

No Place for Street Vendors: Global Capital and Local Exclusion in an East Asian Immigrant Enclave of New York City



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I. Introduction: The “Common Sense” of Vendor Exclusion

Across the globe, street vendor exclusion is justified using a common language. Sometimes this language is ostensibly value neutral and gets articulated through the objective criteria of city planning: there is only so much room for pedestrians, vehicles, and other users of public space on city streets, and vendors cause too much crowding and congestion on city sidewalks. Other times vendors are problematized using more subjective language about neighbourhood character and urban image—vending is associated with poverty and disorder, and getting rid of vendors is often part of broader urban projects of neighbourhood upgrading or modernization. This second line of discourse usually draws sharp distinctions between the interests of street vendors and the broader public interests, with vendors characterized as usurping public space for their own narrow private benefit.

More often than not, in specific struggles over street vending and public space, both objective notions of crowding and subjective notions of proper use of public space are used to justify exclusion of street vendors. This is certainly the case in the New York City neighbourhood of Flushing, situated in the borough of Queens. The area along Main Street, which is known as Downtown Flushing, is a vibrant and busy mix of stores, offices, and apartments, with most residents and business owners hailing from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China. Street vendors have long been a part of the scene along Main Street and its environs, selling food and merchandise to customers hurrying to appointments, school, or work and those headed to and between the buses, commuter rail and city subway transit lines that run through the neighbourhood. During the 2010s, Flushing experienced intense development, as investors from Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan poured money into real estate in the area, intent on remaking Flushing into a more upscale, 21st century version of Chinatown. Street vendors did not have a place in this new vision. Moreover, as development increased, so did pedestrian levels on the neighbourhood’s narrow sidewalks, drawing calls from multiple directions to reduce crowding. All of this culminated in a law, passed in the autumn of 2018, banning street vending from the Downtown area of the neighbourhood.

This new law was justified by local political and business leaders as necessary to reduce sidewalk crowding, but much anti-vendor rhetoric was also focused on the fact that vendors did not fit the desired neighbourhood image. Vendors were blamed for being dirty and inconsiderate; they were portrayed as unwanted interlopers in public space, bringing down the reputation of the neighbourhood, and, it was implied, contributing to negative stereotypes of Chinese neighbourhoods as disorderly, unsanitary, and overcrowded. Much of this discourse was taken up relatively uncritically by media outlets and others as matter-of-fact common sense.

Like most urban neighbourhoods, Flushing is a contested space with multiple conflicting interests. While business and political elites sought to define vendors as unwelcome interlopers, vendors had long been part of the neighbourhood scene, with a loyal customer base that was drawn to their food and goods. As researchers, we were curious about the extent to which elite discourses of space conformed with everyday residents in the neighbourhood. Were politicians and business leaders truly speaking for a broader shared neighbourhood interests, or was their anti-vendor rhetoric more self-serving and narrow in terms of interests represented? We sought to answer these questions

through a large-scale survey of people using and moving through public space, as well as through interviews with business owners, vendors, and community activists. This paper focuses primarily on the survey results. What we found from the survey was that, far from being pariahs, vendors enjoyed support from a majority of respondents. Vendors were not viewed as a major source of sidewalk crowding, rather, they were seen as a useful, even iconic part of Flushing. The positive view of vendors was especially true for lower income respondents, who relied on vendors for inexpensive food and goods, and generally appreciated their presence in the neighbourhood.

II. Setting the Scene: Flushing Queens as a Global Asian Enclave

To outsiders, Flushing may seem to be a relatively monolithic ethnic enclave—a suburban or satellite Chinatown in the outer borough of Queens. It is, however, a tremendously diverse mix of geopolitical identities, linguistic backgrounds, and class statuses—all of which intersect and intertwine with one another, and all of which get lost under blanket characterizations of the area as broadly “Chinese”. The designation of Flushing as a Chinatown has always been something of a misnomer. In fact, the name Chinatown was initially rejected by Asian residents of the area. The first Asian migrants to settle in Flushing were from Taiwan, and as the Taiwanese population of the neighbourhood grew through the 1970s and 80s, they specifically sought to differentiate Flushing from Manhattan’s Chinatown—home mostly to Cantonese speaking immigrants from Mainland China (Huang 2010; Chen 1992). During the 1980s, Taiwanese real estate developers, business owners, and investors branded the neighbourhood as “Little Taipei”. They were building what they saw as a distinctly middle class Asian enclave—not a first stop for working class immigrants like Manhattan’s Chinatown, but as a site of business and investment for educated middle and upper class migrants and investors from Taiwan (Fincher *et al.* 2016; Li 2005).

But the name Little Taipei, while more specific than Chinatown, also hid the diversity of the area. In addition to immigrants from Taiwan, Flushing was also an important landing spot for people and financial capital from Hong Kong—especially around the time of the 1997 transfer of sovereignty from Great Britain to China. Added to this were significant numbers of Korean and Indian immigrants. And in the last 15-20 years, more and more immigrants and investors from Mainland China have started moving to Flushing, tempering the Taiwanese dominance of business and real estate in the neighbourhood (Zhou 2013; Hum 2010).

Today, Flushing is a dynamic and diverse Asian neighbourhood that is home to multiple different East Asian nationalities, linguistic groups, ethnicities, and class backgrounds. As our survey found, class especially exists as a profound cleavage that works as an internal dividing line *within* categories of language, ethnicity, and national origin. These class differences inform competing visions of the neighbourhood’s future, pitting the housing and economic needs of working class Asian immigrants against the plans of property investors and desires of a mobile, transnational Asian elite who envision Flushing as an upscale, sophisticated, and globally connected Asian neighbourhood. Neighbourhood conflict in and over Flushing, Queens, therefore exists as a node in a global network of investment capital, human migration, good planning practice, and urban imaginaries.

While there may be debate over what sort of neighbourhood Flushing is and should become—Chinese or Taiwanese, working class or luxury—one thing is certainly not up for debate: Flushing is busy and crowded. More than a dozen different bus lines terminate or pass through Downtown Flushing. The number 7 subway train, which funnels people back and forth from Midtown Manhattan, terminates in Flushing. The neighbourhood is also home to a stop on the Long Island Railroad, the regional commuter rail serving New York City’s eastern suburbs. Added to this are the countless informal unlicensed “dollar vans” that shuttle people between New York’s multiple Chinese enclaves in Brooklyn, Manhattan and other parts of Queens. In addition to the thousands of residents living in apartments surrounding Downtown Flushing, the neighbourhood is also a regional destination for Asian Americans coming to shop, dine, or visit doctors, lawyers, accountants, and other professionals who have offices in the area. It is also popular with non-Asian tourists and visitors, who come for a taste (literal and figurative) of East Asia.

All of this activity takes place on only a few blocks along Main Street—the neighbourhood’s main thoroughfare. The densely packed nature of the urban environment, the frenetic energy of flashing signs, of storefronts spilling out onto sidewalks, of traffic coursing through the narrow streets, of the commuter train rushing over Main Street on an elevated viaduct, of the constant roar of jet engines as low flying airplanes descend toward nearby LaGuardia Airport—all of it make Flushing into a disorienting cacophony of noise, movement, signs, people. But while many elements contribute to this invigorating and overwhelming atmosphere, it was street vendors who were singled out by political leaders as the main culprits, and therefore targeted for exclusion.

III. Defining Vendors as Problems: Crowding, Nuisance, and Neighbourhood Image

In some ways, the neighbourhood of Flushing is a victim of its own success. During the 2010s, a number of large residential and commercial projects were completed, included Flushing Commons, a luxury condominium on 39th Avenue just off Main Street, and One Fulton Square, a massive mixed-use complex with an upscale mall, hotel, apartments and offices. Many more projects were either under construction or planned. Crowding—long a concern in the densely packed neighbourhood—was becoming more and more of a problem. In fact, according to one study, by the late 2010s, the neighbourhood of Flushing was the second most densely trafficked pedestrian area of the entire city, second only to Times Square in Manhattan.¹

Peter Koo, the local councilmember, decided it was time to take steps to mitigate crowding. His first move was to push the city’s Department of Transportation (DOT) to widen sidewalks along Main Street. In late 2017, Koo and other community leaders presided over a ribbon cutting ceremony, inaugurating nine extra feet of sidewalk space along the neighbourhood’s busiest thoroughfare. But, according to Koo, this new space was being usurped by interlopers. Street vendors, he claimed, had swooped in and

¹ Monteverdi, Suzanne. 2018. “Queen’s Councilman’s Bills would Limit Street Vending in Downtown Flushing.” QNS.com.

claimed all the new space, thereby frustrating efforts to ease crowding. It should be noted that according to multiple observations before the eventual ban went into effect, the number of street vendors along Main Street itself was miniscule. Most vendors did business on the side streets just off Main Street. While Main Street had its share of pamphleteers, street preachers, and storefront stands spilling out onto the sidewalk, vendors were far from the main cause of crowding. Nevertheless, Koo saw this moment as an opportunity to move against vendors—whose presence in the neighbourhood was long opposed by property and business interests. In June of 2018, Koo introduced a bill to City Council that would ban vending from all of Downtown Flushing.

In legislative hearings, two lines of argument emerged to justify the bill. The first was a relatively objective claim that the sidewalks were too crowded and that vendors were one of the main sources of crowding. As an official in the Flushing Business Improvement District testified, “...especially during lunch time our sidewalk is very congested and I often see people walking on the street and it’s very dangerous there as I mentioned before because there are so many carts on the street, and it’s very dangerous.”² The local press tended to echo these objective concerns of crowding, often uncritically parroting claims by Koo and community elites that vendors caused crowding. For many inside and outside the community, this matter-of-fact portrayal had the effect of depoliticizing the issue, and turning it into a technical question of sidewalk width and pedestrian loads.

But Peter Koo, in his remarks at numerous City Council hearings, made clear that the proposed vendor ban was about more than just objective concerns. Koo drew clear lines between vendors and “the community”. According to Koo, vendors were “people who are taking advantage of the new space to selling [sic] everything from health insurance, counterfeit handbags, 99 cent stuff, parts and pens, fruits and vegetables, and of course, socks.”³ Not only were vendors selling unwanted goods but they were doing so “at the expense of the community.”⁴ “We just want our streets back. So we can walk easily. So we don’t have to compete with vendors.”⁵ The word “we” here is imperative. Koo, in his public remarks, was very clear about who he considered part of the Flushing community, the “we”, and who were the interlopers. As Koo closed his statements regarding the bill, he drew these lines with unmistakable clarity. “So, this legislation looks to return the sidewalks of one of New York City’s transportation hubs back to the people, business [sic] and residents who live there.”⁶

These distinctions made by Koo between vendors and “the people” of Flushing were curious to say the least. Most vendors in Flushing were Chinese immigrants, like the large share of Flushing’s residents. Many of them made their home in Flushing as well. Moreover, while the vendors certainly did sell inexpensive goods, “99 cent stuff” according

² Dion Soylu, Flushing BID Manager, Transcript of the Minutes of the Committee on Consumer Affairs and Business Licensing. June 14th, 2018. Pg. 69, line 17-22.

³ Peter Koo. Transcript of the Minutes of the Committee on Consumer Affairs and Business Licensing. June 14th, 2018. Pg. 12, line 14-17.

⁴ *ibid*, Pg. 12, line 19-20.

⁵ *ibid*, Pg. 12, line 4-6.

⁶ *ibid*, Pg. 12, line 19-23.

to Koo, their affordable food and merchandise was much needed in a neighbourhood—new luxury condos notwithstanding—that was still largely working class.

Moreover, the anti-vendor rhetoric put forth by Koo and other elites did not seem to fit the reality on the ground. The idea that “nobody” wanted vendors in the neighbourhood was contradicted by the fact that vendors cultivated and maintained a loyal customer base—many of them Chinese residents of Flushing who enjoyed the Chinese foods that Flushing vendors sold. Finally, a walk down Main Street prior to the vendor ban might leave the observer scratching their head as to why vendors were singled out. Street vendors were simply not an overwhelming presence along Main Street. A survey conducted prior to the ban found only a little over a dozen vendors in the downtown area that was eventually placed off limits, with the vast majority of them located on side streets off the busy thoroughfare of Main Street.

IV. Perceptions of Street Vending and Crowding: Surveying the Community

It was partially this disconnect between the lived reality of Flushing and the overwrought anti-vendor discourse of political and business leaders that led to the idea of doing a survey of people in public space that asked specific questions about crowding and street vending. Did the opinions and perceptions of everyday users of Flushing’s public spaces conform to the anti-vendor discourse put forward by neighbourhood elites? Or was this elite discourse out-of-step with the feelings of Flushing residents. Our hypothesis going into the survey was that responses of neighbourhood residents and denizens would be less strongly anti-vendor than the rhetoric put forth by Koo and his allies.

There was also an advocacy dimension to undertaking this survey. The Flushing case represented a dangerous precedent for vendors in struggles over public space in New York City. Prior to the new law enacted in Flushing, most vendor legislation in the city was debated and enacted at the city-wide level. This was the first time a ban on vending was proposed for a specific neighbourhood by the local city councilmember representing that neighbourhood. The danger in this—from the perspective of street vendors—is that when city councilmembers introduce legislation specific to their district, and take it upon themselves to make claims about what their district wants and needs, they are rarely challenged by other councilmembers. This is for a couple of reasons. First, city councilmembers generally defer to their colleagues on local, neighbourhood-level issues. The councilperson is assumed to be an expert on what his or her district needs. Second, councilmembers are reticent to vote against neighbourhood-specific legislation of fellow legislators for fear of having that legislator vote against one of their own neighbourhood-specific bills.

When councilmembers, who are easily coopted by business and real estate elites in their district, are able to present an unchallenged “common sense” argument about the problems of vending; when they are able to say—without any referencing of evidence—that their community “doesn’t want” vendors; and when these statements go unchallenged by the press, this puts vendors in a difficult position. Carrying out an on-the-ground survey to test the propositions about community feelings towards vendors put forth by Councilmember Koo and others is a way to potentially push back against otherwise unchallenged framings. It is for this reason that we decided to work

with the Street Vendor Project—a vendor advocacy organization in New York—to build a more evidence-based understanding of neighbourhood feelings about crowding, street vending, and quality of life.

V. The Survey Methods and Approach

The survey instrument contained a variety of questions concerning public space and street vending in Flushing. There were questions specifically about the quality and nature of public spaces in the neighbourhood, as well as about perceptions of crowding. Only after we asked about crowding did we ask questions about street vendors specifically. This was done in order to parse feelings about public space in general from feelings about street vendors in particular. For instance, if a respondent did not list vendors as a major source of crowding when given a number of different options, and then said they strongly agreed with the vendor ban, one can assume that their support for the ban comes more from negative feelings about vendors in general than objective concerns about crowding. The survey was rounded out with demographic questions concerning income, place of residence, place of birth, gender, etc.

The survey itself was administered to three different categories of people in public space. One survey was given to street vendor customers. This survey instrument included questions about why respondents visited that particular street vendor that day, and how often they buy something from vendors. The other two surveys, which were identical in terms of questions, were administered to public space users and commuters. We defined public space users as anyone lingering or otherwise using public spaces. Commuters were people using public transit options in the neighbourhood.

The survey utilized a convenience sampling method. Subjects were approached in public space by the researchers and survey volunteers and asked to answer a short survey about public space in Flushing. Vendor patrons were approached while they waited for food at vendor carts. Public space users were approached in public spaces as they sat or lingered in gathering spots like the plaza in front of the Queens Public Library. Finally, commuters were given surveys to fill out while they waited in line for buses. We also administered surveys on subway platforms or on subway trains as they sat in the station (Flushing-Main Street is the terminus of the 7 line, meaning trains headed back into Manhattan sit on the platform with doors open while they wait for the next departure time).

Each survey administrator had three copies of the instrument, one in English, one in Mandarin, and one in Spanish. On each day of survey administration, we had at least one volunteer who was fluent in Mandarin and could administer and answer questions about the survey in that language. The surveys were designed to be completed by respondents, though in a few instances administrators administered the surveys orally to respondents who could not read or otherwise had trouble filling out a paper survey themselves.

In total we were able to gather 250 completed surveys, 143 in English, 97 in Mandarin, and 10 in Spanish. Overall the survey sample was quite local in terms of residence. Residents of Downtown Flushing and the immediate surrounding area accounted for 67 per cent of survey respondents. A full 93 per cent of respondents lived in New York

City. Nearly 40 per cent of survey respondents reported their income as below \$25,000, which would put them below the poverty line in New York City. According to official statistics, only 16 per cent of Flushing residents are below the poverty line, meaning our survey sample had more lower income people than the neighborhood average.⁷ Another 35 per cent of our respondents reported their income as between \$25,000 and \$75,000, putting them in the vicinity of the neighbourhood's median income of \$52,000. Ethnically, our sample was quite representative of the neighbourhood. Our sample was 71 per cent foreign born, not a surprising number for an immigrant neighbourhood like Flushing. Nearly 60 per cent of the neighbourhood's population was foreign born according to 2017 statistics. Over half, 56 per cent of our sample, were born in East or South East Asia, with 45 per cent born in Mainland China (if respondents wrote Taiwan or Hong Kong as place of birth, we coded this as "other East Asia"). These numbers are highly representative, as 54 per cent of Flushing residents identify as Asian. We should note we did not ask about ethnicity, only place of birth. We did have a number of U.S.-born people of Asian descent answer surveys, so in terms of ethnicity, the percentage of Asian respondents was higher than 56 per cent. Our survey sample was 52 per cent female, 47 per cent male, and 1 per cent non-binary. These numbers match the gender demographics of the neighbourhood, which is 53 per cent female and 47 per cent male.

VI. Survey Results

A. Perceptions of Crowding and the Causes of Crowding

In justifying the vendor ban, political and business leaders claimed that the neighbourhood was simply too crowded, and vendors contributed significantly to that crowding. According to our survey, people using the public spaces of Flushing only partially agreed with that statement. Unsurprisingly, 84 per cent of respondents described the neighbourhood as somewhat or much too crowded, with nearly half (43 per cent) calling the neighbourhood much too crowded. But we were interested not just in perceptions of crowding, but the perceptions of what actually caused the crowding. As mentioned earlier, Flushing is a busy, dense neighbourhood, with a number of factors that contribute to crowding. We asked respondents to check off major causes of crowding from a list of options. By far, the most common response for causes of crowding was "people waiting for buses". A word of explanation about this: Downtown Flushing operates something like an outdoor bus depot, especially at rush hours. Flushing is the last stop on the number 7 subway line bringing commuters from Manhattan. From Flushing many people connect to the multiple bus lines that continue out into eastern Queens neighbourhoods not served by the subway. Bus riders form lines as they wait for their connecting busses. These lines can be very long, particularly at rush hour, and take up large sections of sidewalk space, as multiple lines form for different bus routes.

The next two most popular responses when it came to causes of crowding were "popularity of stores/restaurants" and "narrow sidewalks". People come to Flushing from across the city and region to shop and dine. It is a social hub for the New York City

⁷ <https://furmancenter.org/neighborhoods/view/flushing-whitestone>

region's Asian American community, with massive banquet halls, Asian supermarkets, and countless professional offices of Chinese speaking lawyers, doctors, accountants, and others. This popularity gets manifested on the sidewalks, which themselves are remnants of a street grid originally laid out in the 1600s. Flushing is a modern, vibrant, densely packed Asian immigrant enclave laid out on top of a 17th century village grid. This causes crowding by its very nature and has little to do with vendors. Of the nine options given to respondents for causes of crowding, street vending came in seventh on the list, having only been checked off 43 times. The only things that received less responses were "trash bags on curb" (31 times) and "newsstands" (5 times).

B. Perceptions of Vendors and Vending

Despite the claims of Peter Koo and his allies, street vendors were not viewed by most people in the community as a major *source* of crowding. We were also curious to find out people's perceptions of vendors, especially since they were portrayed by neighbourhood elites as unwanted interlopers in the neighbourhood. Were vendors and their "99 cent stuff" really unwelcomed by users of public space? Or did they serve a purpose in the neighbourhood?

What we found was that the majority of people in the neighbourhood wanted vendors to remain part of Flushing. Overall, when asked whether they agreed with the proposed ban on street vendors, 66 per cent disagreed with the ban, while 34 per cent agreed. Unsurprisingly, people who were surveyed buying goods from vendors were the most pro-vendor, with 82 per cent disagreeing with a ban. But even non-vendor patrons were against the proposed ban: 58 per cent of commuters disagreed with the ban, while 55 per cent of public space users disagreed. Even if the non-vendor patron surveys did not reveal overwhelming support for vendors, they nonetheless contradicted anti-vendor rhetoric put forth by political and business elites, claiming that neighbourhood residents were unified in their dislike of street vendors.

When asked why they thought vendors should remain on the streets, respondents focused mostly on the convenience, low costs, and quality and specificity of vendors' foods—which catered to Chinese immigrants and provided them with a taste of home. Many said street vendors were an integral part of Flushing and that a Downtown Flushing without vendors did not make sense. As one respondent said, "this [the proposed ban] is crazy, do not take away Flushing's unique identity!" According to others, vendors, "add to the experience and culture" of the neighbourhood and "make Flushing unique". They "are some of the best parts of Flushing and have the best food—no contest". Moreover they were seen as good for the neighbourhood because "that's what attracts tourists."

Another major reason for opposing the ban seemed to be sympathy or empathy with vendors themselves. Many people remarked that vendors were just trying to make a living and therefore should not be pushed out of space by elites. Respondents recognized vending as a survival strategy, saying things like, "street vendors are usually old people or lower class, they need to survive" and "They're only looking for a living. They don't rob anybody. [They are] simply doing it for their family". This portrayal of vendors as hard-working and legitimate actors in space diverged significantly from elite rhetoric. There was often a sense of solidarity with vendors from respondents, particularly lower income respondents, who claimed vendors should stay, "because

we have the right to get ahead little by little, we do what we can to subsist” and “life is difficult for everyone.”

C. Class, Street Vending, and Neighbourhood Image

When broken down by most demographic groups, responses concerning street vending were remarkably similar. For instance, foreign born respondents were no more or less likely to view vending as a major cause of crowding than native born. Neither did this affect feelings on the vendor ban. Native born respondents were a bit more in favour of vendors, with 83 per cent opposed to a ban compared to 74 per cent of foreign born respondents. Overall though, most demographic variables did not have a significant effect on feelings concerning vending or crowding, with the exception of one—income.

The income level of respondents did tend to have an effect on their perceptions of crowding and vending in the neighbourhood, which reflects existing class divisions in this gentrifying part of the city. Lower income people (those making less than \$25,000 a year) were the most strongly opposed to a vending ban. Overall, 70 per cent opposed the vending ban. When excluding vendor patrons, respondents from the lowest income bracket were the only group that was still strongly opposed to the ban, with over 60 per cent opposed. Other income brackets, when including only commuters and public space users, were more divided. For instance, the two higher income brackets were divided 50/50 on the question of the vendor ban.

Interestingly, class also had an effect on the perception of the number of vendors in the neighbourhood, and therefore the feelings about the magnitude of the vending “problem”. For instance, when asked “how many vendors do you notice in Downtown Flushing?” 80 per cent of people making less than \$25,000 responded “none”, “just a few”, or “some”. Only 20 per cent responded “a lot” or “a tremendous amount”. This differed significantly from higher income groups, where nearly two-thirds of respondents perceived there to be “a lot” or “a tremendous amount” of vendors in the neighbourhood. We included numerical amounts alongside the responses. Just a few equaled 1-5 vendors, some 5-15, a lot 15-30 and a tremendous amount over 30. Prior to carrying out the survey, we undertook a census of vendors in downtown Flushing, finding roughly 15 vendors in the neighbourhood on any given day. Therefore, those respondents claiming that there were a lot or a tremendous amount of vendors in the neighbourhood were over-perceiving the vending population. It is telling that higher income people were much more likely to over-estimate the number of vendors in the neighbourhood. It is possible that class-bias against vending may have led higher income groups to over-perceive vending as a problem.

The class difference underlying perceptions of vending was also borne out in the qualitative sections of the survey. Lower income people tended to see vendors as assets, specifically because they served goods and food catered to new immigrants—both in terms of variety and price. As one respondent said, “I feel like I’m back in China, I can get more like traditional food [from vendors] than restaurants.” Others were clear that vendors were one of the few places they could find inexpensive food, claiming there was “nowhere else” for lower income people to eat. One respondent even claimed that sit-down restaurants were not always welcoming to lower income people, saying “vendors are good because sometimes restaurants don't let you in to buy food and sit.”

Another respondent summed things up nicely on the part of the survey that asked for any further comments: “If you closed street vendor it's very sad for poor people, who cannot buy in supermarket/restaurant. I will be happy you will not close. Thanks.”

On the other hand, anti-vendor language belied very clear class biases, particularly when it came to the perception of vendors' cleanliness, etiquette, and appearance. It was here that we heard distinct echoes of Peter Koo's characterizations of vendors. According to one respondent, “vendors may sell unhealthy or illegal merchandise and damages the city image, causing traffic congestion in Flushing.” Other responses were much more clearly about class perceptions and bias. Vendors “look cheap and dirty”, said one person. They “need more education and etiquette”, said another. Another did not mince words about their views of vendors as lower-class people unable to conform to the norms of the broader neighbourhood, saying, “common people do not have critical thinking, they do not care for community.”

The class divide that we unearthed in the surveys reflects a long-standing divide in Flushing that is only being exacerbated by high-end development projects aiming to further consolidate Flushing as a luxury neighbourhood of transnational East Asian elites. Vendors do not fit into this vision. They are “reminders of poverty”, as one neighbourhood informant explained to us. Many of the higher income immigrants in the area see vending as a shameful activity, an act that represents incompetence or an obstinate unwillingness to get a “real job” on the part of vendors themselves. The fact that many vendors are lower income immigrants from the interior of Mainland China, and many of the property owners and developers are higher income transplants from Taiwan and Hong Kong or the coastal urban centres of the Mainland serves to further deepen the class divide, while telescoping long-standing geopolitical resentments and rivalries onto the space of a few blocks of Main Street in Flushing.

VII. Conclusions

This survey of actual public space users in Flushing ultimately ended up undermining top-down discourses of planning and urban space put forth by political and business leaders in the community. Rather than being a neighbourhood under siege from unwanted and unwelcome vendors, Flushing is a place where vendors are tolerated by most and seen as critical to neighbourhood life and identity by many. While our survey did show that many people view public space as in need of improvement, vendors were not identified as the main problem by users of public spaces. We can therefore say with relative confidence that vendors were used as scapegoats by local politicians eager to show they were “doing something” about public space in the neighbourhood. Finally, the survey reflected the class differences that exist in the neighbourhood, with vendors caught in the crosshairs of conflicting views of the proper use of public space, urban image, and neighbourhood futures.

This research approach can serve as an example for activists and advocates of street vendors in cities across the globe. In framing vendors as problems, political and business elites often use the language of common sense. “Everybody knows” vendors cause crowding; “nobody” likes vendors; and so on. Often these claims are taken uncritically by mainstream media outlets, other politicians, and city agencies. These sorts of on-the-ground surveys can both serve as a tool for vendors in order to push back against

baseless claims with empirical evidence, as well as give voice to vendors and their constituency. In Flushing, wealthy developers, business owners, and their allies in city hall attempted to speak for the neighbourhood, claiming to represent the community's interest. This survey provided Flushing residents and denizens a voice, and reinforced the notion that Flushing, like most neighbourhoods, is not monolithic, but riven through with multiple interests and notions of good public space. And for many in Flushing, a good neighbourhood with welcoming public spaces is one that includes street vendors.

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About WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice. WIEGO promotes change by improving statistics and expanding knowledge on the informal economy, building networks and capacity among informal worker organizations and, jointly with the networks and organizations, influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org