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The Seasonal Christmas Tree Take-Over of New York City

LinDa Saphan and Kevin Cabrera

Abstract

The verticality in New York City can be observed through the erection not only of constructions made by the tree sellers for their stands but also through the sprouting of tall fir trees all over the city. For one month, New York City is no longer just a mineral environment of granite and stone but one of vegetation that takes over the city. The use of the sidewalks by tree sellers shifts the urban morphology, temporarily creating a new urban space where pedestrians can look up and around instead of pass through.

Introduction – From Public Space to Green Seasonal Space

In New York City, millions of people use public spaces on a daily basis when they leave their home and work environments to seek a great variety of other experiences. Individuals' understanding of what public space is, who should be able to access it, and how it should be used sometimes leads to conflicts as people compete for the limited available space. Exercisers, picnickers, dog walkers, nannies, shoppers, vendors, performers, and tourists, along with city officials, are all stakeholders who have different needs and expectations of public spaces. The rules of engagement among these stakeholders are not always clearly defined, necessitating negotiations between residents and nonresidents, buyers and sellers, and authorities to resolve tensions. By definition public spaces are open to all and somehow the public and city officials must accommodate all users and learn to share limited space.

This paper investigates a particular case of the use of New York's public spaces: Christmas tree sellers. We report the results of this study on this group to uncover competing agendas of the users of public spaces and the city officials who control them. This paper addresses the practices of the power of negotiation of public spaces by urban actors, how they interpret, use, and enforce public space in the government-owned infrastructures of New York City sidewalks (Figure 1).



Fig. 1: Stand in Soho. Fir trees of different height standing along the sidewalk, December 2015. Photo credit: LinDa Saphan.

The concept of what constitutes public space and its functions has evolved over time. Public space was originally conceived of as “streets, parks and recreation areas, plazas and other publicly owned and managed outdoor spaces” (Tonnelat) or, more generally, any space outside the home and work environment. By that definition, the majority of the urban landscape is public space.

In public spaces, such as parks, people of all backgrounds can come together and take momentary refuge from the noise and pressures of the urban lifestyle. A unique feature of public spaces, unlike private spaces, is that they are open to all and can be freely entered without permission or membership by anyone, regardless of any social differences that separate people in other environments. In these spaces, people can interact with others more authentically or spend time alone, finding respite away from the normal constraints of the highly structured urban lifestyle.

More than one hundred years ago German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918) outlined his concerns about the expression of individual values in the modern city in his 1903 *The Metropolis and Mental Life*. He described the challenge of maintaining an individual subjective self against the pressures of urban life and technology that tend to erase individuality. City dwellers set themselves apart from others by withstanding outside influences that govern what they do, how they behave, and what they look like. Public spaces are critical to the need for an individual self that is felt by most Westerners, but also for the universal human need for association.

How people view and experience public spaces depends in part on population density. New York City has the highest density of any city in the United States with 27,000 people per square mile, exceeding the density of Mexico City (24,000) but paling in comparison to Manila (107,000). Space is a prized commodity in New York, forcing people to find ways to adapt to what is available, for example by sharing notoriously small and expensive shoebox apartments with multiple roommates. New Yorkers’ contentment with the amount of space they have depends in part on economic status. Herbert Gans underscores the importance of public spaces for low-income city dwellers: “New York’s Park Avenue apartment dwellers live at higher areal densities than the poorest New Yorkers, but they live at low dwelling unit density and many also own weekend and summer homes on large lots. Poor people, who cannot ‘go away’ on weekends, therefore live more of their lives in the streets, and in parks when these are available” (Gans 329). Thus, wealthy New Yorkers experience the city completely differently from those who live in much more crowded areas in lower socioeconomic areas. Where you live in New York City determines how you view the urban landscape and its space. If you can escape the urban environment periodically, or even literally live above it in a large apartment like those that line Central Park, you have more benign feelings about the city. Wealthy urbanites have much more personal control of their space.

For those who are not able to leave the urban landscape, space becomes a much more pressing priority in their lives. Their small apartments shape their experience with space in the city, driving them to expand their activities into exterior public spaces. But both their interior and exterior spaces are structured by landlords and city officials, presenting a challenge to the universal human need for freedom and autonomy.

Although the city can appear as an obstacle to ecological diversity, it still constitutes an ecosystem in its own right where nature is present amidst the manmade. New York City is very much a mineral city where vegetation in green spaces represents 14% of the city land, which amounts to approximately 29,000 acres. This green space is composed of public green spaces and also private gardens. Yet the proportion can vary greatly by neighborhood, and even when present, vegetation is not always noticeable in public space, leaving city dwellers with a very mineral impression. Nevertheless, for one month, from the end of November to the end of December, small pockets of tiny pine forests are erected throughout the city. Nature finds its place in an urban environment like New York City where manmade natural areas on the city sidewalks turned into "wild" natural areas.

Several studies address the role of nature and the positive effects of green space in urban settings. Vegetation in urban setting enhances the quality of life (Chiesura 129-138) and contributes in reducing stress (Grahm and Stigsdotter 1-18) and improving air quality (Frank et al. 7-87). Many studies conclude that people who live near green spaces have healthier lives (Maas et al. 587-592). In this study, we observe a very different green space, a seasonal one, through the Christmas tree sellers in New York City. The paper will address the verticality of the relationships in the sidewalk tree-selling industry and also in the erection of stalls, cabins, and sheds, along with thousands of trees erected throughout the city like little wild pine forests (Figures 2 and 3).



Fig. 2. Stand in Greenwich Village. Shed built by two female French-Canadian sellers with bought materials and found objects for the interior, December 2015. Photo credit: LinDa Saphan.



Fig. 3. Stand in the West Village. Shed built with bought materials by a couple from British Columbia Canada, December 2015. Photo credit: LinDa Saphan.

Space is never neutral or equal. There is some form of hierarchy established by its users. Public space is a space of power dynamics, invisible to the passerby and tourists yet anchored in the ways each user negotiates the space: through the financial purchase of sidewalk corners by big corporation for Christmas tree sellers.

We gathered randomly 54 interviews of Christmas tree sellers in various locations of Manhattan on December 2016. We had open-ended conversations with these tree sellers. Tree sellers are seasonal workers coming from outside of the city, many from the Quebec province of Canada. The tree sellers rely on the one month before Christmas Eve for their income.

The Vertical Relationship in the Fir Trees Selling Industry

Urban life can have a dehumanizing effect as hundreds of thousands of people, all packed into the same restricted space, go about their mechanical, hurried daily routines. The individual feels lost and depersonalized in the crowd. How can urbanites assert their individuality and humanity and stand out against a background of thousands of other anonymous people? Public spaces provide just such venues for individuals to step away from the facelessness of their normal daily performance and partake in a brief period of freedom. The presence of fir tree stands provides a respite in the urban experience through the relationship established with the sellers and the coniferous presence on the sidewalks.

Before Christmas trees became a normality in homes across the world, pine and evergreen branches were used to decorate because it reminded people of the vegetation that existed in the summer months. In the 16th century, Germany started what we know as the traditional Christmas tree. Christians would bring Christmas trees into their houses and decorate them to show their holiday spirit. When German settlers came to America, they brought their Christmas tree tradition. The first record of a tree being on display was in the 1830s. In the 1840s, Americans saw Christmas trees as a pagan symbol, and many did not accept them. In 1846, Queen Victoria and her family were depicted in an illustration celebrating Christmas standing around a Christmas tree. People in Britain and America started to celebrate Christmas with Christmas trees. The evolution of the Christmas tree has come a long way, and some may say it is now viewed as a symbol of family and tradition (History.com Editors).

The tradition of the Rockefeller Christmas tree shows how New York City celebrates Christmas throughout the United States. The first tree placed at Rockefeller Center was in 1931. It was a small Christmas tree erected by workers at the center of a construction site. A few years later there was another tree placed there, but this time it had lights and decorations. From there a tradition was established where each year an enormous evergreen tree is selected from

somewhere in the United States—the largest tree to date was from Killingworth, Connecticut, that measured 100 feet tall. Every year the tree gathers thousands of tourists and New Yorkers who share an urban holiday experience together. The annual tree lighting, aired on NBC nationally every year, has become an event where famous singers perform Christmas songs when the tree is lit up for the first time. This Christmas ritual launches New York City residents into the holiday festivities (Figure 4).



Fig. 4. Christmas at Rockefeller Center. Photo credit: JamesPatrickWaddell/iStock/Getty Images.

From the day after Thanksgiving up until Christmas Eve, Christmas tree vendors sell trees to residents throughout the five boroughs. Manhattan is one borough where you can find at least one Christmas tree stand every few blocks. In the U.S., the Christmas tree business sells to about 25-33 million families each year, creating a retail market worth \$1.03 billion. (National Christmas Tree Association).

Being able to sell Christmas trees without a permit was not always the case in New York City. In 1938, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia declared a “war on Christmas trees.” The purpose of this was to reduce the amount of street vendors on street corners. That year the mayor’s mission was to outlaw Christmas tree vendors from selling on sidewalks (Geis). He created indoor markets where Christmas tree vendors were able to relocate. His goal was to improve the flow of traffic, and he also thought that street vending was a low job done by immigrants which was hurting American workers. The war on Christmas trees in 1938 almost made it impossible to sell Christmas trees. Sellers were allowed to sell trees on the street only if they had a license, which was very hard to get. The people protested. The city council reacted to upset citizens with the “coniferous tree” exception. This allows people to sell evergreen trees on the

streets with no license required but only during the month of December (Sriskandarajah). Some guidelines were set, such as not obstructing traffic and getting permission from the property owner. To this day, New York City Parks and Recreation holds yearly bidding competitions for the vendors that want to locate themselves in city parks. These spots are given to the highest bidder, no matter the circumstance. For example, if one business was located in the same spot for 20 years but they were out bid by a competitor, they would have no choice but to go elsewhere with their stand (Grabar).

On average, a tree stand in Manhattan makes about \$30,000 a season, whereas the seller only makes a fraction of that (DNAinfo Staff). The location of the stand has an impact on how well or how badly the business will do throughout the month of December (Figure 5). The more crowded neighborhoods tend to have more than one stand within the area, which brings competition into play. When the price of the rent for tree stands goes up, the price of the trees also goes up every year. "For the most expensive spot, a tree-stand at SoHo Park on Sixth Avenue and Spring Street, competitive bidding pushed the rent up 19 percent, from \$47,000 to \$56,005, according to official city statistics" (Messing, Rosario & Golding). Similarly, "Figures from the city Parks and Recreation Department show that it is raking in \$238,665 on tree-selling leases at 21 public places in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens from Nov. 23 through Dec. 27" (Messing, Rosario & Golding). The intense bidding process has had a toll on many of the Christmas tree owners and even New Yorkers who cannot afford trees because of price increases. In many of the businesses, customers were essentially paying per foot for their tree. This means that if the standard is \$30-\$40 per foot, they would pay about \$180 a six-foot tree.



Fig. 5. Stand in the West Village. Fir trees lean against a wooden fence with lights and ornaments hovering over the sidewalk, December 2015. Photo credit: LinDa Saphan.

The origin of the trees also determines the price (Faherty). The majority of sellers buy their Christmas trees from North Carolina, Canada, upstate New York, and Oregon. There are three different types of trees that are typically sold: Douglas fir, Frasier fir, and Balsam fir. The Balsam fir had been the standard Christmas tree in homes, but that has changed over to the Frasier fir because it has a significantly longer life span after being cut. They are known to like being in warmer places, so they do better in homes. The Frasier firs are usually grown in North Carolina, and they are the most expensive trees. They take longer to grow, but they tend to have a better shape. Balsams are typically grown in Canada, whereas the Douglas firs are grown in Pennsylvania. (National Christmas Tree Association). Frasier firs are from North Carolina, Balsams are from Quebec, and Douglas are from Pennsylvania. The further away the farm is located the more the sellers had to pay for transportation. Only a select few sellers we interviewed had trees from Pennsylvania because their families own the farms.

Because permits are not needed for Christmas tree stands a lot of business goes unrecorded and unseen. Forever Evergreen controls the majority of tree stands in New York City, and they tend to be very secretive. Forever Evergreen supplies trees to stands and requires the employees to keep track of trees and sales with paperwork. Trucks with Florida license plates drive around at night collecting the money and charts from each one of their Christmas-tree stands. Employees are only paid in cash at the end of each season. There have been recorded cases of Forever Evergreen not paying employees because they leaked information to the press. The vendors who are not affiliated with Forever Evergreen are often threatened or harassed into moving away from Forever Evergreen business. People have even been sent out by competitors to set fire to and destroy rival stands.

But competition exists not only with other tree sellers. Recently, corporation like Whole Foods, Target, and other chain stores are selling trees in front of their stores also. The vendors cannot compete with the prices but hope their personal service and product selection will distinguish them from corporate competitors ("The Christmas Tree Salesmen of New York"). Many tree sellers add personal touches in decorating their stands with Christmas lights and other festive artefacts. Many stands also sell their own handmade wreaths, garlands, and other festive decorations. They take leftover tree trimmings from the trees they are selling and create traditional holiday decorations. During times when they are not with customers, they are making these items and putting them on display. These personalized touches of the Christmas stands create small and unique sheds all throughout New York sidewalks (Figure 6).



Fig. 6. Stand in Soho. An elaborated cabin built from found objects in the city, December 2015. Photo credit: LinDa Saphan.

From an outsider's perspective, a Christmas seller stand looks like a mom and pop shop. The people look at the stand as if these sellers brought their fir trees from their farm to sell in the streets of New York City. This false impression also gives the customer an illusion of an egalitarian relationship among sellers. This naïve image of a family run business may be true for a small number of stands. Nonetheless, all stands do not have the same values and are not equal in their positions. New York City sidewalks belong to the highest bidder for a month. The competitive relationships are very much vertical either among the workers within each business or between stands (Figure 7).

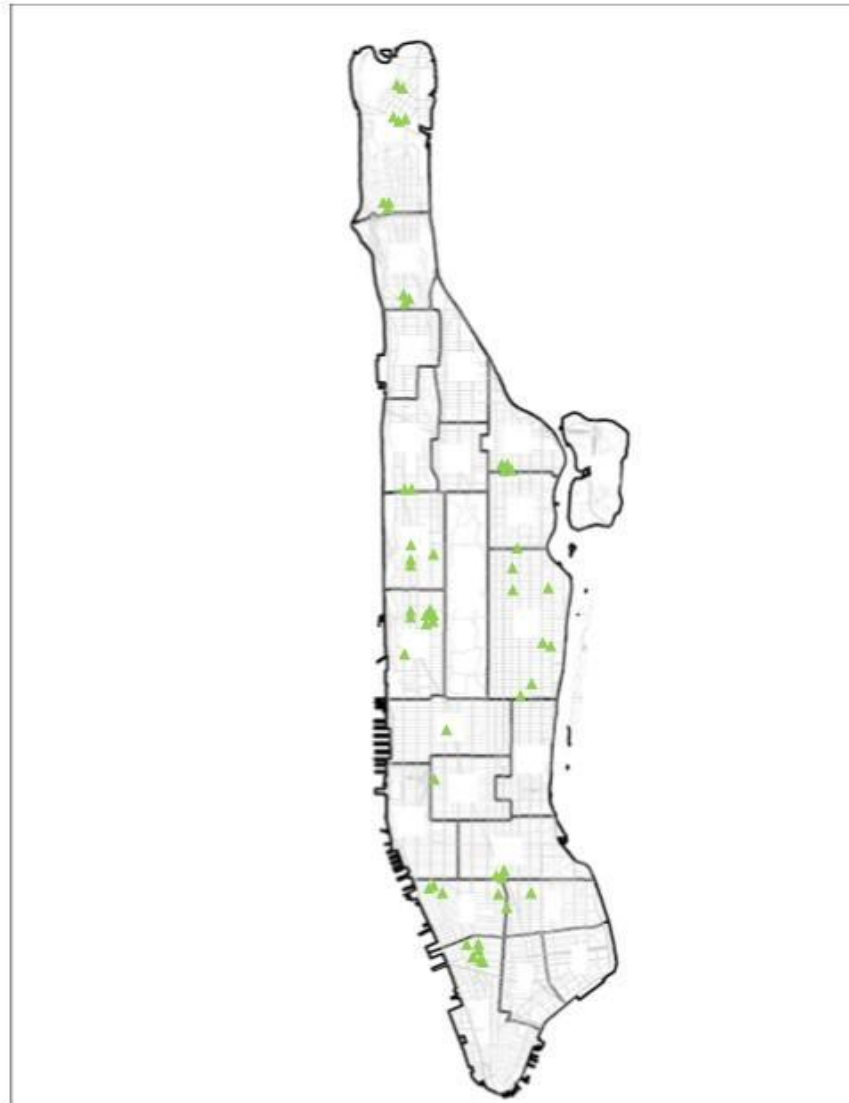


Fig. 7. The map of fir tree sellers surveyed during December 2015 for this research. Tree stands are often only a few blocks apart, making for more competition among sellers. The value of the sidewalks varies greatly depending on their location in Manhattan. The more crowded and higher end the neighborhood the more expensive the stands' rental rates will be. No sidewalks are equal. For example, around Central Park and downtown, the tree stands are more crowded together and therefore more expensive than in Inwood or Washington Heights.

Temporary Northern Village Settlement by French Canadians in New York City

Selling Christmas trees in New York City is attractive to a variety of people from the United States and Canada. The H-2B program is not used by the Christmas tree industry because all growing, harvesting, and selling jobs are connected to agriculture. The industry hires foreigners who are more willing than Americans

to do the work of running a Christmas tree stand. There are people who work full-time jobs in addition to selling trees during the holiday season to earn an extra income. The H-2B work permits allow nonimmigrants to work for businesses seasonally as long as they are nonagricultural. Businesses and individuals each have to meet regulations to take part in the H-2B nonimmigrant program. "The H-2B nonimmigrant program permits employers to temporarily hire nonimmigrants to perform nonagricultural labor or services in the United States. The employment must be of a temporary nature for a limited period of time such as a one-time occurrence, seasonal need, peak load need or intermittent need" ("Wage and Hour Division (WHD): H-2B Program"). As long as both parties are approved for the work permits, they are allowed to hire foreign-born individuals.

Seasonal jobs are a huge component of employment in the United States (National Retail Federation). There are several different jobs that open up during peak seasons for companies and small businesses. Some seasonal workers bounce around from seasonal job to seasonal jobs. One age group that particularly benefits from seasonal jobs are teenagers and college students (Junior Achievement USA Staff). Students are off for months at a time, and some are taking advantage of the need for seasonal workers. Our Christmas tree sellers fall into that category as well. The younger tree workers are doing it for the experience. 9 interviewees were between 18 and 24 years old, while the rest of the 32 interviewees were between 25 and 40 years old, and 14 interviewees were 40 and older. 20 out of 54 were French Canadian. The younger French Canadians came to New York for the experience of visiting New York while making some money, while the older ones take on this hard work away from their family for financial motivation. Steve (a fictitious name to protect the seller), a French-Canadian selling in Greenwich Village, said the previous year he made \$7,000 in cash for a month of work. This was considered a low earning.

The jobs that are created by tree vendors are offered to anyone who is interested, both inside the U.S. and outside. French Canadians have taken more of an interest than most in the tree business. To understand why so many French Canadians migrate to New York City to sell trees every year, we need to step back and look at the way Americans view them. When people first think of Canadian natives, they think of outdoorsy and rustic types of people, such as lumberjacks, who typically wear jeans, heavy-duty boots, and flannel shirts. Even though these are stereotypes, the French Canadians interviewed agreed that it is what Americans are looking for in a Christmas tree vendor. They said that it helps sales when they look a certain way, speak French, and have an accent while speaking English. People are interested in these stereotypical details, which add to the experience of buying a Christmas tree in the city. One British Columbia Canadian seller on Hudson Street made her boyfriend look more like a French Canadian in order to fit the stereotype. Another French Canadian selling on Laguardia Street only wears flannel shirts when coming to New York to sell trees to look like a lumberjack.

Canada is known for their cold weather and harsh winters, and because of this, the perception is that Canadians can weather the cold better than American residents. The pressure and demands of working in the tree business call for the need to be outside at all times, and therefore, camping and survival skills are necessary for dealing with the cold. Canadian tree sellers know tips and tricks that have been passed down for generations, like knowing not to wash their hair more than once a week, eating certain foods to keep them warm, and rubbing essential oils on their hands to avoid infections (Genis).

But why are so many Canadians, specifically French Canadians, attracted to coming to the Big Apple for a few weeks? Historically, the trees came from the Northern country, and along with the trees came the vendors. Generations of family members have become seasonal workers in America during the holiday season. The young French Canadians who were interviewed said that they were in the business because it gave them a chance to travel until they figured out their next chapter in life. Forever Evergreen often hires young unemployed French Canadians who are willing to work hard for a season, even if the trees today come mainly from North Carolina. The tree business even offers the Christmas tree inventory paperwork in French for those who cannot read English. Today though, according to the Canadian government, \$32 million worth of trees were exported to the United States for vendors to sell. This is only a fraction of the trees that contribute to the \$1.3 billion industry in America (The Business Insider).

When looking at our data we were able to find that a majority of the French Canadians came to sell trees because it was something that many of their family members and friends have done in the past. Adeline (not her real name), a 24-year-old French Canadian, said that she first learned about tree selling in New York City from her grandmother who used to do it when she was in her twenties. Perpetuating family tradition and willing to experiment with new endeavors, she is now in her fourth season. Word-of-mouth is another way they learn about this seasonal job opportunity. Because the business of selling fir trees in New York City is a black-market industry, the workers are paid in cash, which makes the job more attractive for French Canadians, who often live in their vans to save money for lodging or share a one-bedroom apartment outside of Manhattan with sometimes up to 10 people, organizing dinner get-togethers and allowing their peers to use showers. One former seller said that a low year would be \$7000 in US dollars; his best year was \$15,000.

During the month that New York City's sidewalks host a seasonal community of primary French-Canadian tree sellers, the city's residents, feeling sympathy for these seasonal workers and the hardship of their labor, often stop to talk with them. Tree sellers do not remain strangers in the community, as many of them become regular to the locals. The residents feel a sense of trust, and a communal experience of the spirit of Christmas inspires many residents to bring them food and drinks, which they would not necessarily offer to other street vendors. For one month the tree vendors are fully part of the residents'

celebrations by selling them Christmas trees for their homes. No other streets vendors have the same rapport with residents as the tree vendors, who not only have a relationship on the sidewalk with residents but also enter the residents' apartments when they deliver the tree, where some residents offer coffee, snacks, and in some cases, even a shower.

Verticality of Green in Urban Setting: The Take-Over of Fir Trees in a Mineral City

Once the Thanksgiving parade has passed, the very next day, seemingly out of nowhere, one can see hundreds of fir trees laying on the corners of sidewalks. Like mushrooms these fir trees appear all over the city, wrapped up in their plastic mesh. Within a day or two, trees started to stand erect, leaning against a wall or a built stand. The residents then know that the Christmas season has arrived. Walking amongst the several different types of fir trees for the length of a few buildings, one can have the illusion of being in a middle of a fir tree forest of Balsams from Canada, Douglas from Pennsylvania, and Frasers from North Carolina, the most expensive trees because they take longer to grow, but also tend to have a better shape and are more elegant than the rest (National Christmas Tree Association). Each Christmas tree stand offers not only various type of trees but all kind of sizes. As one walks through the stand, one can see the different height and for a moment feel lost among the tallest trees.

The presence of the thousands of trees in the city connects New Yorkers to nature and also affords a sense of vertical height at a human scale. With all its skyscrapers, New York often gives a sense of amazement when one looks up. Although some of the fir trees are very tall, it is in a human scale made palpable, making the mineral city seem momentarily at a human scale and giving the urbanites a new perspective of their neighborhood. Seeing the trees against their favorite restaurant wall or next to their grocery store makes the buildings seem much more accessible (Figure 8).



Fig. 8. Stand in Soho. Fir trees lean against a wooden fence and a piano found by the seller on a sidewalk, December 2015. Photo credit: LinDa Saphan.

If New York City witnesses the apparition of fir tree forests, it also witnesses the sudden appearance of constructions near the fir tree forests. Usually the sellers arrive at the location before any trees are dropped off. The experienced sellers come with their tools and hunt the city sidewalk for any furniture. The stands of French Canadians in particular have constructions of a shed or cabin made from scratch. Knowing that they need to spend twelve hours a day, tree sellers makes the stand as cozy as possible (Figures 9 and 10).



Fig. 9. Inside the shed, December 2015. Photo credit: LinDa Saphan.



Fig. 10. Inside the shed, December 2015. Photo credit: LinDa Saphan.

Some spend a day or two creating stands for the trees, places to stock decorations, and even sometimes a place to sleep near the trees. Many of them start from scratch and build a stand out of materials that they buy. They add Christmas lights and other festive decorations to draw the attention of potential customers. Many scout the city for artefacts to make their stand look different and attractive.

One thing that all sellers agree on is the fact that they take the time to make sure their stand is presentable and clean. The better the stand looks the more likely the chance that they will have customers. They also spend time on trimming and cleaning the trees so that they more appealing. There is not much maintenance with the trees after they are cleaned and trimmed. They don't need to be watered every day because they hold a lot of water. They can live 4-5 weeks without being watered. When opening each morning they make sure everything is in order and appealing to the eye.

In contrast to New York stone and brick architecture, the wooden sheds give a feel of a northern winter village with its fir trees. In Manhattan almost every four to five blocks there is a fir tree stand. These stands interrupt the monotony

of the stone architectures of New York City, particularly in the winter time, when all trees have lost their leaves. The patches of green needles from the fir trees breaks the daily routine, and the height of the tree and the decorations from the stands welcome the passersby to look up.

Then, as if at the wave of a magical wand, the morning after Christmas, all the trees have disappeared from the sidewalks stands. No more fir trees stand tall and proud, and only remnants of the leftover trees attest to the forests of the previous month. The trees will appear again beginning of January, laying on the sidewalk, once again dead among the trash.

Conclusion

Every public space has a different purpose and is used and shared in different ways by a variety of stakeholders. The relationship between a public space and the people who utilize it is not always clearly defined. Examining the different agendas of residents and nonresidents, buyers and sellers, and authorities and residents reveals how the notion of public space is perceived differently by each social group and how each group works to appropriate and use public spaces.

The sidewalks of New York City from Thanksgiving to Christmas Day are highly prized spaces. Negotiations are made months ahead and behind doors by the two main Christmas tree companies to lock in the best corners. Despite being a public space, the sidewalk is "rented" out to the highest bidder by the building owners with the coveted adjacent sidewalk space. Undeterred by these bidding wars, the tree sellers, seasonal workers, who are paid in cash, nonetheless, create a community bringing life to New York's sidewalks by keeping it vibrant and lively for the residents.

Although New York City is comprised of only 14% of green space, for one month all over the city, fir trees are standing tall and bringing all the positive aspects of being surrounded by nature. More than just having small fir tree forests erected all over the city of brick and stone, fir trees are also the symbol of the Holyday, which bring many residents a good feeling when they see the tree sellers settling in their temporary housing built from nowhere without any permit. This leniency from New Yorkers is certainly linked to the object of the sale, a Christmas tree for them. It is also part of the city identity to patronize the tree-seller stands instead of buying from a chain stores.

These Christmas tree stands create an in-between space for the urbanites, neither natural nor urban, creating bubbles within the public space of the sidewalks. Through their presence, the sidewalks are momentarily transformed into another kind of space a new urban form of community and relationship with the sellers and with the surrounding.

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