial landscapes, particularly as decisions are made as to which form of nature should be preserved and which should be removed. Ecological restoration at the Spit seeks to maintain and enhance natural succession processes, in recognizing the value of its spontaneous emergence. It was not however, until the 1970s that citizen groups advocated for the Spit to evolve naturally, in part due to growing attachments to the emergent ecosystems.

Leino et al. (2017) reframe understandings of a waste pond as an artefact, to illustrate how the pond actually “mediate[s] human action” (p. 135). Applying a similar approach here, the Spit can be considered as an artefact that “actively co-shapes the events around us”, and “affects human-world relations by giving shape not only to peoples actions but also their experiences of the surrounding environment” (Leino et al., 2017, p. 137). The physical structure of the Spit inspires people to interact with the surroundings in a particular way, to confront curiosities raised by unique assemblages of rusted steel rebar, worn porcelain and wildlife habitat. While we first created the Spit, the landscape has and continues to effectively shape us.

Both in Leino et al.’s (2017) case and at the Spit, the unplanned arrival of colonizing bird species led to increased public attachment and shifted the ways in which the landscape was seen and eventually used. The presence of spontaneous vegetation and then wildlife led the public to view the Spit in a different light and to imagine new futures both as public green space, and as important habitat creation, enhancement, and protection. On the one hand, the nonhuman actors have been quite successful in securing protection. On the other hand, considering the continued use of the Spit as a dumping ground with spatially fragmented plans and visions across the extent of the peninsula, along with uneven public and private access, the dominant narrative of mixed-industrial-wilderness-park maintains that human values preside.

The high levels of appreciation and engagement with wildlife at the Spit however, suggests alternative futures may be forthcoming as evidenced by dominant visual representations. As more visitors become attached and engaged with wildlife at the Spit, there may be greater engagement and therefore, ability to influence sociopolitical processes that shape land use decisions. This emphasizes the potential contribution of Instagram to non-human ecologies, through providing a platform to share and inspire particular affective responses that shape behaviours and lead to concrete actions on the ground.

While the presence of people in photographs is ranked third in frequency, this alludes less to aesthetic preferences and is more reflective of the nature of social media itself. Instagram, as a social platform, is frequently used for posting 'selfies', activities, and memories to connect with others. Rather than an aesthetic preference, this also shows how the ability to socially engage at the Spit is highly valued. The fact that people are so frequently captured in photographs also reflects Instagram's tendency to cater to intrinsic motivations. Photos are performative, reflecting one "version" of reality - a curated view of both behaviour, self, and setting. As noted by S. P. Smith (2021), there are specific image compositions that have gone viral, including what they refer to as the promontory witness: "that of one or two individuals gazing outwards, often from an elevated viewpoint, at an awe-inducing landscape" (p. 605). S. P. Smith (2021) attributes this to social media specifically, but this arguably can be traced back to cultural representations of the sublime and notions of human domination over nature more generally. Think, the-late-1800s -tight-rope-walkers-over-Niagara-Falls, or landscape photographs by Ansel Adams (1902-1984) and Peter Henry Emerson (1856-1936), that shaped and were shaped by perspectives on human-nature relations. Dunaway (2005) recounts the powerful ways in which images shaped environmental reform, affirming how Americans "looked to images to understand the meanings of their landscape" (p. 16). Historically, landscape photography has had a considerable role in shaping the ways the Western world views nature. Photographic means may have changed today, but their ability to influence our collective vision remains (Raad, 2021).

While in the context of the Spit, discursive representations of nature are more nuanced, the positioning of nature within (or outside) the frame matters as imagery is continuously produced and reproduced, forming part of the collective vision (Raad, 2021). As noted by Raad (2021), "as times goes on, the collective vision ends up influencing people's experiences and even altering memories" (p. 103). If what is represented by an image is what is valued, and particular cultural representations are continuously produced, it limits the possibilities for alternative

values that in turn, reinforces what Raad (2021) refers to as “a myopic dominant narrative” (p. 104). As an example, Raad (2021) explains how “scenes of the pastoral and wilderness prevail over neglected Indigenous and other alternative, suppressed conceptions of the landscape, as well as over scenes representing the effects of industrialization” (p. 105). While user-generated captions and the true intention behind sharing images used in this study are unknown, the findings show less focused engagement on the historical attributes that have made the Spit, turning away from the less scenic or uglier traces of its past.

The industrial remnants and areas undergoing ecological restoration work such as wetland enhancements, are less portrayed in the images. Photos of remnants accounted for 5% of the images. Photos that do primarily depict remnants include sculptures of rebar and brick, up-close images of colourful assorted rubble and larger pieces of construction debris jutting out of the shoreline (see Appendix A for examples). The lower occurrence of remnant imagery may also be indicative of a cultural aversion to waste. The less attractive, troublesome, or uncharismatic elements of a landscape are examples of what Saito (1998) refers to as “unscenic nature”⁶ that may evoke negative reactions and emphasizes how aesthetic appreciation is highly subjective and evokes moral considerations.

The relatively low number of photographs directly depicting industrial remnants may also be due to the method of compositional analysis used. As noted by Schlieder & Matyas (2009), “the primary object, judged by the esthetic criteria of photographic composition, needs not to be the object on which the image is centered” (p. 216). If a photograph depicted a shoreline that was relatively distant in the background, the details of the rubble may be appreciated by the photographer, but not recorded in the research. Images of remnants may also be less prevalent as they increasingly blend into the landscape, succumbing to natural succession and restoration efforts. This is one of the major challenges in manually analyzing photographic samples of this size. Careful attention was paid in order to let the photographs speak for themselves. It is for this reason the total amount of codes attributable to any given photograph were capped at 4, despite the average codes assigned were 1.46.

While not a specific category on its own, the depiction of water was a perhaps the most prevailing image attribute. Prevailing scenes included open views of Lake Ontario and the shoreline, reaffirming the Spit’s role in providing important access to the water. The presence of water is noted as a significant contributor to imageability (Ode et al., 2008), and the occurrence

⁶ Saito’s (1998) exploration of unscenic nature is further explored later on.

in Instagram photographs confirms water is an important element of the landscape character. There was not an enormous amount of differentiation between lake-oriented photographs, with some including images of people, their bikes carefully positioned in front of the lake, or simply photos of the shoreline with no sign of people around. There was a dominant landscape imagery that positioned the water and the sky uniformly within the frame. From this view, it portrays an image of the Spit almost akin to any other beach along Lake Ontario's waterfront. Industrial monuments and other traces of the past have come to characterize Toronto's harbour (Stinson, 1996), but by positioning the frame a certain way it effectively masks signs of human intervention along the shoreline or directly into the lake, by strategically leaving evidence of human activity outside of the frame. The pattern of image attributes frequently shows no sign of human influence at all – whether in the distance or in the periphery. Photographic sight, as explained by Schlieder & Matyas (2009), requires two spatial choices: the point of view from which the photograph was taken, and the choice to include certain objects over others. As echoed by (Godfrey, 2020b), "the act of photographing is an act of selecting... photography shows, but the very act of framing also takes away, removes and abstracts" (p. 10). In this context, what is left out of the frame are the more sensitive ecosystems at the Spit, people who use and rely on the Spit for both shelter and sustenance, and species beyond those that are captured through the image sample. It is challenging to infer the purpose of the visit, or any information regarding the users and their degree of appreciation for certain aesthetics or features of the Spit. Instagram offers some insight, but certainly not the full picture.

Other more place-based elements of the Spit including the Spine Road, the Red Bridge and the Lighthouse were considerably less represented than expected. Bikes occurred more frequently than boats perhaps due to the land-based nature of the park experience. Both the Spine Road and the red bridge were most frequently cross-coded with people and bikes – an expected outcome given bikes are not permitted along the recreational trails that follow the shoreline, and the Spine Road directs most users to the bridge. This is also affirmed by the 2018 Rubble to Refuge Pilot Study that found visitors most frequently travelled to the Spit by car or by bike. The fact that so many photographs were taken at dusk and dawn was surprising, considering the hours of the park are restricted. While not officially included in the analysis, there were a number of photographs that included dogs, firepits and swimming at the Spit – all of which are not technically permitted. This alludes to the reality of many visitors likely experiencing the park in unsanctioned and undocumented ways. Considering their prevalence in the data, vantage points that offer views of the urban skyline and the lake may face increased visitor traffic across all times of day, and consideration for this may help inform future park designs.

Specific to the landscape category, it is interesting to note how meadows and wetlands were significantly less represented in the data. Collectively, they were represented in 184 photographs compared to shoreline, lakeview and urban views that were represented in 771. As the prevailing imagery centers on the iconic, this suggests the less picturesque examples of nature are not as appreciated. Saito (1998) emphasizes how the longstanding appreciation for the picturesque has led to an over-appreciation for scenic nature, and support's Raad's (2021) assertion that Americans hold a myopic valuation of landscapes. Elements of the natural environment which are beautiful and interesting often correspond with those that are appreciated, protected, and preserved. As noted by Saito (1998), "those environments devoid of effective pictorial composition, excitement, or amusement (that is, those not worthy of being represented in a picture) are considered lacking in aesthetic values" (p. 101). The lower occurrence of meadows and wetlands in the imagery implies they are less aesthetically valued. In order to distance from solely visual determinations of aesthetic values, Saito (1998) emphasizes the role of being physically immersed within nature. The rhythm and flow of visitors at the Spit may influence how aesthetics are perceived, or entirely missed. Cyclists move quickly along the Spine Road, slower foot traffic may turn around after a few kilometres (not making it to see the wetlands or the "inner" ecosystems), and visitors on foot tend to remain along the shoreline. As stated by Arnold Berleant, "perceiving environment from within, as it were, looking not *at* it but being *in* it, nature ... is transformed into a realm in which we live as participants, not observers" (as cited in Saito, 1998, p. 107). Cycling down the Spine Road, visitors may appreciate the wetland for a fleeting moment, only to stop for the final iconic reward: views of wide-open Lake Ontario and Toronto's urban skyline. Meadows and wetlands are generally located between the road and paths, primarily visible "on the way" to see the water's edge and rendering them as "ancillary" aesthetic objects. In order to help build appreciation for the unscenic, communicating the importance and intrigue of natural elements may increase aesthetic valuations (Saito, 1998). Environmental education and interpretation at the Spit then becomes critical in encouraging emergent aesthetic ideals.

To further problematize these results, wetlands may attract visitors already attuned to appreciating the natural environment and may be those same users who post wildlife or photos of vegetation. Photos of wetlands were the least likely to include other attributes in the frame. Photographs of wildlife may, however, have occurred within a wetland, the primary confirmable scene would have determined the coding. For instance, a swan may have been on the open lake, or within a wetland with no discernable trace between the two. Another noteworthy finding is the number of photographs taken in the winter. While the 2018 Rubble to Refuge Pilot Study

found that most visitors reported not visiting during the winter, a surprising number of photographs depicted snow and ice. Some of these photos were associated with a single running event, but many included images of birds, animal prints, the shoreline and people walking through the snow. Many focused on how the ice formed around pieces of rebar and other remnants on the beach.

It is difficult to discern what types of values are most represented through these images. A visual analysis alone cannot make this determination, but it could be inferred due to the occurrence of attributes. Ecological values may be the most appreciated despite the prevalence of urban-oriented views. Rather than viewing “the City as opposed to the Spit”, on a rudimentary level, perhaps the popularity of city views demonstrates a growing awareness of the interconnectedness of the two. As a form of industrial or socio-nature, the Spit is a product of the City’s “urban engine”, overcome by natural processes and protected by shifting socio-political values (Coelho, 2018). One view is perhaps not more or less natural than the other, rather symbolizes the hybridity of urban natures. The Spit is literally built upon the rubble of the City: does that make it any less natural? Appreciating the distant buildings from the shoreline also, in some convoluted way, pays homage to the buildings that were demolished in the face of urban renewal. City today, wilderness tomorrow.

There is no doubt that the Spit is poetic. It elicits a sense of awe and wonder and requires some degree of cognitive work to understand the landscape (Nohl, 2001). It is a unique landscape, with a distinct sense of place. The frequently occurring image attributes presented here are likely strong contributors to the imageability of the Spit, defined by Ode et al. (2008) as, “the ability of a landscape to create a strong visual image in the observer and thereby making it distinguishable and memorable” (p. 97). The notion of imageability has roots in Kevin Lynch’s (1960) notion of *legibility* that proposed people perceive environments through elements like landmarks, points of interest and boundaries (Powell, 2010). Imageability can help make a place memorable. In their literature review, Ode et al. (2008) found there to be two primary indicators of landscape character, which can lead to imageability: (1) spectacular, unique and iconic elements; and, (2) viewpoints. Considering these indicators in the context of the Spit shows that very strong imageability is derived from viewpoints, but also from those that contribute to the spectacular, iconic scenes. Namely, the presence of water, unique features of the landform and ecosystems, and the historical elements arising from industrial scars and ongoing port operations. The array of different structures and seemingly conflicting formations at the Spit, prompts other considerations for emergent aesthetic perceptions. Based the Spit’s “unusual

patterns of spontaneous, wild nature...self-dynamics and self-productivity” alongside a “chaotic multiplicity of (apparently) disintegrated elements and structures mostly of technical origin”, the Spit represents aesthetic categories of “the (new) sublime” and “the interesting” (Nohl, 2001, p. 230). As opposed to “the beautiful” which presents an orderly narrative, the new sublime and the interesting require cognitive work to understand “the order behind the things” (Nohl, 2001, p. 233). Despite historical plans and visions that sought to change the unconventional aesthetics of the Spit, this proves there is hope for an emergent aesthetics that provides space and care for spontaneous, post-industrial nature to flourish.

Notes for Future Research

Looking to Instagram images provides some insightful understandings of aesthetic preferences and dominant representations of the Spit’s landscape character. This information can help inform future park management plans and design interventions, particularly related to protecting viewpoints and effectively communicating the story of the Spit. Using images on Instagram proves to be an effective approach to understand the aesthetic appreciation for the Spit. It is however, just one dimension—and while it “minimises the expert-led steer” (A. Scott et al., 2009, p. 416) in soliciting data, meaning is derived from multiple dimensions, including “visual, lifestyle, professional, action, social, sensory, and personal”⁷. Future research should consider adding other dimensions to a visual analysis that directly engages with the ways in which landscapes are multidimensional (A. Scott et al., 2009).

The results show visual analysis can be complementary to traditional survey’s and in-person interviews, as was highlighted in considering the 2018 Rubble to Refuge Study Project results⁸. Using Instagram also targets a different audience. The Pilot Study found that the largest visitor age group is between 40-60 years old. Considering Instagram’s user profiles are typically well below this range, Instagram provides insight beyond what can be collected through traditional means of engagement. Not only does it help broaden the scope of participants, but it provides an innovate way to collect information that is directly linked to the place in question.

As landscapes continue to change, so does our experience of them. In a society increasingly reliant on mobile technology, social media platforms play an undeniable role in contemporary culture. The production and exchange of visual information is a central element of contemporary society, further asserted by Thomas Mitchell (2002) who states “to live in any culture is to live in

⁷ Refers to previous citation.

⁸ Refer to pages 59-60.

a visual culture” (as cited in Ibrahim, 2015, p. 42). The importance of this will only amplify, as younger generations are already accustomed to digitally sharing their lives. A significant body of research exists that explores the social and psychological implications of this growing reliance, most underlying the negative effects, particularly on women and youth (Gray et al., 2018; Ibrahim, 2015). The outdoor recreation industry is also particularly attuned to the role of social media in distorting expectations of outdoor adventures, leading to negative consequences in personal valuations by comparison, but also through encouraging lay people to pursue otherwise dangerous or unethical choices in the sake of capturing a photograph. There are also concerns related to the commodification, aestheticization and fetishization of nature that occurs through image sharing on social media (Gray et al., 2018; Igoe, 2010). The effects of online action has also been linked to conservation dynamics (Büscher, 2016), that pose troubling effects across a global scale. Drawing from work in Tanzania, Igoe (2010) demonstrates how “spectacular images of biodiversity promise Western consumers escape from alienation through consumption, self-expression and connections to imagined places, people and animals”, ironically in turn adding new forms of detachment and alienation (p. 389). As explored earlier, many other scholars draw connections between the role of visual culture and images, whether it be paintings or photographs, in shaping human-environmental relations (e.g. Dunaway, 2005; Kaußen, 2018; Raad, 2021). These implications, while not all known or fully understood, are issues which future research must contend with. Traditional methods for understanding landscape aesthetics and the social construction of nature more generally, are no longer the most relevant and new approaches such as the use of Instagram, are necessary in order to consider and respond to the shifting ways in which we relate to the world around us.

There is however, a growing need to understand the implications and potentials of social media in the planning practice more broadly. While there is a large body of work related to landscape aesthetics, very little has been done using Instagram specifically, particularly with hyper-local frame of analysis. From a park planning or city-planning perspective, Instagram affords an abundance of insight that could be optimized and used far more frequently than it has been to date. Research could again focus on place-based dynamics but compare representations across periods of time, or in response to landscape changes or the introduction of new design interventions. Beyond collecting images from a geotagged location as this research has done, directed engagement efforts could utilize other features of the platform through asking users to share specific images with certain hashtags, respond to quizzes or answer questions directly within the application. It presents an invaluable tool to collect insight in ways that are societally relevant, that reach different audiences and demographics, and can be done at a relatively low-

cost. As a potential tool for public engagement and as a means to understand existing place dynamics, as this research has done, Instagram offers many advantages. Relevant studies that used Instagram were all found to have been published in the last 8 years, emphasizing its relatively recent emergence and potential opportunities for research. Literature on landscape aesthetics primarily came from Europe and the Netherlands or the United States, with less exploration in the Canadian context also emphasizing the need for more Canadian based studies.

Limits of Sight

Anne Godfrey (2020) shares a story of a professor *unable to see* Godfrey's approach to photography while in school, noting that "his expectations closed off discourse" (p. 65). The act of discerning what is presented within a frame relies on perceptual judgements of what is there, or what is important to note. This research attempts to highlight a very broad range of considerations that have implications for visual studies of the environment. In doing so, it has not adequately engaged with theories of perception and different ways of visualizing the physical world. Points of discussion and the coding of photographs were also determined based on individual interpretations of the literature and imagery. Positionality matters here, as a Caucasian person who identifies as a woman, relatively new to the Toronto area. Existing knowledge certainly shapes the outcome of this paper and limits my ability to see and connect other theories and aesthetic categories that are beyond my own range of sight. As with any academic endeavor, this paper may have been approached quite differently by another. Future research may expressly consider the role that Instagram or other new media may have on understanding urban ecologies of the Spit or elsewhere. Greater attention could be paid to species identification and conversely, those which are not represented. Research could also engage more with the subtleties of environmental perception to better understand affective response to certain stimulus or features within the landscape.

Limits of the Data

Specific to method for analysing content used here, future research may consider using a smaller sample size, to permit the consideration of text based captions that would have provided insight around intent, satisfaction, or overall experience. Other studies frequently paired visual analysis with surveys and interviews as well to add greater context to the visual analysis. It would have been valuable to be able to extract more precise geographical information with each photograph. This would have allowed for more place-based considerations of "hot-spots". The data collection period would ideally also cover the peak season at the Spit. This data captured

some of the peak season (i.e. 3 weeks of August and September), but photographs may vary during the core season. There is likely greater density within certain months as well, and future research could consider adding a temporal layer to the data collection. Image analysis could occur over a long period as well, for instance, a series of 50 photographs every 4 weeks could be selected from the “Recent Images” menu of the platform. This was considered here, but due to time constraints it was deemed better to retrieve data over a single, 6 month time period. Another option might be to consider the same time period over a number of years to track landscape change, or response to design interventions. In terms of conducting the data analysis, it would have been ideal to include additional research participants who could code the photographs in order to determine reliability and consistency in coding. The home-made database used for this research also had its pitfalls, and it is suggested not to use excel for future photograph-based explorations, or to use a combination of platforms that allows for better coordination between images and quantitative data.

Conclusions

From a wasteland turned urban wilderness, the Leslie Street Spit exemplifies shifting social, cultural, and economic views of nature that highlight dominant narratives and ideologies that underpin human-nature relationships. The Spit is in flux as ecological flows and human induced pressures continue to transform the landscape. Non-human actors continue to shape planning process through physical restructuring, and by way of inspiring connections between people and place, they shape human behaviours. While this research has paid particular attention to socially constructed views and cultural representations that have informed predominantly Western human-environment relations and aesthetics, hopefully connections have been established that link these directly back (and forth) to the land. Recognizing how we are enmeshed within the very systems which have produced the Spit, allows for a deeper understanding of landscapes that move beyond perspectives that maintain them as “a static backdrop” (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015, p. 42). Planning processes must strive to incorporate both human and non-human values that are directly connected to place, requiring creative approaches that move beyond technocratic, top-down practice. Instagram proved to be an effective tool to collect unsolicited insight around aesthetic preferences and place-based dynamics at the Spit. As noted by Glover et al. (2008), “narrative is powerful, especially when it is shared publicly” (p. 397). In contemporary culture, the collective vision is constructed and circulated through social media platforms such as Instagram. This makes it an exceptional tool to be leveraged by planners in order to move beyond institutionalized processes and expert-

based landscape assessments. As proclaimed by Gobster (2001), “one of the greatest challenges to urban park planners, landscape architects, and managers is to balance the tension between providing for the diverse uses and values of park space and preserving and enhancing the unique qualities of place” (p. 35-36). The findings of this research affirm the Spit’s multivalent character and inspire recommendations to ensure its future is directly informed by people, place, and the nonhuman world.

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Appendix A. Sample Photographs Listed by Image Attribute

[This section contained sample photographs listed by image attributes. Due to privacy and copyright concerns, they were removed for this platform.]