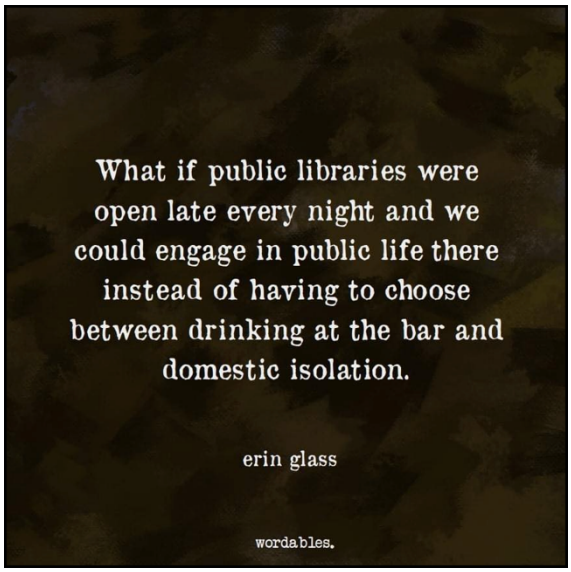
Can public recreation do more to promote happiness and reduce social isolation and loneliness?

By Rick Gilbert

"Sometimes it hurts so badly I must cry out loud I am lonely." Stephen A Sills

INTRODUCTION

This paper was conceived to explore the possibility that public recreation could benefit by taking note of the successes of the Halifax Central Library in creating a public space that is more accessible and welcoming to all citizens. Originally inspired by a meme that landed in my Facebook inbox (see below), the paper's scope has evolved with the writing and the article now also touches on themes such as happiness, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on reducing social connection, and the challenge to the recreation sector to provide a policy-based response to those themes.



/ The original inspiration for this article

The City of Halifax, where I live, has an alternative, weekly newspaper called *The Coast*. One of its most popular features is an annual "Best of Halifax" poll. In 2015 the then new Halifax Central Library won the category for "Best Public Space". Having frequented the Central Library many times to visit its cafes; attend meetings; participate in public events such as book signings, musical performances, and lectures (and even to borrow books a few times); there's no second guessing the voters' choice.

Those who frequent the library are a diverse lot ranging from children coming to the play space with their parents, to students and professionals using semi-private workspaces, to unhoused people using the public-access computers to search for information and access services. At a glance, you get the impression that the library's diversity of visitors is an accurate reflection of the City's population. It's a modern, aesthetically pleasing space, staffed by friendly and helpful public servants. The place screams, "You are welcome here. This is your space."

When I first read *The Coast's* 2015 poll results and began to ponder the success of the Halifax Central Library, I couldn't help but wonder if recreation space designers, builders and operators have similar goals to those of modern public libraries. Do we aspire to be voted Best Public Space? Are we committed

to the idea that all citizens feel ownership of and welcome within their recreation centres? If we could design, build and operate buildings that are more accessible and welcoming in the way that the Halifax Central Library has done, would more people frequent indoor recreation places for purposes other than participation in structured and semi-organized programs and would that be a start to achieving the public good of a less socially isolated, less lonely population. Could we add an element of spontaneity to the use of recreation centres?

To be clear, I believe that public recreation in Canada is brilliant at much of what it does. That was illustrated by the surge in popularity of outdoor facilities such as parks and trails early in the pandemic. At that time, when opportunities for physical activity, connection to nature, and community interaction were limited, those community assets became vital to individual and community wellbeing.

To state the obvious, neither libraries nor community recreation centres are outdoor facilities. In the case of the latter, their pools, rinks, gymnasia, walking tracks, exercise rooms and multi-purpose rooms provide opportunities that often require pre-registration, scheduled participation and participation fees, all of which create barriers to participation not usually found at libraries. Again, recreation providers often do what they do very well, but the question inferred by the meme remains; does the recreation sector do enough to make every person who walks through the door feel immediately welcome? Is that message unambiguous and universal? Do participants have a sense that this is their space, in the same way that people do when entering the Halifax Central Library?

Certainly, one important factor in this comparison is the reality that there are generally no fees associated with the use of the library or its resources, making an apples-to-apples comparison difficult, but that's not really the point of this essay. The point is more to consider the example of the Halifax Central Library as inspiration for asking questions about how we can do more in support of the public good of improving individual and community wellbeing through increasing social connection and happiness, and reducing social isolation and loneliness.

This paper was intended to be more anecdotal than academic, mainly reflecting my observations, experiences and learnings over 40 years working within municipal and provincial governments in the recreation and youth policy areas. Since retirement in 2015, I have continued to be involved through volunteerism, consulting and writing. As I learned more during the writing process for this article, I have added selected, evidence-based information to strengthen its essential arguments.

BACKGROUND

The *Framework for Recreation in Canada* has provided relevant, long-term direction for the sector since its endorsement by federal and provincial ministers, provincial/territorial recreation and parks organizations and the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA) in 2015. Its vision reads,

We envision a Canada in which everyone is engaged in meaningful, accessible recreation experiences that offer: individual wellbeing, community wellbeing and the wellbeing of our natural and built environment.

Not surprisingly, the themes of this paper are reflected, albeit indirectly, in the *Framework for Recreation in Canada*. Goal 2, Inclusion and Access (one of five goals) addresses the need to "Increase inclusion and access to recreation for populations that face constraints to participation." It is part of the premise of this article that limited access can lead to limited participation which in turn can contribute to increased social isolation and loneliness.

In addition to guidance provided by the *Framework for Recreation in Canada*, CPRA has provided leadership to a COVID-19 recovery initiative entitled *ReImagine RREC — Renew, Retool, Engage and Contribute*.

ReImagine RREC …is intended to help leaders working in parks, recreation and community sport to improve planning, operations and delivery of programs and services in a pandemic and post-pandemic environment, as well as to contribute to community recovery more broadly. (*Reimagine RREC*, page 2)

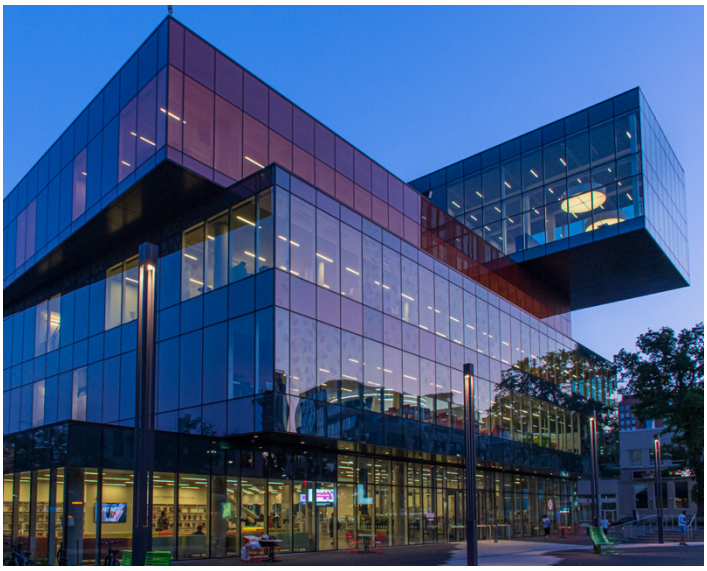
Like the *Framework for Recreation in Canada*, some of the *Reimagine RREC* findings provide indirect support for the essential premise of this article. Most notably, *Reimagine RREC* lists as two of its major themes:

- "Equity, inclusion and access: The need to reach those hardest hit by the pandemic." and;
- "Non-traditional use of existing indoor spaces: Recreation centres became food banks, vaccination centres and recovery sites. Strategies to maximize use are required. (*Reimagine RREC*, page 13).

In terms of looking to both the longer-term and shorter-term futures of recreation and parks in Canada, the sector is in good hands.

PREMISE

As mentioned, the library-related meme above provided inspiration for crafting this paper. The meme's dichotomy — social connection versus isolation — is not new to the recreation sector, but it does inspire consideration of an even greater level of innovation to address the related concerns of access, inclusion and loneliness. The word "accessibility" doesn't show up in the meme, but the idea is there in the nuanced question of "how open" public buildings should be. It wouldn't be a great stretch to edit the meme's opening to read: "What if public libraries and recreation centres were open late every night…"



// Halifax Central Library

One way that the meme's implied question was addressed years ago was through "Night Hoops" basketball as a way of serving at-risk youth through the provision of a popular activity at a time of night when many were vulnerable to participation in less socially acceptable pursuits.

The choices inherent in hanging out at the library (if it were open late at night), drinking at the bar, and domestic (social) isolation remind us of the compelling connection between recreation and the public good, as referenced in The *Framework for Recreation in Canada,* (page 18). This touches on a subject of concern to the recreation sector, a concern worsened for many by the COVID-19 pandemic. Equity of access as a means of increasing social connection, decreasing social isolation, and increasing happiness, represents a compelling public good. Evidence would be found in increased numbers of participants, a more diverse population of users, and an increased proportion of spontaneous users, all of which sounds like an excellent investment of recreational resources.

EVIDENCE BASE
The Happiness Lab

As I was working on this paper, I became aware of the work of Dr. Laurie Santos, Professor of Psychology and Head of Yale's Silliman Residential College. Dr Santos teaches a course called The Science of Well-being, one of the most popular courses at Yale, and also hosts a podcast called "The Happiness Lab".

For several years I have wondered whether the COVID pandemic would have lasting effects on our ways of life or on our relationships with others and with nature. Have our priorities as individuals, families and communities changed and is the recreation sector aligned to change in response? In addressing similar questions, Dr Santos offers the following (edited for length).

What lessons have we really learned?

- The pandemic has taught us the importance of social connections and seems to be breaking them up. We need to fight against that. Talking with each other in real time, for example by using Zoom or FaceTime for both work and social connecting, works better than email and text messaging which are not conducted in real time.

- Feeling that you belong, are connected to others, and are close to the people around you, helps to prevent loneliness.

- Exercise is often cited as a coping mechanism to mitigate effects of the pandemic.

- We should remember the things that were lost during the pandemic such as face-to-face time with work colleagues, family members and friends who do not live in the same home.

- Dr. Santos tells the story of a colleague who compares happiness to a leaky tire in that you have to find ways to inject small amounts of air (happiness) into the tire (your life) so that it doesn't go flat. "Short bits of social interaction are one of the best ways to keep your happiness tire inflated." Where and how are you going to get those bits of social interaction? Perhaps, in part, at public recreation spaces and other places made as accessible as possible through healthy public policy.

Harvard Study of Adult Development

Another fascinating source of information on happiness — one that has received much attention as I've been writing this paper — is the Harvard Study of Adult Development, also referred to as "the world's longest scientific study on happiness." The study managers, Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz, have recently released a book entitled *The Good Life* that highlights lessons from the longitudinal study. The January 19, 2023, issue of *The Atlantic* provides an overview of the study findings.

The early part of *The Atlantic* article focusses on relationships, especially with family members and close friends. "You don't have to examine scientific findings to recognize that relationships affect you physically. All you have to do is notice the invigoration you feel when you believe that someone has really understood you during a good conversation, or the tension and distress you feel after an argument, or how little sleep you get during a period of romantic strife."

The discussion of relationships evolves into one of loneliness. "Loneliness has a physical effect on the body. It can render people more sensitive to pain, suppress their immune system, diminish brain function, and disrupt sleep, which in turn can make an already lonely person even more tired and irritable." And, of particular interest for those who work with elders, "…for older adults, loneliness is far more dangerous than obesity."

The article also states that ongoing loneliness increases a person's odds of death in a given year by 26%.

Clearly, the prevention of loneliness is worthy of policy attention. If loneliness is caused, at least in part, by the absence of relationships, perhaps the provision of spaces and places that encourage social connections should be a stronger policy focus for the recreation sector.

Huberman Lab

Andrew Huberman, Ph.D., is a neuroscientist and tenured professor in the department of neurobiology at Stanford School of Medicine. If you know of Dr. Huberman, and many do, it's likely because of his online podcast, Huberman Lab, which is often ranked in the top 15 podcasts internationally, and the #1 podcast in the categories of science, education and health and fitness. He has a large following.

The information that follows is based on Huberman's evidence-based model for happiness found in his podcast #98, "Science-based Tools for Increasing Happiness." At over two hours and twenty minutes in length, the podcast has much more to offer, but this small contribution is included due to its relevance to the broader theme of the article.

The first thing to understand is the importance of social connection to increasing our levels of happiness. Interestingly, quality social connections include presence (facial/eye contact) and physical contact that can be attained through a range of deep, brief and even trivial/superficial connections. Trivial and superficial social connections include, as an example, brief conversations with people we may not know. Extending Huberman's thoughts somewhat, by intentionally designing public places and spaces to facilitate such contact, we can increase opportunities for formal and informal social interaction.

And finally, Huberman states that giving money, effort, time and attention (what we would refer to as voluntarism) leads to pro-social connection and happiness — to both the giver and receiver. This will be no surprise to members of the recreation sector.

Call to Action

By way of a brief summary, I offer the following:

Evidence from a variety of credible sources indicates that a lack of social connection can lead to isolation and loneliness, in turn leading to a reduction in happiness — a concern that is calling out for a social policy response.

The modern library system may offer hints to public institutions, such as recreation, to play a stronger role in enabling social connection and reducing social isolation through more accessible, welcoming and inclusive use of our built infrastructure. Public libraries used to be places to borrow books, but now they function more as community hubs, offering a range of services, enabled by capable, friendly and helpful staff who are stationed strategically throughout the building. And yes, among a wide range of ways that they can offer assistance, it seems that any one of them can help you sign out a book.

One of the concepts that I believe is crucial to recreation moving forward effectively in a changing world is embedded in the phrase “raising our gaze.” The idea here isn’t to play the role of futurist and try to predict the future. It’s more about looking out towards the horizon, and perhaps to our peripheral vision as well, to see what’s out there already. Where are the emerging pressures coming from? What innovations are workers in other sectors making in response to changing times? Can we imagine our field playing a stronger role in identifying and responding to emerging problems such as supporting unhoused people by providing temporary care and shelter in unused community facilities.

Effective Questions

Some effective questions on this topic:

- Are the questions raised in this paper relevant to our community? Are matters of social isolation, loneliness, and, ultimately, happiness, important to our citizens?

- Thinking of the “post-COVID” period and the possible long-term implications, is our best focus on a return to normal or on crafting a new normal, based on things we’ve observed during the pandemic?

- Is there inspiration and leadership within the space design and operational principles employed within public libraries and other municipal infrastructure? Do they represent a priority for our municipality? our department? within our community recreation centres?

- What kind of changes would help recreation spaces be more accessible, more welcoming and more inclusive? How could building design and functional considerations result in a wider range of service offerings, and a renewed sense of the experience we are trying to create?

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