The Coexistence Toolkit

Dialogue, design & policy tools for engaging with homelessness in public space

Prepared for SPUR Gehl
How to Use This Toolkit

This document includes presentation materials and interactive exercises to guide community engagement.

Steps for Place Managers Using This Tool:

➔ Reflect on whether this activity is a **standalone** set of exercises, or a part of a **larger process**.
➔ Consider what **site context** you might need to provide, including additional content or slides to inform your group.
➔ **Print out** key **worksheets** and interactive slides and/or **use virtual platforms** like Zoom polls or **Poll Everywhere**.
➔ Use the **three core tools in succession**, ideally in **one sitting**.
➔ Make time to **analyze your results** and reflect on how they shape policy decisions.
When to Use This Toolkit

ACKNOWLEDGE
You might face a roadblock that gets in the way of ’coexistence’ in a project you’re working on.

ENGAGE
To understand what’s getting in the way, bring a diverse cross-section of people together to walk through exercises in this toolkit — perhaps through multiple sessions.

SYNTHESIZE
Review and analyze (e.g., how do men vs. women react to different behaviors?) to surface opportunities and improvements.

ACT
From there, you can develop a set of recommendations and actions to take forward.
There’s a lot to take on in homelessness — we’re not here to cover it all.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT THIS IS</th>
<th>WHAT THIS IS NOT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A dialogue tool that may inform design or policy</td>
<td>A prescription or brief for public space design or policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A way to address the symptoms of homelessness</td>
<td>A way to address the systemic causes of homelessness</td>
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</table>
“The park will only be great if there are no homeless there”

“From Toward

“The park will only be great if we design for coexistence”
Our Purpose Today

1. Reflect on our core objective: creating **just, welcoming, and healthy spaces** where diverse people can coexist.

2. Focus on what public space design and stewardship can accomplish.

3. Unpack what **what shapes coexistence in place** and identify core challenges so we can better share space with one another.
Estimated Presentation and Discussion Time: 30-60 min

The Toolkit
Tools

Three tools for engaging around coexistence in public space.

Tool 1
Values

➔ You might use this tool if your stakeholder group:
Struggles with fundamental alignment on priorities

Tool 2
Behaviors

➔ You might use this tool if your stakeholder group:
Disagrees on how to address maintenance and public safety challenges

Tool 3
Facets

➔ You might use this tool if your stakeholder group:
Desires clarity on roles and responsibilities
Tool 1

Workshopping Values for Coexistence in Public Space
Q. What are your core place values?

Respond to the poll based on the slides to come
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>People and the structures they build should respect the natural environments and ecosystems they inhabit.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Public space should be accessible, safe, delightful, and welcoming for all, without privileging one person or group over another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Public space should be shared among people of different backgrounds, identities, and experiences (e.g., race, ability, income).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Everyone has a responsibility to fulfill the social contract—an implicit commitment to mutual protection and well-being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The community should help define how the social contract is maintained with respect to everyone’s dignity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Your Take

What are your reflections on the values exercise?

Which resonate with you most or least? Why?

What would you add?

What would you remove?
Tool 2

Defining a Community Spectrum of Acceptable Behavior
How do different behaviors in public space make us feel?
People ≠ Behaviors
We started by comparing three sets of public space rules to gauge what’s ‘off-limits.’

Working list of ‘off-limits’ behaviors and spatial conditions in public spaces

SFPL patron code of conduct — including enforcement tiers — aligned to San Francisco and State of California civil and public health codes

San Jose Parks, Recreation & Neighborhood Services’ neighborhood park rules — which apply to spaces like Guadalupe River Park
We catalogued every unique type of behavior/condition, and where it showed up.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPUR Homelessness in the Public Realm</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>OFF-LIMITS BEHAVIORS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DRUGS &amp; ALCOHOL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug use / smoking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug use / Injection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibiting signs of being under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possession and/or use of illegal drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug dealing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking alcohol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking / probably tobacco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating food and consuming beverages from an open container is prohibited, except in designated areas. Alcoholic beverages are prohibited, except in licensed establishments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MENTAL &amp; PHYSICAL HEALTH</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screaming / erratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical emergency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibly unwell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appears unconscious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnerving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defecating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HEALTH HAZARD</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken glass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human and animal waste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire in progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other biohazard</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioral</th>
<th>Spatial</th>
<th>OEWD</th>
<th>SFPL</th>
<th>SJPR</th>
<th>SFPL CONSEQUENCE</th>
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80 behaviors and conditions!
Behaviors enforced in codes of conduct generally fell into these categories.

COMMON TYPES OF RULES

- MENTAL & PHYSICAL HEALTH
- DRUGS & ALCOHOL
- HEALTH HAZARDS
- HARASSMENT & VIOLENCE
- TEMPORARY SHELTER
- PERSONAL & PUBLIC PROPERTY
- CHILDREN
- NOISE
- HYGIENE
- RECREATION
- VEHICLES
- ATTIRE
- ANIMALS
- LANDSCAPE

Note — For full list of 'off-limits' behaviors in each set, visit this link.
This worksheet asks participants to share their reactions to a set of behaviors and site conditions that often land in the gray area of a public space’s social contract.

There’s room for write-in behaviors that may be missing.

Access PDF here
The worksheet includes four categories of behaviors and conditions.

#1 Property & Landscape
#2 Public Health
#3 Drugs & Alcohol
#4 Harassment
The tool asks how each behavior or condition makes you feel on this scale.

1. Doesn’t bother you — you might even welcome it

2. Doesn’t bother you

3. Neutral

4. Slightly bothers you

5. Acutely disturbs your sense of safety and calm
Tool 3

Identifying Facets of Coexistence In Place
Q. How do we shape civic space where we can coexist?
Many different factors come together to shape and sustain coexistence in our public spaces.
The design and features that give shape to a place

Public space design includes lighting, seating opportunities, natural features and landscaping, shading structures, and walkways.

➔ Key Actors
Designers, Planners, Environmental Advocates
The cleaning, oversight, and upkeep of a place

Operations & Maintenance includes the landscaping, waste management, and regular staffing of a public space.

➔ **Key Actors**
  Maintenance Staff, Volunteer Groups
The uses and activities that draw people in

Program & Activation includes food and beverage amenities, playscapes, artistic and cultural assets, and recreational opportunities.

Key Actors
Community Organizers, Arts / Culture / Entertainment Organizations, Vendors & Small Businesses (Formal & Informal), Recreational Leagues, Adjacent Property Owners
The standards that create a shared civic life

This includes norms and systems for protecting safety, comfort, and property, such as through stewardship and social service provision.

Key Actors
- Park Stewards, Rangers, Social Workers, Social Service Providers, Police
The engagement processes that connect users

Dialogue includes outreach and engagement processes that shape places, and sustain their maintenance over time.

➔ **Key Actors**
City Government, Advocacy Organizations, Conservancies, Community-Based Organizations
Coexistence in Your Place

Share how you account for each facet of coexistence in your public space (e.g., roles, protocols, etc.)

Who is responsible for Spatial Design & Environment?

Who is responsible for Operations & Maintenance?

Who is responsible for Program & Activation?

Who is responsible for Rights, Rules & Accountability?

Who is responsible for Dialogue?
For Organizers

Learning From Case Studies
We drew global inspiration from a mix of cases that addressed homelessness in public space.
Pittsburgh
Using a role-play card game to build empathy for the unhoused

An interdisciplinary Carnegie Mellon studio was tasked with sparking dialogue around the experience of homelessness. To build empathy, students developed a journeying card game prompting players to “survive the month” with limited resources in health, money, and relationships. At the end of the sequence, each player found out if they were housed, housing insecure, or homeless based on the resource cards they had left. The game was included in pop-up park events, and was paired with micro-exhibits profiling prized possessions of the unhoused. The studio’s findings were shared with the Pittsburgh Mayor and local non-profits, and informed a local TV program.

“The goal of the gameplay was to spark conversations around the difficult decisions that have to be made by people in precarity, and ‘deep processing’ of those situations by the players.”

MICHAEL ARNOLD MAGES, PROFESSOR
New York City
Debunking myths by communicating rights and resources in an asynchronous, graphic, legible, and human way —

This fold-out poster breaks down people’s rights in homeless shelters, various programs available, paths to housing, and access to other resources like transportation and storage. Not only does graphic clarity help convey complex information, but this is also an example of the importance of passive, asynchronous dialogue when communicating about homelessness. The pamphlet is a product of collaboration among Center for Urban Pedagogy, Safety Net Project, and the design studio 13 milliseconds.

“The guide was distributed at food pantries, libraries, and shelters throughout New York City. The Safety Net Project continues to distribute the poster at different shelters.”

CENTER FOR URBAN PEDAGOGY

How might graphic information design take shape in public space?
Copenhagen
Inviting everyone into the process at the outset — to build trust, understand needs, and diversify usership —

Located in one of the city’s most diverse neighborhoods, Folkets Park underwent a redesign that prioritized deep community engagement as a path to building trust, ownership, and ultimately, high levels of usage. Now, the park attracts a cross-section of migrants, strollers, the unhoused, and the yuppie set. It bucks design features that would go unquestioned to provide safe places for the homeless population — such as by providing zoned lighting so they can sleep and rest comfortably without fear of theft.

“Some groups need darkness to feel safe, so we agreed on zone lighting, which lights up the path system.”

KENNETH BALFELT
San Francisco
Employing at-risk communities as responsible stewards of public space

Urban Alchemy employs people who were once unhoused, incarcerated, or who face significant barriers to employment as place stewards. In partnership with the San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development, UA deployed staff in Civic Center Commons in 2016. Drawing from their own experiences, staff balance empathy for people experiencing homelessness, with a firm approach to setting behavioral norms and ensuring safety and order in public spaces. The approach has been so successful that the group now has a presence in many public spaces throughout the Bay Area.

“They have a Zen-like ability to deal with conflict, confusion, and discord. UA works with law enforcement, but they can say, ‘Hey, we don’t do that here.’ It’s very different.”

AMY COHEN
OEWD
Atlanta
Trading police officers for social workers and resource providers as keepers of the peace, and housing amenities that welcome all park users —

In Atlanta’s Woodruff Park, frequented by people experiencing homelessness, the local BID teamed up with a local nonprofit to hire a social worker who is stationed in the park each day. The park also includes a game cart, where anyone can sign out board games to play — an amenity also staffed by an employment agency for people re-entering the workforce, to build trust and connections to resources.

“There are a lot of social issues around every park. You just have to have someone dedicated to looking into them.”

JANika ROBINSON
CASE MANAGER
Indianapolis
Putting more ethical encampment sweep practices into policy

In 2016, Indianapolis City-County Council passed landmark legislation to ensure any people displaced from encampments receive support from the city. The ordinance mandates that the city:

1. **Services** — Designate organizations to help each person find transitional housing and other services, such as drug and alcohol rehab or mental health care.

2. **Notice** — Provide residents with 15 days notice before closing a camp, and its nonprofit partners would have to find transitional housing before a homeless person could be removed from public property.

3. **Storage** — Store personal items for up to 60 days in a 96-gallon container — the same size as residential trash bins, and then stored in the city’s homeless engagement center.

“It will cause this community to pause before displacing these people from these camps. It will create a moment where the eyes of the community will be on all of us to ask the question, ‘are we properly providing services and more importantly housing for our homeless neighbors?’”

BILL MOREAU, ATTORNEY AND HOMELESS ADVOCATE
New York City
Inviting a variety of users through design and programming updates —

By the 1980s, Bryant Park had earned the nickname “Needle Park.” The park’s design — elevated off street level — deterred potential users and facilitated drug dealing and drug use, particularly at park entrances close to high foot traffic but shielded from view. A redesign led by the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation — advised by William H. Whyte — included a lowering of the park, removal of obstructions like fencing and hedges, and additional entrances to ease pedestrian flow and boost visibility. But design alone didn’t make Bryant Park a crime-free place that now welcomes over 25,000 people daily. Varied programming created more earned income for management to monitor and improve park conditions.

“The cart, which holds games, information, power outlets, and other amenities, is a moveable focal point for new, dynamic uses.”

AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION
Seattle
Designing pop-ups that provide temporary comfort, and humanize the homelessness crisis —

Two Seattle designers collaborated to create pop-up “Living Room” parklets in a bustling neighborhood, near a homeless services center. For people experiencing homelessness, free food, magazines, games, and music made for a lively occasion. For passersby, the parklet became a provocative thought- and conversation-starter — building empathy about the experience of homelessness in the city.

“Right away, this parklet forced visitors to think about what their own living room means to them. Maybe that’s a space where you gather with friends, watch T.V., dance to music, or just lie on the floor.”

CITYLAB
How can we collect data on these behaviors?

Use a mix of methods to observe public life (e.g., stationary activity), gauge perception (e.g., survey), and map conditions (e.g., place inventory)

Access tools here